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Effective Grading Practices Pages 66-70

How Grading Reform Changed Our School

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At a suburban high school in Minnesota, grading reform has resulted in a fundamentally new way to approach learning.

Last summer, I took great joy in watching my daughter take swimming lessons. One of the most difficult tasks for her was swimming the front crawl 50 feet to the other side of the pool. During the three-week course, with ongoing guidance and feedback from her teacher, she relentlessly practiced this task every day. Only during the last class did she finally reach her goal and swim across the pool. Her final report for the class recommended that she move to the next level.

How shocked I would have been if her teacher had informed me that my daughter's final mark in the swimming course would be determined by the average of her performance over the entire course—that even though she had mastered the front crawl at the end of the class, she failed because the teacher had included all her unsuccessful attempts in calculating the grade.

Perhaps this scenario seems outlandish. But in the world of schooling, averaging is just one of many common but questionable practices that can significantly distort the accuracy of grades.

The Guiding Question

At Minnetonka High School, a suburban school serving nearly 2,900 students in Minnetonka, Minnesota, the need for grading reform became evident in the early 2000s. Parents were calling for more transparency and consistency. Teacher surveys revealed that the purpose for grading varied from classroom to classroom and that teachers were using a wide range of factors to determine grades. Attendance, behavior, effort, extra credit, and participation were all in the mix along with actual achievement of curriculum standards. We needed to articulate a clear focus for grading.

Changing our school's grading practices required that we take a fundamental look at one guiding question: What should go into a grade? Our answer: Grades should reflect only what a student knows and is able to do. This principle became the impetus for our work. As we analyzed our policies and procedures, we discovered many practices that were either inflating or deflating grades.

Inflating Grades

Is there a connection between a strong bladder and grades? Amazingly, in some cases there is. A substitute teacher was covering a colleague's classes for the day. The regular teacher instructed him that if a student asked to go to the bathroom, he should ask that student for his or her pink pass because the student might decide to keep the pass and remain in the room. Why? At the end of the quarter, students could submit their unused pink passes for extra points to be added to their final grade.

This may seem like an extreme example, but it's common practice for teachers to award extra points for bringing in tissue boxes, completing extra-credit assignments, returning permission slips, contributing canned food to the food drive, and so on. Such practices inflate grades and distort their meaning. The whole grading process becomes a game rather than a reflection of learning.

Another source of grade inflation is grading "on the curve." When scores on a particular test are initially low, the teacher applies a curving process, and everyone's score is magically inflated. Typically, the top student score in a class becomes the "perfect" score, and the rest are sorted from that point.

Deflating Grades

Factors unrelated to student achievement of standards—such as behavioral infractions, unexcused

absences, cheating, late or missing work, or averaging—can also deflate grades.

An example of the effects of averaging occurred when Pam decided to take a risk and register for an advanced placement course in the fall of her junior year. Unfortunately, she soon became overwhelmed by the course's content and demands. After trying hard but receiving a first-quarter grade of *F*, she decided to change to a general-level class, where she achieved great success. During the second quarter, she earned an *A* on her classwork and a *B+* on the final exam. Two weeks later, the final grades for the semester were issued. Before I reveal the grade Pam received, what grade do *you* think would demonstrate what she knew and was able to do for this course?

Pam was surprised and confused when she saw that her final grade was a *D+*. Following common practice with course transfers, her first-quarter *F* had been carried over into the new course. Needless to say, her parents called the school. Fortunately, Minnetonka district policy allows a teacher to conduct additional assessments if he or she agrees that a report card grade does not fairly represent the student's performance. In this case, the teacher gave Pam two additional summative exams that she had missed from the first quarter, and her grade was converted to an *A-*.

Student behavior can also complicate grades. For example, in our school, many students used their cell phones to text or send e-mails during class. Some teachers attempted to use grades to control this behavior. One teacher would reduce a student's percentage grade by two.points every time the student in appropriately took out a cell phone. In some cases, this practice reduced students' grades by two letters.

Schools also frequently consider student attendance when calculating grades. Students with unexcused absences and tardies may find their grades reduced at the end of the quarter—a consequence issued up to nine weeks after the offense.

Practicality + Best Practice

Establishing a common purpose for grades enabled Minnetonka High School to reexamine and change many of the practices that were inflating or deflating grades. On the basis of our belief that grades should show what a student knows and is able to do, we developed a policy for consistently and objectively reporting student academic achievement.

Teachers are now required to use two assessment categories—formative (not more than 15 percent of the grade) and summative (not less than 85 percent). Grades in these two categories determine the quarter and semester grade. Within the summative category, teachers of the same course must conduct at least four common assessments, one of which must be a performance task. Throughout the learning process, the formative assessments inform the students of their progress in mastering material that will appear in the upcoming summative exam. Teachers are responsible for articulating clear learning targets that students understand and can attain.

Of course, few people would argue that participation, effort, and positive attitude are unimportant. However, including these elements in a grade would distort our purpose of communicating achievement. Instead, we report students' performance on these factors to students and parents during conferences.

We also developed a system to replace the old practice of applying the "curve" to adjust test scores. Now, after every assessment, the teacher conducts an item analysis. If a significant number of students miss certain questions, the teacher reflects on whether he or she provided enough instruction on those topics. In terms of scoring, the teacher omits these test questions from students' grades, reteaches the lesson, and reassesses the topic.

We determined that behavioral infractions are legitimate concerns and should be addressed—just not with grades. When grades cannot be used to control students, we must replace them with sound classroom management and student engagement strategies.

For instance, we replaced the system of reducing grades for unexcused absences with a highly responsive and immediate intervention and consequence system. When a student skips a class, a phone call goes home that same day. A staff member meets with the student within 36 hours to find out why the student was absent and issues a detention for an unexcused class absence.

Initially, some educators and parents expressed fear about what would happen: Would students skip class when grades were no longer connected to attendance? This proved not to be the case. Instead, we experienced a 55 percent reduction in unexcused absences, a 66 percent decline in disciplinary referrals, and a 37 percent reduction in suspensions. We did not eliminate consequences for misbehavior; we simply developed more effective and appropriate consequences.

Homework practices were another fruitful area for change. Homework had typically been graded based on completion. Parents were often confused when they saw that their child's mark on the final chapter or unit summative test was a *D* or *F* after the child had received a series of perfect homework scores. Over time, homework practices have evolved. Instead of giving students homework scores that reflect completion, teachers now frequently give a quiz on the previous day's homework, thus providing real-time progress updates. As a result, students and parents see a higher level of consistency between the homework grades and final assessments.

Second Chance for Learning

Of all the grading dilemmas, retakes and redos surge to the top as one of the most highly disputed. Those who argue against retakes claim that this practice coddles students and doesn't reflect the real world.

Imagine that you've just taken a major test for your high school Spanish class, and in spite of your preparation you bombed it. You ask the teacher for a chance to take a retest to improve your learning and score. Your teacher tells you that he doesn't offer retakes and that you just need to try harder next time. You leave defeated, muttering, "Well, I just can't get Spanish." If this pattern continues, it won't take much

time for you to doubt your potential for growth and success.

Students need multiple chances to grow and show what they know. If the goal is for all students to master essential learning, the philosophy *teach, test, and move on* should be replaced with *teach, test, and now what?* The essential question that each teacher should ask after every assessment is, Now what do I do for the students who didn't get it? In Minnetonka, the only unacceptable answer is "move on."

When the answer is to provide a retake, the most important step is what happens between the first and second test. The purpose of retakes is never for the student to simply show up and hope for the best. Corrective instruction must occur between the test and retest.

For example, Polly, a social studies teacher, requires students to review all incorrect answers on the original assessment and find the correct answers. Next, the student must come in and work with her to complete review pages. Only when it's evident that the student is ready to be reassessed does Polly offer a retake. The new score replaces the old one—there's no averaging or limit to what the student can earn. This is not letting students off the hook; it's holding them accountable for mastering the information.

Each year, we have refined and more deeply implemented our new grading philosophy. At the end of the 2009–10 school year, we posed the question to staff, "What if no student failed at Minnetonka?" In analyzing the data, we discovered that the primary reason for course failure was not lack of understanding of the material, but missing work. We decided that the consequence for not doing the work should be—doing the work. Students are now required to complete missing work during their lunch periods or before school. We also stepped up communication; teachers phone parents of struggling students every three weeks to report on progress.

This combination of increased student accountability and improved home-school communication has produced dramatic results. The number of *F*s in grades 9–12 has dropped 63 percent, and the number of *D*s has dropped 32 percent from 2009 to the current term. When an entire faculty implements this consequence and moves away from practices that deflate grades—and hope—an entire culture can be transformed.

Professional Development

To sustain the fundamental kind of grading reform undertaken by Minnetonka, educators need meaningful professional development. They not only need to study grading research, but they also need new learning opportunities around effective classroom management, assessment, and instruction.

Minnetonka created the High School Instructional Leadership Team to redesign professional development in the school. The team works to set the agenda and professional development for all monthly staff meetings and other teacher work days. During each meeting, teachers share research as well as their own experiences.

For example, in a recent meeting, Sarah described an experience concerning her 9th grade English students. During the second semester, the students read two Greek tragedies, *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*. When they took their summative assessment for the first play, some students demonstrated a sound understanding of the play itself but performed poorly on a specific section dealing with passage analysis. The students requested a retake. Sarah's dilemma was how to balance the need to start the next play with the fact that students had not mastered the skill of passage analysis. Knowing her students well, she was concerned that they would spend much of their time working on the old material and fall behind with *Antigone*.

Sarah's solution? During study of the second play, she continued to have her students practice passage analysis through intensive formative assessments. When they took the *Antigone* summative assessment, students who had previously struggled with passage analysis had the option to complete an extra section in which they applied this skill to the new play. Sarah replaced the students' previous results with their new scores.

As a result of this strategy, more than 65 percent of her students increased their scores and demonstrated a higher level of mastery of passage analysis. Sarah said that her students felt empowered by this experience.

For the reluctant teacher, the argument that "retakes are great, but they won't work in my classroom" is diminished when colleagues like Sarah show how they've used retests with good results. This timely professional development has transformed our school and sustained our grading work.

A Culture Transformed

Parents, students, and teachers had been comfortable with the old system, with its cushion of "free" points from extra credit and homework completion. We spent much time during the first year educating parents and students about the new policy. During parent-teacher conferences, we held breakout sessions that helped parents understand the need for grading reform and the research supporting it.

Initially, some parents and students feared that Minnetonka's new grading policies would mean that grades would be lower. After the first-semester grades that first year were calculated, it was clear that these fears would not come true. Although there were slightly fewer *A*s, the combined percentage of *A*s and *B*s was the same. In addition, we have seen a significant increase in overall student achievement. Between 2006 and 2010,

- ACT composite scores rose from an average of 24.1 to an average of 25.7.
- The number of students taking advanced placement (AP) exams rose from 505 to 661.
- The number of students participating in the AP Scholars program rose from 160 to 258.

- The Minnesota Comprehensive Reading Exam (grade 10) passing rate increased from 85.5 percent to 92.3 percent.

The school climate has changed, too. No longer do teachers receive panicked calls at the end of the quarter seeking extra-credit opportunities to boost a grade. Regardless of the teacher, the protocols for late work, retests, and evaluating nonacademic factors—to name a few—are the same. Teachers, principals, students, and parents share a common understanding of the school's grading and assessment policies.

Ever since we began the process years ago, teachers have been highly involved in the conversation. They routinely ask themselves, Do my grades reflect students' academic achievement? Are there nonacademic factors influencing the grades?

More broadly, the questions Why are we doing this? and What research supports it? have become central to our ongoing conversations about school improvement. Our relentless focus on grading and assessment practices has helped create a culture of learning at all levels.

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