

I Used to Think I Was a Fair Grader. Now, I Look Back and Cringe

What the research says on equitable grading

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I prided myself on being the fairest grader in my school. Looking back, I cringe at the grading practices I once used.

It's not that I took grading lightly. Quite the opposite: I was deeply invested. Rooted in my personal beliefs and pedagogies, my grading system was crafted around what I genuinely believed was best for my students.

During my student-teaching year, a veteran educator explained the pitfalls of using zeros. According to my mentor, zeros were a disservice, particularly to disadvantaged students, given the mathematical inconsistency with the A-F grading scale. For instance, while a zero and a 100 average out to 50, the corresponding letters of F and A average to a C—but we all know that a 50 doesn't equate to a C.

Acting on this advice, I ensured that no student received a grade lower than 50 in my grade book. Later, I learned this act was called “employing the minimum grade.”

While grasping this mathematical discrepancy was a step in the right direction, I still cringe when I recall my other misguided grading habits. I was so certain that my grading practices were best for my students that I never questioned myself.

In truth, I used many grading practices I have since learned produce inequitable outcomes for students. I allocated 25 percent of the final grade to “effort/participation”; deducted 20 points from an assignment for each day it was late; allowed up to 25 points of extra credit per unit; scored nightly homework based on completion, regardless of the gibberish quality or accuracy of content; merged scores from retakes with original attempts or offered only half-credit for improvement; and, maybe worst of all, I bumped up a student's final grade based on my subjective evaluation of their effort or compliance in class.

So, why was I so devoted to practices that used my subjective judgment of students' effort, regardless of their content knowledge? I saw grades as leverage—a means to motivate and mold student behavior. Like many of my peers, I believed the grade book was a tool to reward or penalize, which could prepare students for the “real world.” I didn't recognize how such practices could dampen learning motivation.

The “traditional grade,” which includes nonacademic measures like participation or effort, remains attractive to many teachers for its ability to offer a holistic student view. Yet, traditional grading can inadvertently perpetuate inequities. When final grades include teacher-pleasing

behaviors, economically disadvantaged students are twice as likely to fail , even when they demonstrate the same academic abilities. Grading-reform researchers like myself are actively communicating these inequities with schools, trying to make them aware of the pitfalls of traditional grading.

Despite attending numerous professional development sessions, I was never exposed to sessions on fairer or more equitable grading practices. I didn't know any better; no one tried to correct me or change my foundational beliefs about these misconceptions.

It wasn't until my fifth year of teaching that I overhauled my grading practices. A mentor during my master's program and I started a research project to compare new practices that give students some autonomy in their grading with standards-based grading. To our delight, students reported deeper understanding and a more enriched learning experience under these new grading practices.

Drawing on the works of grading reformer Thomas Guskey, we did things like :

- Engaged students in conversations about the overarching purpose of my math course, setting clear objectives aligned with our state's mathematics standards;
- Shifted to a grading system that provided multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery;
- Allowed most recent performance on a standard to reflect a student's current level of understanding without averaging in former mistakes;
- Avoided the traditional 0-100 scale, opting for a simplified grading metric, such as a 0-4 scale or proficiency-based ratings; and
- Still emphasized personal growth by holding monthly one-on-one sessions with students to discuss not only their academic performance but their personal growth, skills, and behavior without using the grade to punish or leverage these characteristics.

It's not that grading-reform researchers are diminishing the role of behavior and noncognitive skills for student development. Instead, the call is for report cards that separate students' cognitive achievements from soft skills like agency, collaboration, and attitude. This paradigm, coined the "Three P Report Card" by Guskey, insists that while these skills are still valuable, they shouldn't skew a student's academic grade.

After all, a student's home-life circumstances shouldn't determine their academic fate. It's crucial to acknowledge that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face unique barriers to completing homework or extracurricular activities. They might lack access to a quiet

place to study, consistent internet or computer access, or parental assistance. Therefore, intertwining academic grades with assessments of these soft skills of homework completion could inadvertently penalize students for factors beyond their control, exacerbating existing inequalities.

As we navigate the path toward better grading practices, we must recognize the challenges at the intersection of research, pedagogy, and school funding realities.

But have teachers even been taught or shown they can report students' cognitive and noncognitive abilities separately?

From a researcher's vantage point, it's easy to cast stones and point fingers at educators' grading practices. But having once stood in those teachers' shoes, I recognize that many teachers lack exposure to grading alternatives. While administrators often acknowledge the need for change, actionable PD isn't readily available. Even when grading PD is provided, recalibrating one's traditional grading ethos is a deeply reflective journey that cannot be rushed.

Importantly, individual educators can begin to shift their own grading practices independently, adopting fairer strategies in their own classrooms even before broader, schoolwide reform takes place. However, some educators may not know where to start without professional development.

Budget constraints might lead some districts to sideline grading PD. However, the stakes are too high, with grades influencing educational trajectories and future earnings. I urge districts to prioritize grading-focused PD. Every student deserves educators with the knowledge and tools to implement equitable grading practices. In doing so, we can pave the way for inclusive learning spaces where students thrive academically and feel empowered and valued. When teachers know better, we do better.

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