5-2021

Undoing the Traditions of Grading and Reporting

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Notes/Citation Information

Guskey, T. R. (2021). Undoing the traditions of grading and reporting. *The School Administrator, 78*(5), 32-35.

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One silver lining from the ongoing public health crisis might be the lasting impact of two modified approaches of the past year

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

T he COVID-19 pandemic compelled district leaders to make drastic changes in the way schools operate. Nearly overnight, school buildings were closed, transportation was halted and instruction became remote for students. These changes made apparent the need for revisions in grading and reporting as well.

What district leaders quickly discovered, though, is that changing grading policies and practices meant challenging some of education's longest-held traditions.

In efforts to make grading fairer, more meaningful and more equitable for students during the pandemic, school district leaders in many communities realized that certain grading traditions have long outlived their usefulness and need to

be altered or abandoned. When schools began to reopen and classroom instruction resumed, several of these changes in grading were retained. Grading reform thus became a silver lining to the hardships created by the pandemic.

Two of the most important improvements in grading and reporting involved (1) the use of fewer grade categories and (2) the assignment of multiple grades.

Grade Categories

One of the first changes in grading made at the onset of the pandemic was to reduce the number of grade categories teachers had to consider. Prominent universities such as University of Chicago, Harvard University and Stanford University
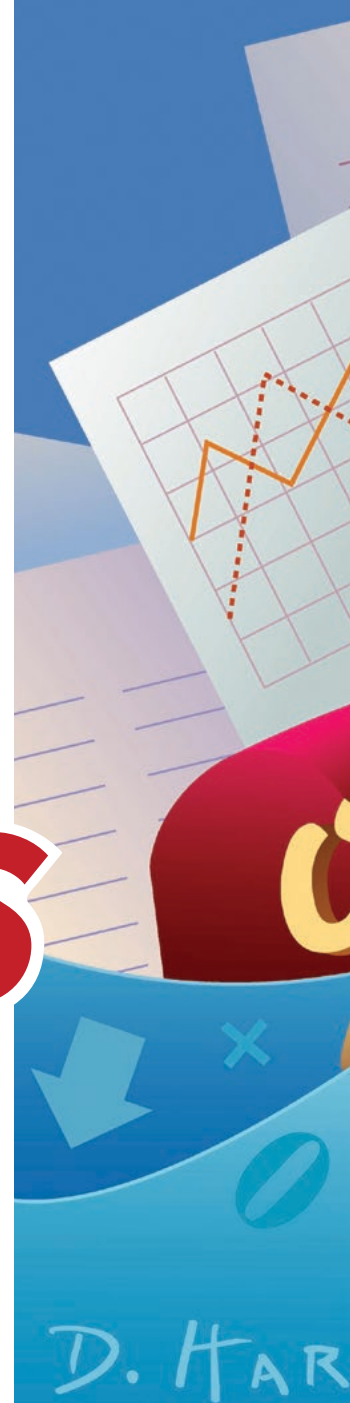
led the way by shifting temporarily to satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading after transitioning to remote learning. University officials recognized the abrupt changes in instruction made it unfair to faculty members and their students to have to distinguish the five levels of student performance associated with A-F grades. Shifting to satisfactory/unsatisfactory grades meant professors assigned only one of two grades using a single performance cut-off.

School districts followed suit, with many changing their grading systems to include only two grade categories as well, typically satisfactory/incomplete. Opponents charged this would diminish academic rigor and lessen students' motivation to strive for excellence. Change advo-

cates argued, however, that such a change was fairer to teachers and students who were forced to deal with unprecedented changes in both teaching and learning because of the pandemic. They contended that satisfactory/incomplete grading would help students focus more on learning rather than simply working to achieve high grades. District leaders also saw this change in grading as a way to offset some of the obvious inequities students faced in learning from home.

Admissions offices at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. showed their willingness to adapt to these changes in high school grades. Brandeis University, in suburban Boston, developed a COVID-19 FAQ page that stated: "If your school decides to move to an alternative grading

system (i.e., pass/fail, credit/no credit), our office is fully prepared to accept these changes as made by individual schools. Any information explaining these changes is always welcome, whether on the transcript itself or in a communication from your school counselor."

Of course, teachers still had to determine specific criteria for "satisfactory" grades and develop procedures for students to resolve "incomplete" grades. To help decide what level of performance should be considered satisfactory, several school districts conducted surveys of stakeholder groups. The Great Valley School District in Malvern, Pa., surveyed nearly 1,700 parents, more than 300 teachers and all site leaders asking at what level of performance (i.e., grade A, B, C or D) should satisfactory be set. To the surprise of district leaders, 96 percent of parents, 94 percent of teachers and all school leaders indicated that satisfactory should be equivalent to a grade of C or higher. These results made it easy to recommend procedures for setting the cut-off between satisfactory and incomplete grades.

Research Support

When schools in some communities reopened last fall, while still struggling with health and safety issues related to the pandemic, most returned to grading scales with more categories of student performance. But for many, returning to percentage grades that include 101 levels of student performance, two-thirds of which denote failure, was too great a transition. Teachers at all levels questioned the reasonableness of setting so many cut-offs for students' grades. Many also raised doubts about the extent to which they could agree on the distinction between adjacent percentage grade categories, say between an 89 and 90.

District leaders found additional support for getting rid of percentage grades in the synthesis of research on grading conducted by Susan Brookhart and her colleagues in 2016. This extensive review, published in *Review of Educational Research*, made clear the inescapable unreliability of percentage grades. Well-designed studies showed that equally experienced and knowledgeable teachers asked to assign percentage grades to the same sample of evidence on student learning typically varied by 10 to 15 percentage points in the grades assigned.

As a result, many school districts, including the Martin County School District in Stuart, Fla., abandoned percentage grades and now use the five-category, A–F letter grade scale and its associated numerical values of 4–0. In defining the criteria for determining these grades, Martin County teachers discovered not only were they more consistent and less subjective in assigning grades, but the grades they assigned had clearer meaning for students and their families.

Abandoning percentage grades also alleviated the problem of assigning zeros. With percentage grades, a zero essentially dooms students to failure. To recover from a single zero and earn a passing grade, students must achieve perfect scores on at least three subsequent assessments. But with letter grades, recovering from a zero to passing means moving from zero to one; not zero to 60 or 65. And because nearly all colleges and universities use letter grades rather than percentage grades, it eases students' transition to higher education environments.

Multiple Grades

Changes in grading prompted by the pandemic also forced district leaders to consider the meaning of grades and precisely what they communicate. Many began to recognize that when teachers combine evidence on student achievement with data on homework completion, class participation, punctuality in turning in assignments and other work habits, the grade becomes a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret. Researchers refer to this as a "hodgepodge" grade that mixes achievement with factors related to

Thomas Guskey, author of *Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems,* sees the pandemic leading to permanent, positive changes in how students are assessed on their learning.

behavior, attitude, responsibility and compliance.

The problems associated with hodgepodge grades became apparent to district leaders when they discovered dramatic increases in the number of failing grades this school year. More than a third of high school students in St. Paul, Minn., Public Schools received failing grades in the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year. Similar results were noted in several districts surrounding San Diego, Los Angeles, Houston and Salt Lake City. The number of failing grades in these districts were two to three times higher than last year. Evidence also showed that students of color and those from economically disadvantaged homes were more than twice as likely to be failing as their more advantaged peers.

When district leaders examined the evidence that teachers used to determine students' grades, they discovered that many failing grades were not due to deficits in learning but to the lack of compliance. Students received failing grades because they didn't turn in homework assignments, didn't fully engage in class sessions or failed to meet assignment deadlines.

To provide more accurate information about students' academic performance, many schools began separating student achievement from compliance and work habits by reporting multiple grades. This doesn't mean there are no consequences for compliance infractions, but rather they will be reported separately from grades reflecting student learning. At Bryan Station High School in Lexington, Ky., students receive separate grades for employability skills, which include dependability, punctuality and deadlines, communication and technology use, in addition to grades reflecting their academic performance.

Although the use of multiple grades is relatively new in most U.S. schools, it has been common practice in schools throughout Canada for decades. In the province of Ontario, schools have reported multiple grades for students across all grade levels for nearly 20 years. Teachers there indicate that reporting multiple grades actually make grading easier. They don't need to gather any additional data and avoid debates about how these different factors should be weighted in calculating a single grade.

Reporting multiple grades on both the report card and transcript emphasizes to students the importance of these different aspects of learning. Parents gain the advantages of a more detailed and comprehensive picture of their child's performance in school. In addition, because achievement grades are no longer tainted by evidence based on students' compliance or work habits,

By separating students' academic performance from work habits and behavior in grade reports, schools can paint a more accurate picture, assessment authority Thomas Guskey believes.

those grades more closely align with external measures of achievement and content mastery, such as state assessments, AP exam results and ACT or SAT scores.

Reporting multiple grades doesn't improve student learning or lessen the inequities that impact how well students learn. It simply makes the grades students receive a more honest, more meaningful and more accurate representations of their performance, whether learning remotely or in school.

Simple Strategies

Grading and reporting are basically a challenge in effective communication. Using fewer grade categories and reporting multiple grades enhance the meaning, reliability and accuracy of that communication.

Without adding to the workload of teachers, these two simple strategies can greatly enhance the effectiveness of grading and reporting, provide more meaningful information, facilitate better communication between school and home, and offer direction in efforts to improve students' learning. ■

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