

5 Ways to Help Students Focus on Learning Rather Than Grades

When teachers give retakes and shift the way they talk about grades, students concentrate on the skills they're gaining—not their scores.



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My middle and high school students eagerly walk into class with their homework fully completed, ready to ask follow-up questions. They have no desire to earn a grade for this work. They did it for the sake of learning... and then I wake up from this lovely dream.

The reality is they check their grades online constantly. They ask questions like:

- How many points off if I forgot units?
- How much will you take off for spelling?
- What can I do to get my average up to an A?

After decades of this reality in my math classes, I began to reflect on how my behavior contributed to the grades-obsessed culture. I am embarrassed to admit that I used to praise students based on their grades rather than their effort and improvement. Conferences with parents generally focused on number grades rather than student learning.

As part of my reflection, I found a community of teachers at my school who also were fed up with the grades obsession. We shared strategies and resources that helped us de-emphasize grades in our classes, even though we still had to give them.

5 Adjustments to Shift Class Culture Away From Grades

1. Adjust your language (with kids and parents): When a student was unmotivated to complete an assignment, I threw out threats like, “You have to do it because this will be a grade!” I now make statements of encouragement such as, “You did really well with simplifying radicals. I’m looking forward to seeing how you apply that skill to the Pythagorean theorem.” Does this work perfectly every time? Of course not. But being mindful of my language that focused on learning rather than scores started to shift the culture of my class.

My language with parents also shifted. I would email or call with information about the concepts or skills their child was demonstrating rather than emphasizing grades. If I was pressed for a number grade, I would reply, “Devon earned 35 out of 42 points on his last assessment. I recommend that he practice prime factorization to be better prepared for the material in the next chapter.” Maybe this is mathematically sneaky, but giving a grade of 35 out of 42 de-emphasizes the undeserved stigma that may come with earning a low B.

2. Delay the grade: I first encountered this idea in Kristy Louden’s [blog post](#) on how to get students to pay more attention to teacher feedback than to grades. Louden writes, “Delay the delivery of the actual grade so student focus moves from the grade to the feedback.”

Another math teacher and I both experimented with this strategy. In our classes, we would grade tests with usual marks and brief notes, but we did not write any point deductions or a grade on the test itself. After handing back the tests, the students were asked to reflect and make corrections. As I assisted the students with their corrections, I would discuss the concepts and feedback, but never points.

This irritated the kids at first, but over time they began to focus on their actual performance. I would conference with each student at their request a day later if they wanted to know the number grade (I still had to give grades as a school requirement.)

3. Lower the stakes: Research suggests that homework or formative assessment should never be graded for accuracy. Most teachers I know record completion grades for homework. A few years ago I stopped that. (I did keep a record of who was doing their homework for future student/parent conferences.) I emphasized that homework was a chance to practice and explore. To lower the pressure even more, I advertised to my students that their lowest quiz grade would be automatically dropped each term. This eliminated a lot of anxiety and tears.

4. Provide retakes: I am a big fan of [Starr Sackstein's blog](#), where she writes often about standards-based grading. In a recent post, Sackstein writes, “Tests and other ‘one and done’ situations are never going to get the best out of students particularly because of the nature of time and memorization.” My high school’s math department had a policy of offering a retake test per term to replace the lowest test grade. If your school doesn’t have a redo policy, advocate for one. Or get creative in your class on ways to offer retakes for the sake of learning—not just for a grade replacement.

5. Allow self-grading: As a secondary teacher, I often hear the pushback, “If we don’t give traditional grades, are we preparing them for college?” Naturally, we can’t predict what our kids will encounter in postsecondary education, but there seems to be a trend toward “ungrading” among some college professors. A 2019 [Inside Higher Ed article](#) noted that there are “sound pedagogical reasons to do it [ungrade], given the litany of research finding that grades play to extrinsic (not intrinsic) motivation, decrease enjoyment of learning and increase fears of failure. More than that, grades aren’t necessarily a good measure of student learning. And, based on additional research, we know they’re subject to rampant inflation.”

Teachers can counter some of these detrimental effects of grades by giving students more ownership of their assessment. When assigning a rubric-assessed project, ask the students to complete their own rubric, and then take a moment to conference with them about their self-assessment. Sometimes their grade will be lower than what you would have given, which is a great start to a productive conversation. Additionally, self-assessment gives students ownership of their own learning and enhances their metacognitive skills.

In my dreams, we stop giving grades altogether, and students joyfully complete their assignments for the pure pleasure of learning. But in reality, grades, however flawed, determine placements and ranking. Still, we, as teachers, can get creative within the walls of our own classrooms to make grades more accurate, collaborative, and much less stressful.

