

Confronting Inequity / Well-Rounded Grading

Matthew R. Kay

Schools can take some inequity out of grading by rounding to "the fives."

In my [November 2019 column](#), I argued that, while striving to dismantle the larger racist systems in our schools, educators should also take the time to address some of the more fundamental, practice-based obstacles to a more just education for our students. Specifically, I asked that we reexamine the ways that schools hold teachers accountable for lesson planning. I advocated for switching from unnecessarily restrictive biweekly lesson plans to unit plans that encourage backward planning. This shift was simple to articulate, but, as I know from 14 years of experience, not easy to execute.

As we open the 2020 school year, there is another basic shift towards equity that I'd like to draw attention to—one that actually is fairly simple to execute. (And, as in the case of unit plans, I'm a personal witness to its success.) In short, I think schools should seriously consider rounding all report card grades to "the fives." This means all *As* are representative of 95 points, *Bs* of 85, right down the line to failing grades, which bottom out at 55.

I'm glad to see that this last part—limiting the impact of a "failing" grade—is already beginning to gather a bit of momentum across the country. The Philadelphia School District, where I work, changed its policy two years ago, capping all failing report card grades at 50. The logic is unassailable: Students who have, for whatever reason, not done well in a marking period are not likely to find additional motivation in a grade of, say, 34. If the issue is building self-confidence, the 34 acts as evidence that they are as dumb or careless as they may believe themselves to be. If the issue is the distracting gauntlet of traumas that many at-risk students have to navigate every day, that 34 is evidence that the school prioritizes punishing their lack of "grit" over getting them the help that they deserve. If the issue is student absentee rates, a teacher that gives a student a grade of 34 isn't likely to woo him back.

In all cases, bottoming out a students' grade removes all likelihood of a student's academic recovery. Telling most kids who just got a 34 that they will have to grind for *As* and *Bs* in order to squeeze by with a *C* or *D* on a final report card does not usually have the effect desired. Or, maybe it does, if schools' role as America's sorting mechanism is what's most important to us. Because bottoming out grades encourages kids to quit.

Minor Differences, Big Impact

But if this shift makes sense at the bottom of our grading scale, why not also at the top? What, really, separates a student who has earned an 88 from someone who has earned an 86? How about a 94 and a 91? In my experience as a classroom teacher who grades a lot of writing, such minor differences probably have little to do with my students' performance; they probably have more to do with how much caffeine I have in my system when I read their papers. This is especially true when I'm grading subjective elements like the effectiveness of the figurative language in their stories. Rubrics pull back the grading veil in many beautiful ways, but the difference between scoring an 18/20 and a 20/20 on a category is, well, did the writing "move" me? Would I be more "moved" if I had gotten more sleep the night before?

But there's also another, more complicated factor that plays into these minor distinctions in scores—particularly in the case of *A*-level work. Since my school pulls students from all over the city, our students have drastically different backgrounds and elementary school experiences. Some of them went to private schools, some to charters, some to neighborhood schools. Some are middle class, while most are low-income. Some of their parents had enough disposable income to afford tutors. Some of their parents' work schedules are consistent enough to allow them to discuss world events at regular family dinners or to tuck their kids in at night with a good book.

These more advantaged students consistently end up scoring 20/20 on assignments. Their writing is slightly more polished, not because they necessarily are any more talented, or because they paid more attention in class, or because they've worked harder. They are the beneficiaries of a lifetime of advantages that have, in effect, made it a little less

likely that they might make the small grammatical mistake, and a little more likely that exposure to the arts, travel, or any of a number of enrichment experiences has infused their writing voice with confidence. This is enough to tilt just about every rubric category in their favor.

You might think that these minor percentile differences in grades don't hurt anyone. However, in the cutthroat world of college (and, sadly, sometimes high school) admissions, the difference between a 94 and a 91 might be thousands of dollars in scholarship money. The difference between an 84 and an 80 might be an acceptance letter or a rejection letter. And even in K–12 schools, such grading distinctions can de incentivize collaboration and teamwork among students, especially when we consider class rankings and the awards attached to them. They can also make it that much easier for students to consider themselves better than classmates from less advantaged backgrounds, even though these scores ultimately measure their privilege more than their grind.

A Win for Equity

The challenges of switching to a rounding system are easily surmountable. At my school, it took most students only one term before this new normal was accepted, as they began to realize that their grades were rounded up to an interval of "5" just as often as rounded down to one. Essentially, an *A* is an *A*, a *B* is a *B*, and so on. This makes grading easier for teachers as well. Meanwhile, our wonderful college counselor sends out students' transcripts with a note describing how we do things. Our kids are accepted into competitive colleges at the same rates as comparable schools.

Through this simple change, one more privilege-based barrier can be removed from students' ability to form meaningful relationships with each other and the learning material. Students are less incentivized to spend their energy "grade-grubbing," and are more likely to spend it collaborating with people different from them.

And students who struggle are never mathematically buried before November—which is a major win for equity in schools.



Matthew R. Kay is a founding English teacher at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia and author of *Not Light, But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom* (Stenhouse, 2018). Follow him on [Twitter](#).