



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series May 2015

#### **Are Grades About What Students Earn or What Students Learn?**

Conversations about grading practices can be difficult to approach. Few schools or school districts have established common grading practices. One district working to develop common practices came to the realization that, “Grading is one of the most private experiences for students and teachers in the learning process.” (Erickson, J. 2010)

No matter how uncomfortable the conversation may be, school leaders in systems without common grading practices should be having conversations with teachers about the impact of grading practices on student success. Establishing grading practices that are equitable and support student learning requires teachers to challenge their beliefs and think about what grades represent. Grading practices that promote equity focus on what students learn. Grading practices that are equitable do not focus on behaviors such as organizational skills or the students access to support systems.

One of the first steps of implementing common grading practices in a school system is to develop a common purpose statement that is agreed upon by all staff. Schools with firmly entrenched practices may want to take a scholarly approach to this issue by researching current best practices, engaging in book studies and providing opportunities for professional debate and dialogue such as socratic seminars or philosophical chairs. It is important to acknowledging how difficult it is for teachers to let go of past practices and to provide a safe path to change.

Teacher judgement is a large factor in grading. Assisting teachers to develop belief systems and practices that help them make good judgements focused on student learning benefits the student and the teacher. Grading systems won’t change without thoughtful and deliberate conversations. Grading practices are mired in belief systems that cause discomfort among teachers. Teachers may struggle with change because to change you have to effectively admit that your previous practice was not effective and that is not a comfortable state for some. Teachers are professionals who want to excel in their job and feel competent. Admitting you are not sure can be scary. Teachers may not know what the new way of grading will look like and how to go about implementing the changes. Guiding staff through difficult changes in a way that helps them safely challenge their own beliefs and integrate new ideas will yield positive results for students.

The book, Grading Smarter Not Harder by Myron Dueck (2014) is a great way to start a discussion with around grading practices. This book inserts actual stories and humor to explain how Dueck’s grading practices have evolved over time. It illustrates how strategies that work effectively are often found because you attempted a strategy that failed. This non-threatening approach makes it easier for teachers to be willing to take risks and try something new.

School systems striving for equity must address the issue of grading. Inconsistent grading practices make it difficult for students who struggle with navigating systems. This can hinder students progress towards on-time graduation, students' own beliefs about themselves and even college admission. The college admission process is extremely competitive. It is important that we know we are not keeping students out who have the ability to earn and do well even if they don't show the behaviors we desire. Let's work together to make grading about what students learn.

Erickson, J. A. (2010, March). Grading practices: The third rail. *Principal Leadership*, 10(7), 22–26.

Dueck, M. (2014). *Grading Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn*. ASCD.

Sally Lancaster Ed.D.,  
Principal  
Everett High School  
Everett School District  
[slancaster@everettsd.org](mailto:slancaster@everettsd.org)

**Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development**  
825 Fifth Avenue SE ♦ Olympia, WA 98501 ♦ (360) 357-9535  
[www.wsascd.org](http://www.wsascd.org)