Taking the Grading Conversation Public

Suggesting grading reform can be risky business.
Here's how to keep the discussion productive and on track.

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Grading policy is among the most emotional topics in education today. Indeed, Guskey and Bailey (2001) documented nearly a century of research on grading practices. We know, for example, that the average is the wrong measurement of student proficiency (O'Connor, 2007); that the zero on a 100-point scale is a math error (Reeves, 2004); and that the implementation of effective grading practices can have a positive effect on student achievement, discipline, and attendance (Reeves, 2008).

But knowing these things is not enough. Unless education leaders can engage teachers, parents, communities, and policy-makers in a rational discussion about grading, progress will be as elusive now as it was a century ago. Here are some good ways to start the conversation.

Discuss Principles Before Policy

Start a conversation about grading policy with the announcement, "I think we should eliminate the zero," and you'll start not just a fight, but a national campaign. Freiss (2008) reported on one school system's proposal to use intervals of 10 points between letter grades (for example, $F = 50–59$, and so on). The response was a firestorm of protest, eventually undermining that district's attempt to implement even the most basic grading reforms.

Why not start the conversation on grading with a discussion of the principles on which all stakeholders can agree? For example, even those who disagree vehemently about specific grading policies should find common ground in the proposition that grading should be accurate and fair. That is, students who do the same quality of work should receive the same grades. Any grading system in which the same quality of work receives grades ranging from *A* to *F*, depending on the idiosyncratic grading policy of the teacher, is clearly inaccurate. The principle of fairness suggests that differences in grades should be associated with differences in student performance rather than with differences in gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

If we agree that grading is a form of feedback, then we should also be able to agree on principles of effective feedback, such as specificity and timeliness, so that students can apply

the feedback from their grades to improve their academic performance.

We can use these principles—accuracy, fairness, specificity, and timeliness—to bring parents, teachers, administrators, students, and policymakers together. The principles establish a set of boundaries that provide abundant freedom for teachers. Some teachers may use menu systems, allowing students to accumulate points for different projects to establish evidence of academic proficiency. Others may use standards-based systems, requiring students to resubmit work until they achieve a level of proficiency. However teachers may decide to grade, their creativity operates within the boundaries of fundamental principles. Inaccurate and unfair grading systems are not "creative," but rather a violation of the boundaries of effective grading policies.

Discuss Constants Before Change

Many proposed changes in grading policies are subverted before they begin because of rumors about the new policies. Parents, in particular, focus on what they and their children will lose. (See "What to Say to Parents," p. 78). My recommendation is that before school leaders contemplate a change in grading policy, they should make clear what will *not* change. Stakeholders must know that their high school students will have a transcript, that their students with special needs will have an individualized education plan, that their schools will continue to have an honor roll, and that teachers will continue to give letter grades.

The last of these stipulations is controversial, as many leading advocates of grading reform suggest replacing letter grades with standards-based report cards. But I don't see

these alternatives as mutually exclusive. Educators can provide additional information to parents with a standards-based report card and also provide a letter grade, thus avoiding an emotional and unnecessary battle.

There's nothing inherently wrong with letter grades. What has rendered our present grading system so toxic is that letter grades, in the absence of additional information, are inaccurate and misleading. Two students can earn a *C* in math, with the first student an ace mathematician with poor attitude and conduct and the second student utterly unprepared to advance to the next grade in mathematics while possessing a great attitude and compliant disposition.

The label *C* alone is insufficiently descriptive; parents, students, and teachers would all benefit if we provided the details of the academic proficiency associated with the grade. This "both/and" approach to letter grades and standards achievement reports would, perhaps, expose how wildly distorted many grading systems are and might lead more schools to separate grades for academic achievement from grades for behavior.

Provide Accurate Risk Comparisons

Opposition to improved grading systems often includes an apocalyptic vision of the consequences of reform. For example, when one enterprising administrator sought to disconnect attendance from grading, critics warned that without the threat of grading as a punishment, students would have no incentive to attend school (Erickson, 2010). However, something quite different happened. Unexcused absences dropped dramatically as teachers, administrators, and students quickly learned that the most effective consequence for unexcused absences was not an *F* or zero, but rather direct

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What to Say to Parents

■ Assure parents about what will not change: "We will continue to have an honor roll, transcripts for high school students, and individualized education plans for students with disabilities. We want to improve how we communicate with parents and make our grading system more clear."

■ Focus on principles before policy: "Before we talk about the details of grading policy, can we all agree that grades should be accurate and fair?"

■ Talk about the purpose of grading: "One of the most important methods for improving student performance is feedback, and grading is part of the way we give feedback. We would like to give feedback that is most useful to students and parents, and we want to ensure that both students and parents can use our feedback to improve students' confidence and performance."

■ Talk about parent frustrations: "Tell us what frustrates you about grades. For example, when you ask your children on what basis they received a grade, what is their most frequent response?" If the answer is "I don't know," then we need to work together to create a better grading system with clearer communication for parents.

communication among administrators, students, and parents.

Of course, not every grading reform will have such a fortunate result, but we must at least be accurate in our risk analysis. The comparison is not between a perfect present state of affairs and the hazards of the unknown grading policy. Rather, the comparison is between perpetuating our current rates of failure and disengagement and the unknown consequences of alternative policies.

Any change entails risk. The most common risk associated with changes in grading policies is that students (and often their parents) will game the system—for example, by taking advantage of the opportunity to turn in late work and waiting until the last week of class to turn in homework. Many teachers fear that the absence of sufficient punishment for turning in late work will subvert the discipline of personal responsibility that schools should seek to instill. After all, they reason, in the real world of work, employees must complete the job as assigned on time.

These risks are serious and worthy of consideration. But there are also risks associated with adhering to present policies that elevate the value of compliance over performance and magnify failure rates.

One thing is certain: The perpetuation of current practices will guarantee the perpetuation of current results. In my travels around the globe, teachers everywhere complain that students fail to complete homework, fail to take tests seriously, and fail to heed teacher warnings about the value of time management. Perhaps it's time to stop focusing so much on grading as punishment, which has not worked for a century, and refocus our energies on creating incentives for work that students do correctly and on time. There is ample evidence that alternative strategies

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offer opportunities for lower failure rates, improved discipline, better time management, improved organization, and greater respect for teacher feedback (Reeves, 2011).

Focus on Systems Thinking

Grading policies are only one part of a complex system of instruction, assessment, and feedback in schools. Fullan (2010) makes a compelling case for system alignment. The systems perspective reminds us that we can get many parts of a system right, but when one part is out of alignment, it affects every other part of the system—for good or ill.

For example, when the inappropriate use of the average in a grading system leads to student despair in the last two months of a semester, discipline problems tend to increase. Teachers' and administrators' time and attention are diverted from effective instruction to disciplinary issues, and school resources are forcibly directed toward remediation and course repetition.

When, by contrast, effective grading policies reduce failures, there's a cascade of unexpected benefits: reduced discipline problems, increased college credits, more elective courses, improved teacher morale, fewer hours of board of education time diverted to suspensions and expulsions, and added revenues for the entire system based on a higher number of students continually enrolled in school. Systems thinking reframes

the grading debate from "my grading policies for my classroom" to a collegial responsibility for the decisions of every teacher and administrator in the education system.

When school systems improve grading policies, they enhance their work on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership; when school systems maintain toxic grading policies, they undercut even their best work. Grading, in sum, is a high-leverage strategy that will, when effectively implemented, help every other element of the system improve. When done wrong, however, it can have a deleterious effect systemwide.

Keep It Collegial

In Africa, Australia and New Zealand, Asia, Europe, South America, and throughout North America, the subject of grading can, in an instant, transform otherwise polite discourse into rhetorical combat. As a profession, we can do better than this.

Perhaps we should start by presuming the good will of our colleagues. People who disagree with grading reforms are not cretins but experienced professionals who have arrived at their convictions by dint of years of experience and hard work. People who propose reforms are not wild-eyed neophytes, but colleagues who have compared the present system of grading with our potential and found the present system wanting.

Our first presumption should be that all involved in the discussion love kids and care about their futures. Suggestions of reform are not a criticism of the past but a hope for the future. In that spirit of professionalism and collegiality, let the debate begin. **EL**

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