



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
www.wsascd.org

‘Critical Questions’ Series March 22, 2011

What is the Purpose for Grading?

Few issues have created more debate among educators, parents, and students than those associated with grading and reporting student learning. Despite the many debates and multitudes of studies, conversely, recommendations for best practice remain elusive. Although teachers generally try to develop grading policies that are honest and fair, strong evidence shows that their practices vary widely, even among those who teach at the same grade level within the same school.

Although educators would unquestionably prefer that motivation to learn be entirely intrinsic, grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth. Studies show that most students view high grades as positive recognition of their success, and some work hard to avoid the consequences of low grades (Feldmesser 1971). At the same time, no studies support the use of low grades or marks as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-images, many students view the low grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade, but they may feel helpless to make any improvement. Sorrowfully, some teachers consider grades or reporting forms as their “weapon of last resort.” In their view, students who do not fulfill the teacher’s expectations must suffer the consequences of the greatest punishment a teacher can bestow: a failing grade. Such practices have no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affect students, teachers, and the relationship they share.

Measurement experts such as Peter Airasian explain that educators use grades primarily 1) for administrative purposes, 2) to give students feedback about their progress and achievement, 3) to provide guidance to students about future course work, 4) to provide guidance to teachers for instructional planning, and 5) to motivate students (Marzano, 2000). According to the research, each of the five purposes for grading has some support from educators. A useful question is which of the five purposes are the most important or, more generally stated, what is the relative importance of the five purposes? One of the more obvious purposes for grades is to provide feedback about student achievement. Studies have consistently shown support for this purpose. Both educators and non-educators perceived providing information about student achievement as the primary purpose of grading.

This is a very complex dilemma we face in education today. Many districts shy away from dealing with this issue because it is so complex. In Grandview School District, we have decided to embark on this topic. We have commitment from the school board, superintendent, and all administrators for job-embedded professional development, training teachers and administrators to understand and implement standards-based instruction and assessment. We have created a Standards-Based Reporting Committee with representation from all stakeholders, including parents, to develop a grading/reporting system based on a clear purpose for each reporting method. With parent representation in our committee work, they are able to communicate the system to other parents and the community. We have come up with a district purpose for grading in our district. This is “to communicate academic progress to students, parents, teachers, and others.”

Using Ken O’Connor’s ‘15 Practices that Distort Achievement’ from *A Repair Kit for Grading:Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades*, our district committee is now attempting to address our grading practices. Below are these 15 Practices:

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1. Don't include student behaviors (effort, participation, adherence to class rules, etc) in grades; include only achievement.
 2. Don't reduce marks on "work" submitted late; provide support for the learner.
 3. Don't give points for extra credit or use bonus points; seek only evidence that more work has resulted in a higher level of achievement.
 4. Don't punish academic dishonesty with reduced grades; apply other consequences and reassess to determine actual level of achievement.
 5. Don't consider attendance in grade determination; report absences separately.
 6. Don't include group scores in grades; use only individual achievement evidence.
 7. Don't organize information in grading records by assessment methods or simply summarize into a single grade; organize and report evidence by standards/learning goals.
 8. Don't assign grades using inappropriate or unclear performance standards; provide clear descriptions of achievement expectations.
 9. Don't assign grades based on student's achievement compared to other students; compare each student's performance to preset standards.
 10. Don't rely on evidence from assessments that fail to meet standards of quality; rely only on quality assessments.
 11. Don't rely only on the mean; consider other measures of central tendency and use professional judgment.
 12. Don't include zeros in grade determination when evidence is missing or as punishment; use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine real achievement or use "I" for Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence.
 13. Don't use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.
 14. Don't summarize evidence accumulated over time when learning is developmental and will grow with time and repeated opportunities; in those instances, emphasize more recent achievement.
 15. Don't leave students out of the grading process. Involve students; they can - and should- play key roles in assessment and grading that promote achievement.

I believe grading and reporting practices for any district should support the learning process and encourage student success; and grades need to communicate academic progress to students, parents, teachers, and others. What do you think is the most important purpose for grading?

Sources:

Feldmesser, R. A. 1971. The positive functions of grades. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Marzano, Robert (2000). Transforming Classroom Grading. Alexandria, VA: ASCD

O'Connor, Ken (2010) A Repair Kit for Grading: Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades, Second Edition, Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Jose Rivera, Principal
McClure Elementary School
Grandview School District
jrivera@grandview.wednet.edu
(509) 882-7100