CLS NEWSLETTER

Insights, Updates, and Inspiration | November 2026

What if grades told us more about learning than points earned? This issue explores how leaders can strengthen grading practices through clear expectations, meaningful feedback, and a district example of what's possible when instruction drives change.



Are Students Chasing Points or Learning?

"When did this become the standard? An 84 is an A now? I guess students don't have to work so hard."

Recent conversations about grading scales on social media, have sparked reactions from parents. One post that received attention asked, "When did this become the standard? An 84 is an A now? I guess students don't have to work as hard."

But those reactions reveal something worth examining: *Have we come to equate collecting points with learning?*

For decades, students have learned to play the grading game: complete the assignment, earn the points, calculate what is needed on the next test, and protect the average. This allows one student to accumulate points without mastering important learning, while another can struggle early, learn significantly, and still have a grade weighed down by those early attempts.

Neither tells us particularly well what the student actually knows and can do.

Which is exactly what a grade should communicate.

The goal of grading reform isn't to make it easier to earn an A. It is to make grades more accurate. Before debating whether an A begins at 90, 84, or somewhere else, we should ask whether the grade itself represents meaningful evidence of learning.

Real learning isn't found in how difficult it is to accumulate enough points. Real learning is found in what students are expected to know and do based on the standards, as well as the evidence they must provide to demonstrate that learning.

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

In your school, are students chasing learning or chasing points? Are points accumulated without clear evidence of learning?

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Register for upcoming round table discussions on current research and timely topics that help leaders reflect, learn, and lead with purpose.

EXPLORE UPCOMING EVENTS →



Written by Dr. Emily Freeland
Director of Development, Creative Leadership Solutions

Rubrics Done Right

MAKING FEEDBACK MATTER

Grading isn't just about the final result. It's about providing feedback that helps students understand where they are in their learning and what they need to do next.

Rubrics are one of the strongest tools teachers can use to make that feedback meaningful. When built around standards and clear success criteria, **rubrics shift the focus from completing an activity to demonstrating learning**. They also help teachers target their feedback and make instructional decisions more efficiently.

In ***Fearless Instruction*** (2025), Emily Freeland highlights two practical approaches:

Three-Column Rubrics: Combine success criteria, student self-assessment, and teacher feedback.

Single-Point Rubrics: Identify success criteria while providing space for growth opportunities and advanced learning.

Three-Column Rubric

Success Criteria	(Student) Self-Assessment	Teacher Feedback
Cite two sources using APA.	My sources are in APA format at the end of my response.	
Support claim with three pieces of evidence.	My three pieces of evidence are cited in paragraphs two, five, and six.	Two pieces of evidence are the same. Where can you find additional evidence for support to meet the standard?

Single-Point Rubric

Growth Opportunities	Success Criteria	Advanced
	Cite two sources using APA.	Move to in-text citations in your next response.
Two pieces of evidence are the same. Find an additional piece of evidence to meet the standard.	Support claim with three pieces of evidence.	

Both approaches help students take a more active role in understanding their progress while allowing teachers to focus their time on feedback that moves learning forward.

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

How are your teams using rubrics to help students understand their learning and next steps?

CONTINUE READING

Rubrics Done Right

BY DR. MAJALISE TOLAN

READ RESEARCH WEDNESDAY →



Written by Dr. Majalise Tolan
Superintendent, Oregon

FROM THE FIELD

FEARLESS INSTRUCTION:

HOW DENAIR UNIFIED SLASHED F-RATES AND SUMMER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

In the California Central Valley, high school F-rates of 25% to 45% are not uncommon. In Denair Unified, however, we've been holding steady at a 6% F-rate since Fall 2024.

This remarkable feat did not come from simply tweaking grading scales or changing assignment weights. Instead, it followed deep collaboration with Creative Leadership Solutions to examine what grades truly mean and we focused heavily on understanding academic standards, establishing clear success criteria, and providing excellent student feedback.

The results speak for themselves. Denair's comprehensive high school sent just 15 students to summer school in 2026, down from nearly 60 in 2023.

We attribute this success to **Fearless Instruction**. This approach means teaching with the end in mind and bringing students along as active participants in their own learning. By monitoring and improving the F-rate, the district is successfully reducing barriers to college eligibility and future student success.

KEY PRACTICES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

1. **STANDARDS ANALYSIS**
   Teams collaborate to identify what students need to know and be able to do based on the standards.
2. **CLEAR, STUDENT-FRIENDLY SUCCESS CRITERIA**
   Teams develop shared expectations so students understand what successful learning looks like.
3. **FAST FEEDBACK**
   Teams provide feedback that is Fair, Accurate, Specific, and Timely to help students move their learning forward.

READY TO RETHINK GRADING?

Move beyond points and percentages. Explore how CLS supports schools and districts in strengthening grading practices that reflect student learning.

EXPLORE THE GRADING REFORM SOLUTION →



Written by Dr. Terry Metzger
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At CLS, Impact is Not Optional — it's Fundamental.

We partner with schools and districts to transform intention into measurable results through tailored support, research-aligned practice, and collaborative implementation.

Let's Talk

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