



Transforming Grading to Reflect Learning

How Denair Unified is Changing Practices in Grades 6-12 to Reflect Learning

CLIENT OVERVIEW

Client Name: Denair Unified School District, Secondary Schools

Location: Denair, CA

Timeline: SY 2022 - 2026

Service(s): Fair & Accurate Grading & Feedback

Denair Unified School District is a small rural district in the California Central Valley, serving approximately 1,278 students in grades TK–12. When CLS began working with the district, leaders were examining grading practices through action research and exploring a shift to a 4-point grading scale for secondary schools, with a goal of preparing teachers to implement the change the following year.

CHALLENGE

For more than a year, Denair Unified had been examining grading practices to ensure grades reflected student learning rather than points earned. Following the pandemic, Ds and Fs reached an all-time high, with 36% of all high school students earning one or more Fs. Parents questioned the accuracy and meaning of grades, while secondary administrators noticed signs of grade inflation and inconsistencies in grading practices across classrooms. These patterns made it difficult for grades to clearly communicate student learning, prompting leaders to focus on strengthening standards alignment and ensuring grades more meaningfully reflected mastery.

- Grades did not consistently reflect student mastery
- Grading practices varied across classrooms
- Grade inflation raised concerns about rigor
- Leaders needed stronger alignment between grading and academic standards

PRACTICE

When CLS began working with Denair, the district was exploring grading practices to inform policy decisions. Early in the partnership, leaders chose to transform the grading scale and align standards, rigor, and expectations so grades more accurately reflected student learning. CLS facilitated professional learning to support the shift, helping teachers unpack Power Standards™, determine rigor, and develop clear learning intentions, success criteria, and rubrics for actionable feedback. Annual sessions for new staff helped institutionalize the work.

Over three years, CLS supported implementation by helping teachers develop performance tasks, create exemplars, and incorporate student voice into grading conversations, with support differentiated based on teacher readiness and progress.



FOCUS ON LEARNING

Redesign the grade scale to reflect standards and student learning.



INSTRUCTIONAL CLARITY

Build teacher skills to unpack standards, determine rigor and create success criteria.



SUSTAINED IMPLEMENTATION

Provide ongoing learning and virtual support to deepen implementation and train new staff.

“Working with CLS was a turning point for our district. They were in it with us for the long haul, which allowed us to shape and reshape the work until we got it right.”

Dr. Terry Metzger, Superintendent

TAILORED PROCESS

01

Identified and unpacked Power Standards, including learning intentions and success criteria.

02

Built rubrics to increase clarity and provide actionable feedback.

03

Deepened learning through performance tasks and student voice.

04

Provided ongoing training to ensure implementation and sustainability.

RESULTS

98%

GRADUATION RATE
Up from 84% in 2023
(+14 points)

0%

DROP OUT RATE
Down from 6.2% in 2023
(-6.2 points)

29%

AP PASS RATE
Up from 18% for all subjects
in 2023
(+11 points)

5%

"F" RATE
From 36% in 2023 to 17% in
2024 to 5% in 2025
(-31 Points)

ABOUT US

Creative Leadership Solutions is a leading provider of research and evidence-based professional development and coaching for K-12 education. We partner with districts and schools to achieve their goals, impact student learning, and improve performance. Our team of experts is dedicated to delivering personalized and differentiated learning opportunities.

- Research-driven approach grounded in evidence and practice
- Experienced coaches with deep K-12 and systems-change expertise
- Customized supports based on context, goals, and stakeholder needs
- Sustained partnership focused on implementation and results

ROADBLOCKS

Some teachers were skeptical about changing grading practices, so CLS engaged staff in exercises examining fair and accurate grading and the impact of harmful practices. When teachers wanted non-academic behaviors included in grades, the district created a separate citizenship grade. Concerns about eliminating zeros were addressed by reframing them as "insufficient evidence," requiring students to demonstrate learning for credit.

IMPACT OVER TIME

Over four school years, Denair transformed grading practices so grades more accurately reflected student learning. During this time, pass rates increased, graduation rates rose to 98%, and the district's dropout rate fell to zero. When expectations for mastery are clear, students are more willing to engage in the work required to succeed.

Source: CDE Dashboard & District Level Data

