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The Forgotten Element of Instructional Leadership: Grading

Thomas R. Guskey
University of Kentucky, GUSKEY@UKY.EDU

Laura J. Link
Purdue University Fort Wayne

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The Power of Instructional Leadership

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The Forgotten Element of Instructional Leadership: Grading

Thomas R. Guskey and Laura J. Link

Getting the school team coordinated on grading and reporting policies—and the purpose of grading—is too often overlooked in instructional leadership.

As a principal, Ms. Torrance takes pride in being an instructional leader. She attends conferences on high-quality instruction and reads cutting-edge books and articles on effective teaching strategies. She helps teachers design lessons grounded in learning theory that differentiate instruction based on students' individual needs and interests. She regularly observes teachers, offering detailed feedback on key aspects of effective practice. She even assists teachers in using results from classroom formative assessments to improve their teaching.

Still, serious problems are cropping up at Ms. Torrance's school: Every day she deals with new complaints from parents. One group is upset because, despite excellent performance on quizzes and assessments, their children received low report card grades due to neglected homework assignments. Another group saw their children's grades lowered when they (the parents) didn't sign the teacher's course syllabus because they didn't fully understand it. Still other parents question why advantaged students received extra credit for bringing in additional art supplies or canned food for the food drive.

Why Is Grading Neglected?

Ms. Torrance's problems arise from neglect of a critical but frequently overlooked dimension of instructional leadership: *grading and reporting*. Discussions of instructional leadership typically focus on three dimensions of teaching and learning: curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018). School principals assist teachers in planning what they teach, how they teach, and how they gather evidence on student learning. A fourth and equally important dimension is the way teachers evaluate that evidence and communicate the results of those evaluations to students, families, and others—grading. Instructional leaders' lack of attention to grading policies and practices—particularly how grading practices align to curriculum, instruction, and assessment—severely limits their effectiveness in improving student learning outcomes (Cohen, Spillane, & Peurach, 2018).

To solve this problem, instructional leaders at every level must give serious attention to grading and reporting. They need to become familiar with the extensive knowledge base on effective grading (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019) and engage teachers in ongoing discussions about how to put this knowledge into practice. Most important, they must guide their teams (including teachers, counselors, instructional coordinators, and aides) in reaching consensus about the purpose of grading and help them ensure that the policies and practices they implement are consistent, meaningful, and educationally sound.

Many reasons undoubtedly account for instructional leaders' neglect of grading and reporting. Let's consider a few.

Few leaders have training on effective grading practices (Stiggins, 1999). Pre-service programs and expectations for school leaders rarely include coursework or practicum experiences that address grading policies or practices. Only recently with the emphasis on accountability in education have aspects of assessment literacy been included (Popham, 2018). For example, The National Policy Board for Educational Administration's *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* makes no mention of how information about students' success and well-being should be communicated to parents, families, and students themselves.

Most teacher evaluation systems don't call for principals to consider grading practices. Instead, they direct principals to observe and support teachers' ability to design effective lessons, deliver engaging and differentiated instruction, and create authentic assessments that align with curriculum goals. These are all good things, and, like Ms. Torrance, principals devote a great deal of time and attention to this work through classroom observations and feedback procedures aimed at helping teachers improve. Despite this focus, however, evidence indicates that most principals still struggle to meet teacher improvement and student achievement goals (RAND, 2018).

Grading practices are deeply rooted traditions. This reason is particularly important. School leaders who propose changes in grading are challenging some of education's longest-held traditions (see Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2015). These are policies and practices most teachers and parents experienced when they were students and which they believe served them well.

Three Steps to Improvement

Despite these obstacles, instructional leaders can and must take important steps to improve grading practices. Other leaders have blazed the trail: Current research evidence from successful grading and reporting reform efforts offers sound guidance on how to proceed (Link, 2019).

Step 1. Study Effective Policies and Practices

An essential first step is research-based professional learning on effective grading policies and practices for both school leaders and all instructional staff members. As mentioned, the frequent inconsistencies in teachers' grading practices are due largely to a lack of professional training (McMillan, 2019). Without knowledge about what is or isn't effective, the majority of teachers rely on personal recollections of how—when they were students—the educators serving them handled grading. On the basis of those experiences, they develop grading policies they hope are equitable and fair.

The vast knowledge gained from research on grading conducted over the past century can guide instructional leaders and teachers to more effective policies and practices (see Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Developing a thorough understanding of this extensive knowledge base,

however, requires research-based professional learning. When a school team or professional learning community explores the evidence gathered on effective practices, it can help resolve disagreements about what constitutes valid grading criteria, how those criteria can be appropriately applied, and how educators working in a common setting can use grades to communicate meaningful information about students' performance—leading to agreed-upon grading policies.

Instructional leaders need to be cautious, however, when selecting professional learning experiences on grading. The popularity of grading reform has led to a flood of new "experts" on the topic whose ideas may or may not be research- or evidence-based. Acting on recommendations for grading policy that have scant research behind them will result in the same disasters that have ruined many other well-intentioned grading reform efforts (St. George, 2017).

Similarly, Google searches, Facebook groups, and Twitter chats make it easy for instructional leaders to access information on various approaches to grading reform, but don't always identify credible sources of reliable evidence to guide meaningful change. Often, they simply provide a forum for sharing opinions about what might be best practice. Instructional leaders who want to locate truly trustworthy sources of information will need to take the time to examine the credibility behind recommendations (Guskey, 2018). Leaders can then proceed knowing their actions—and the actions that flow from new policies—have been tested in specific contexts and found reliable. (For a review of recent, reliable research on grading policies, see the 2019 book *What We Know About Grading: What Works, What Doesn't, and What's Next?* by Thomas Guskey and Susan Brookhart, ASCD).

Step 2. Promote Peer Collaboration

In addition to credible professional learning, instructional leaders must build the organizational supports teachers need to change their grading and reporting practices. In particular, they must establish regular, focused opportunities for peer collaboration. Teachers need time to take advantage of their collective expertise, using each other as resources to develop shared solutions to common grading problems.

Although teachers frequently interact in writing curriculum, planning lessons, and developing common assessments, they rarely have opportunities to collaborate on grading issues. As a result, grading practices tend to be idiosyncratic and highly varied, even within the same school (Brookhart, 2005). Keeping up with teachers' varying grading practices can be confusing for students and families alike. A student's math teacher, for example, may carefully grade every homework assignment, while her English teacher uses homework only to offer feedback that doesn't include grades. Her science teacher may accept late work, but her social studies teacher reduces grades by one letter for each day an assignment is late. Her music teacher might factor class participation into grades, but her art teacher doesn't. Regular peer collaboration leads to more consistent grading practices and lessens confusion among students and families.

Instructional leaders must ensure, however, that peer collaboration focuses on practices for which there is credible supporting evidence so teachers don't collaborate to do the wrong things. Combining collaboration with knowledge from reliable research studies and evaluation reports will greatly enhance the success of grading reform efforts.

Step 3. Clarify the Purpose

Even when grading reforms are made from verifiable knowledge and collaborative decisions, practices still may be misaligned if the *purpose* of grades and grading remains unclear. To succeed with grading reform, instructional leaders must guide teachers and school teams to consensus on what they want to

accomplish with grades and reporting. Once an agreed upon, schoolwide purpose is determined, changes in grading policies and practices are easier to make and put into practice. Clarifying the purpose also helps align the entire teaching and learning process, since grades communicate the combined outcome of teachers' curriculum, instruction, and assessment efforts.

Because teachers have different perspectives on grading, coming to consensus on the purpose of grading and reporting is never easy. Researchers who have asked educators about the purpose of grades (Guskey, 2015) find answers can be classified into six categories:

- To communicate information about students' achievement to families and others.
- To provide students information for self-evaluation.
- To select, identify, or group students for specific educational paths or programs.
- To provide incentives for students to learn.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs.
- To provide evidence of students' effort or responsibility.

Although teachers typically agree that all these purposes are legitimate, they seldom agree on which is *most* important. Such disagreement often leads educators to try to address *all* these goals with a single reporting device, typically a report card. The result is they end up achieving none very well (Austin & McCann, 1992). The simple truth is that no single reporting instrument can serve all these purposes well. Some of these purposes are actually counter to others.

What Ms. Torrance Might Have Done

To see how teachers—with the guidance of a school leader—agreeing on the purpose of grades makes for greater consistency and fewer problems, consider how this might have made Ms. Torrance more effective. Imagine that after extensive discussion, the entire team at her school had decided the primary purpose of grading is *to communicate information about students' achievement of specific learning goals to students and to families at a certain point in time*. Suppose they then committed to align their grading and reporting practices with that purpose. This commitment would mean that teachers could no longer allow nonacademic factors—like parents' signatures on syllabi or bringing in art supplies or cans of food for a food drive—to be considered in determining students' grades. Doing so wouldn't align with their agreed upon purpose.

Such a shared commitment to purpose might also have compelled Ms. Torrance's teachers to reexamine the practice of reducing students' grades for negligent behavior, such as not turning in homework, a practice many teachers were attached to. Perhaps the team would have decided that teachers could still report on students' completion of homework on the report card, but not use homework completion as a source of evidence in determining grades. With this kind of compromise, homework completion is reported, but simply not included as part of a grade that represents what students have learned and are able to do.

Clarifying the purpose of grades prompts teachers to rethink how the other dimensions of teaching and learning align to that purpose. Gogerty (2016), for example, found that when the purpose of grading becomes clear, teachers become more deliberate with their approach to student learning. They prioritize curricular standards and jointly adjust their instructional procedures to more closely align the content, format, and level of difficulty characteristic of each of their classroom assessments. Teachers also become less tolerant of peers who fail to align their teaching and learning practices to the common purpose.

Aligning the Dimensions

Instructional leadership is vitally important in efforts to improve student learning. To live up to that importance, instructional leaders cannot neglect grading policies and practices. Through facilitating research-based professional learning, peer collaboration, and clarity of purpose, leaders can ensure that grading and reporting are aligned with the other three key dimensions of teaching and learning—a strong curriculum, effective instruction, and authentic assessment practices. This will not only make school an easier place for students to navigate—it will also facilitate critical communication with parents and families that fosters family involvement, collaboration, and support.

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Thomas R. Guskey is a senior research scholar in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville, and professor emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Laura J. Link is an assistant professor of educational leadership in the College of Professional Studies at Purdue University Fort Wayne in Indiana. Follow them on Twitter @tguskey and @laurajlink.

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