

# Grading Practices: *The* Third Rail

**A**lthough Social Security funds are in decline and no solution is evident, few politicians have the temerity to try to change the system. Why? Because Social Security is the third rail in politics: if you touch it, you'll die. The field of education has an issue that is equally as lethal: grading. Grading is one of the most private experiences for students and teachers in the learning process. Usually, a teacher's grading protocols, which can be harmful to students, originate from his or her own experiences as a student. To implement universal and consistent grading practices, strong leaders and the willingness to tackle deeply rooted and harmful grading traditions are required.

## The Need for Change

For five years, the administrators, staff members and teachers of Minnetonka (MN) Schools tried to answer two questions: What goes into a grade? and, How do we report it? After study and discussion, a new, smaller committee was selected to bring closure to the issue in 2006. Those of us who served on the committee attended a grading conference in Princeton, NJ, where we listened to some of the top speakers in the field. After the conference, we were motivated by the need for reform and ready for action. But the team comprised only 10 teachers, who represented more than 270 teachers in grades 6–12, and we knew that we needed to convince

**A public school district decided that a single course grade cannot convey a complete picture of a student's performance.**

**A new grading policy focuses on using grades to convey only what students know and are able to do, not behavioral issues.**

**The district also recalibrated the system so that a single failing grade does not doom a student's ability to succeed.**

our colleagues of the importance of changing the status quo. Over the next few weeks and months, we shared our knowledge with each of the middle school and high school teachers and school board members through presentations, exercises, articles, and discussions.

To help build our cases, we asked teachers to take a survey in which they listed all of the reasons why a student might earn a B- in a course. We hypothesized that the sole reason would be that the student had proficient knowledge of the course content, but did not show mastery of it. This did not turn out to be the case. In the end, teachers gave



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more than 10 different reasons that a student would receive the grade, including turning in an essay late and completing an extra credit assignment that moved a low grade up just enough for the student to eke out a B-.

The survey showed the school community that one grade is incapable of representing the sum total of a student's performance in class. Guskey (2006) described this as the "hodgepodge effect." Trying to reduce a student's performance to a single course grade renders that grade meaningless to all parties and, in the end, communicates nothing. This revelation proved that the district needed to make a change.

Nevertheless, we did not wait for 100% commitment from all stakeholders before taking action. A common roadblock to change is the "buy-in" myth. Reeves (2006) proposed a different order for the change process that we adopted for our work. He wrote:

The wait for buy-in can be interminable because leaders fail to acknowledge the truth that behavior precedes belief. In other words, the cycle of organization improvement is not "vision, buy-in, action" but rather "vision, action, buy-in, and more action." The buy-in does not occur until employees first see the results of their action. (p. 96)

### **Lethal Grading Practices**

When we finally answered our two questions—What goes into a grade? and, How do we report it?—we decided that a grade should reflect what a student knows and is able to do. This definition enabled us to identify several lethal grading practices for immediate reform.

**The point system.** This is most likely the most flawed practice. Students keep track of each point as if it were money. Nowadays, families are able to

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view their student's gradebook for each class and receive instant updates of how their children are doing. Although the computerized gradebook can greatly reduce the mystery of the grade, it does come at some cost. Just as students keep track of their points in each class, parents can do the same for their children. It can almost be like the stock market: today, Helen is up 3.4% in English and down 12.4% in math, and on the basis of today's scores, Jimmy is not permitted to go out to a movie with friends. Sadly, this type of finality can take away from the fluidity that grading should have.

Averaging within a point system can kill a student's hope and future in a course. At worst, it causes a student to drop a course and eliminate any possibility for success. For example, during the first few weeks of school, Susie failed the first assessment in her history class and sealed her fate to receive a C, even if she earns As on the next four assessments. Life is even bleaker for Mark: after earning two low scores and three As, there is little hope for him to pass, and it is apparent that he should drop the class. Keep in mind that after their initial failures, each student scored As on all subsequent assessments.

Although we have yet to move away from the computer grade book and averaging completely, in our new policy, all teachers have the discretion to modify a student's final grade if the most recent evidence more accurately reflects what he or she knows and is able to do.

**The percentage scale.** This leads me to the second harmful practice we've corrected—the percentage scale system. Under the former system, an F had a range from 0–60 points, and each of the other letter grades had a range of only 10 points. In other words, the F had six times the impact as any other grade. After receiving a few low scores or zeros, a student may never recover. Reeves (2004) argued, “Just two or three zeros are sufficient to cause failure for an entire semester, and just a few course

failures can lead a student to drop out of high school, incurring a lifetime of personal and social consequences” (p. 325).

We changed the floor of the percentage scale from 60% to 50%—meaning that students who master less than 50% of course material earn an F—and made the point intervals between all the letter grades equal. Our new grading scale ensures that a poor performance

does not destroy a student's hope. The zero does still exist in our system, but it is only employed as a last resort when a student makes no effort to complete an assessment.

**Behavioral issues.** One particularly entrenched grading practice is including behavioral factors in a grade. If, as we determined, a grade is meant to represent what a student knows and is able to do, behavioral factors must not be included in a grade. After a careful analysis, it became evident that some teachers were using grades as a means of controlling basic classroom behaviors, such as participating in class, completing homework, bringing materials to class, and getting midterm slips signed. A colleague approached me and asked what to do when a student shows up late every day and doesn't bring the correct materials to class. In the past, this teacher would have docked the student's daily grades for each infraction. This teacher—and a few others—needed time and guidance to develop new strategies to handle classroom behavior issues.

**Extra credit and the curve.** The last two lethal practices are extra credit and the curve. We no longer allow extra credit for bringing in school supplies (i.e., “Kleenex box extra credit”). Teachers still offer extra credit but not nearly as much as before.

Students often believe that applying a grading curve means that their scores are adjusted so that everyone does better. They are not aware that a true curve creates winners and losers. We have eliminated class rank and don't have a valedictorian at graduation. Students now are graduated under the Latin honors system, which allows them to compete against the learning standards, not one another.

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### Clear Focus

Our final policy states that at least 85% of the course grade should be derived from summative assessment grades and the remaining 15% should come from formative assessments. All of the aforementioned factors that have nothing to do with subject knowledge—late work, behavior, participation, and homework completion—may no longer be included in a grade and instead are reported separately and shared during conferences.

Once the first year ended and the final marks were tallied, there was a drop in the number of As. The number of As and Bs combined, however, were the same as the previous year's. When the school board raised questions about the drop in As, we described it as a market correction.

### Policy Changes

Once we established the definition for grading and created the policy, every other policy and practice had to be examined. We ended up changing two important policies.

**The attendance policy.** This policy, which allowed teachers to lower students' grades when they had unexcused absences, required a major overhaul. In the past, a student could earn a B+ on his or her course work but receive a C- on his or her transcript because of unexcused absences. The reported grade did not accurately reflect the student's academic performance.

The new attendance policy disconnects grades from attendance. Instead of giving students a consequence for their poor behavioral choice nine weeks later, we adopted a model that imposes immediate consequences that are not related to grades.

We were concerned about the immediate reaction. We no longer would drop grades or disallow students to make up work because they have unexcused absences. Would students skip school more frequently if their grades were no longer affected by their unexcused absences? Quite the opposite occurred—there was a drop of 55% for unexcused absences and a drop of nearly 40% in suspensions across all secondary schools.

**Academic integrity.** The other major policy shift occurred with development of a new academic integrity policy. In the past, when a student cheated on an assessment, the student received a zero—no questions asked. Rarely was the focus on why did the student chose to cheat. Nor was anyone particularly concerned that the student might never recover from the mistake. The new policy requires students to take an alternate assessment and complete an ethics study in addition losing privileges if they are caught cheating. We believe that we have elevated the consequences of cheating and shifted the emphasis from purely punitive to learning from mistakes.

### Next Steps

The third rail on a railway is lethal if touched, but it also supplies a train with energy. The changes in our grading policies that we enacted in 2007 have energized our efforts to improve achievement, such as developing common assessments and common scoring rubrics. We try to ensure that when students make mistakes in the learning process, they are ones from which they can recover. Knowing what goes into a grade helps ensure grading consistency among teachers throughout the district.

It is incumbent on educators to ensure that grading and assessment practices give students chances to succeed. Poor grading practices can harm students and set them on a course of failure. Deeply entrenched grading practices are not easy to uproot and changing them requires courage from administrators and teachers alike. But as we in Minnetonka Public Schools have seen, the change can be profound and transformative. **PL**

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