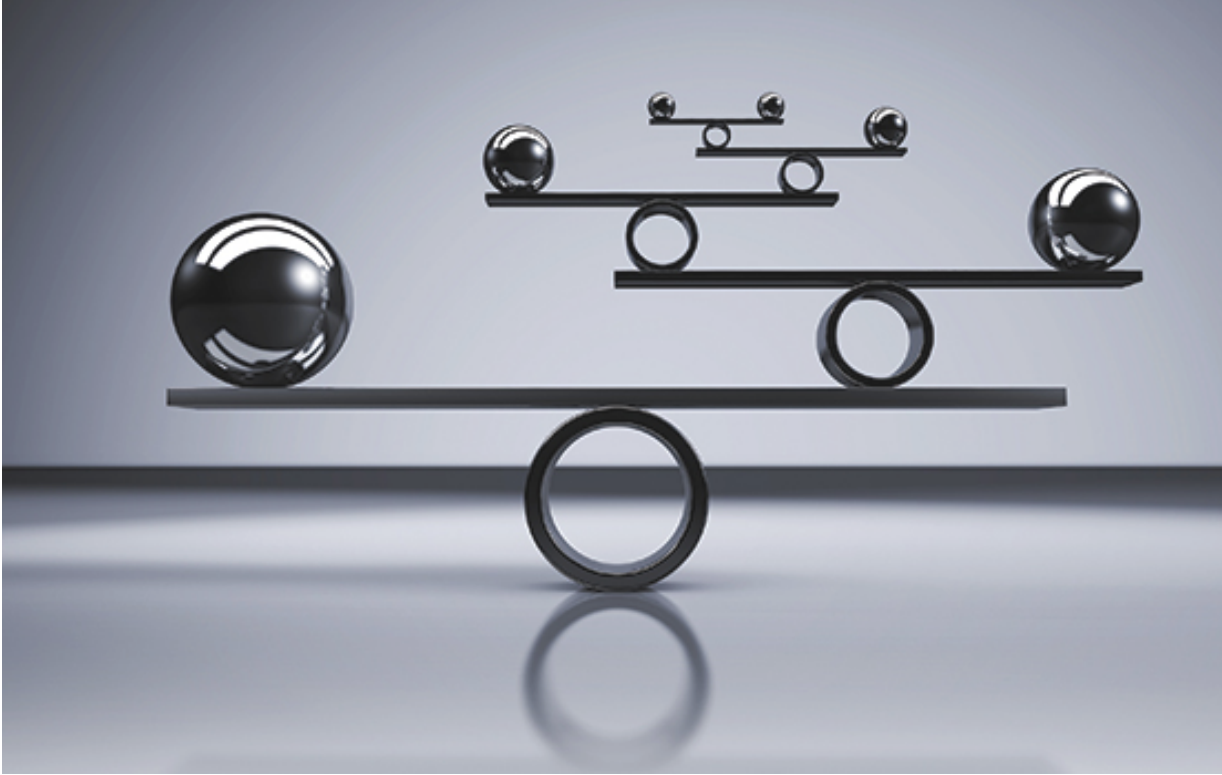


Beyond standards-based grading: Why equity must be part of grading reform

Joe Feldman
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Traditional grading methods perpetuate inequities. Any new grading system must counteract both individual and institutional biases.

In the May 2018 issue of *Kappan*, three experts on grading — Ken O’Connor, Lee Ann Jung, and Douglas Reeves — [make a convincing case](#) for teachers and school leaders to reject traditional approaches for evaluating and reporting student performance. The authors argue that instead of using grading practices that emphasize mathematical precision and the accumulation of points, teachers should implement standards-based grading practices that are Fair, Accurate, Specific, and Timely (or “FAST”). Such practices exclude student behaviors — such as lateness or compliance — and rate students only on academic performance and include a more flexible array of assessment strategies. The authors also call for educators to incorporate into the grade a student’s performance on only summative, not formative, assessments and to consider a student’s recent academic achievement rather than averaging performance over time.

Standards-based grading and examining grades through a schema such as FAST is a vast improvement over common grading practices. However, the authors’ argument overlooks one of the most insidious aspects of traditional grading: Many common grading practices in K-12 classrooms perpetuate the historical inequities woven into our schools for a century. The Grading for Equity Initiative that I lead critically examines the legacy of traditional grading and considers how teachers can reduce bias in grading and promote educational success, particularly for students who have historically been underserved. Multiple qualitative and quantitative external evaluations of the initiative conducted by Leading Edge Advisors and Elite Research, LLC, have found that equitable grading practices that are more accurate, bias resistant, and motivational lead to stronger teacher-student relationships, less stressful classrooms, reduced failure rates and grade inflation, interruption of the cycle of achievement disparities, and grades that are more closely correlated to student test scores (Feldman, 2018).

Grading’s historical legacy

In the early 20th century, as techniques of mass production reshaped the U.S. economy and families from rural areas and immigrants flooded to cities, the need to educate large numbers of students led educators to apply the efficiencies of manufacturing to schools. So, just as manufacturing sought to increase production and maximize value, our schools were charged with sorting students into academic tracks that best reflected their supposedly fixed intellectual capacity and prepared them for their assumed life trajectories. In most cases, this sorting, facilitated by the introduction of the A-F scale, was used to justify and to provide unequal educational opportunities based on a student's race or class.

A century later, we have drastically different beliefs about students and the goal of schools. We believe that every student can meet challenging academic standards, and we want our classrooms to interrupt the cycle of disparities that allows us to predict students' success based on their race, resources, and native language. To promote equity, we implement restorative justice discipline policies, learn culturally responsive instructional strategies, teach more diverse authors and perspectives, and expand our repertoire of assignments and assessments to address the different ways students learn. Yet our grading system remains virtually unchanged. By continuing to use century-old grading practices, we inadvertently perpetuate achievement and opportunity gaps, rewarding our most privileged students and punishing those who are not.

O'Connor and his colleagues mention equity in passing, but a focus on making grades equitable not only provides a sharper lens through which teachers can interrogate and examine how they grade, but also provokes an ethical obligation to change. Grading for equity goes beyond FAST grading and standards-based grading in two ways: It protects grading from *implicit individual biases* and it counteracts the *institutional biases* in traditional grading.

Inoculating grading against implicit bases

Many teachers are familiar with the concept of implicit biases: attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions without our conscious knowledge or awareness. We make assumptions about people and interpret their behavior through lenses that are clouded by our personal experiences, our country's legacy of discrimination, and media-driven stereotypes; and because we may not be consciously aware of our biases, they may even be contrary to our explicit beliefs. In other words, even those of us with an avowed commitment to impartiality and fairness are susceptible to judging students unfairly.

Educators, policy makers, and social justice advocates have taken this idea to heart when reforming school discipline policies and practices in recent years. For example, when researchers found that implicit biases contribute to disproportionate punishment of Black and Brown students for infractions based on educators' subjective judgments, such as showing "defiance" or "disrespect," some schools and districts dropped those infractions as punishable offenses (Staats, 2014).

Grading practices in which teachers choose to award or subtract points in a grade for students' behaviors are just as susceptible to misinterpretation and implicit bias as these disciplinary practices. For example, in classrooms taught by White teachers, Black students are typically rated as "poorer classroom citizens" than their White peers (Downey & Pribesh, 2004) based on the types of behaviors often included in graded categories of "participation" and "effort."

As O'Connor and his colleagues (2018) assert, including student behavior in grades creates "an uncertain mix of achievement and behavior" that renders grades meaningless. But that's just the beginning of the problem. When teachers include in grades a participation or effort category that is populated entirely by subjective judgments of student behavior, they invite bias into their grading, particularly when teachers come from a dominant culture and their students don't. Awarding points for behavior imposes on students a culturally specific definition of appropriate conduct that involves interpreting their actions through an unavoidably biased lens. Just as teachers might require students to write their name on the back of a test to prevent their opinions about students from infecting scoring, equitable grading inoculates grading against bias by excluding from grades any judgments about student behaviors.

Counteracting institutional biases

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Institutional biases show up when the procedures and practices of institutions, which may appear neutral, result in certain groups being advantaged or favored and others being disadvantaged or devalued. Many traditional grading policies that seem innocuous on the surface can reinforce existing disparities, rewarding students who already have more resources and punishing students who come to the classroom with fewer resources.

Consider the common practice of factoring students' homework performance into their end-of-course grades. Students are much more likely to complete homework if they have a quiet, well-lit space to work and college-educated parents who have the knowledge and availability to help (or, if not, a paid tutor). By contrast, students are much less likely to complete homework if they live in a noisy apartment or have parents who didn't graduate from high school, have jobs in the evening, or speak a first language that isn't English. Plus, nearly one-fifth of students report that they are unable to complete homework because they lack internet access at home (Project Tomorrow, 2017). When teachers include homework performance in the grade, they give points to students with resources and deny points to students without. Put simply, educators often inadvertently translate student economic disparities into achievement disparities, replicating in classrooms the very achievement disparities they want to interrupt.

Another example of an institutional bias in traditional grading is the common practice of averaging a student's performance over time. O'Connor and colleagues (2018) explain how this practice violates the A (for accuracy) in FAST grading: When students struggle with content initially but ultimately master it by the end of the term, the averaged performance will inevitably be lower than their actual achievement, and the final grade will misrepresent the students' true level of content mastery. Viewing the practice through an equity lens reveals another problem: Students who earn high marks from the start of a unit likely had prior experiences with the content before the unit even began. Perhaps they participated in an enrichment program, received tutoring from an instructional program that anticipated the school's curriculum, or had teachers the previous year who effectively taught essential pre-skills. Other students who lack these advantages may receive lower scores early in the unit, and although they can make up the ground during the unit, when all performances are averaged together, those early scores place them at a disadvantage. By only considering students' final learning in the grade rather than averaging performance over time, educators more accurately describe students' level of content mastery and level the playing field, allowing all students to be successful regardless of their resources and histories.

The benefits of equitable grading

There is evidence across dozens of schools, hundreds of teachers, and thousands of students that more equitable grading practices not only make grades more accurate but also reduce achievement disparities. When teachers use equitable grading practices their rates of failing grades decrease significantly, with low-income students and students of color experiencing a more dramatic decrease. Across all middle and high school students in an urban California school district, for example, the percentage of D and F grades assigned dropped by almost a third when equitable grading practices were put in place, allowing the district to reallocate the cost of what would otherwise have been 250 remedial seats to other instructional needs (Feldman, 2018). At the same time, equitable grading decreases grade inflation, and does so more significantly for White and higher-income students. In a cohort of teachers across four high schools in California, there was a statistically significant decrease in the rate of A grades awarded, particularly for White students and students not qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch (Feldman, 2018). With a reduction of D and F rates for historically underserved student groups alongside a reduction of A rates for White and higher-income students, more equitable grading reduces achievement gaps in grades.

In addition, independent research on the Equitable Grading Initiative has found that equitable grading results in a statistically significant increase in the correlation between teacher-assigned grades and standardized test scores, with a greater increase in this correlation for low-income students. These results illuminate how traditional grading disproportionately punishes vulnerable students and rewards more advantaged students.

Finally, we've seen that equitable grading affects student motivation and the culture of the classroom. Students who have experienced years of failure — whether from constant judgments of their behavior or unsound mathematical

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calculations — respond to more equitable grading with more intrinsic motivation to learn, more trust in and stronger relationships with their teachers, and greater confidence in their own capabilities as learners. (See www.gradingforequity.org for direct quotes from teachers and students.)

The motivating power of equity

Teachers are always interested in improving their work, and for some teachers, pedagogical justifications may be enough incentive to make a major change. However, teachers often enter the profession because of a conviction that every student deserves a full opportunity to succeed. When we explicitly connect grading to equity and teachers learn how traditional grading practices undermine the very equity they want in their classrooms, they feel the urgency and develop persistence to learn more, to push through skepticism and discomfort.

Nearly every school and district's goals include a commitment to equity, which makes the importance of tackling grading more obvious and justifiable. Explicitly naming the inequities in current grading and how grading can promote equity means seeing grading improvements as more than a nice-to-have pedagogical shift. Educators have a moral imperative to dismantle the inequities that endure in our schools, and we cannot make good on our promise to give every student a real chance at success until we make our grading equitable.

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