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Starting the Conversation About Grading
Susan M. Brookhart

The first task in successful grading reform is to reach consensus on the purpose of grades.



When I talk with teachers about grading, feelings often run high. Teachers tend to assume that others agree with their positions, but in fact I hear a range of opinions. Some talk about the academic meaning of grades:

Our state test scores were rising, but our grades weren't. Aren't we supposed to be measuring the same standards?

Our kids used to complain that with some teachers they'd get an A, and with others they'd get a B. We're trying to be more consistent.

Some address the importance of effort:

They can't get an A if they don't do the homework. If you only do half the work on your job, you get fired.

Everything students do counts in my classroom.

Some think about the motivational aspect of grades:

It's very important to keep hope alive. Once kids give up, you've lost them.

But even though opinions about why grades are important differ, more and more educators are beginning to question traditional grading practices that were developed to sort students into learners and nonlearners, not to support learning for all. Today's standards and accountability movement, which holds schools responsible for the learning of *all* students, has its counterpart in *standards-based grading*, which could just as easily be called learning-focused grading.

Decide on Purpose

As school districts contemplate a journey toward standards-based grading, they must make quite a conceptual and practical shift. With most conventional grading practices, one grade sums up achievement in a subject, and that one grade often includes effort and behavior. With standards-based, learning-focused grading practices, a grade sums up achievement on standards—there are often several grades per subject—with effort and behavior reported separately.

As they attempt to make this shift, many schools go off track or get swamped by side issues. They waste energy having hard discussions about details of grading practice that, by themselves, cannot accomplish real reform. Merely tweaking the details of a grading system can result in a system that makes even less sense than the one it was intended to replace. Any school that is interested in reforming grading needs to talk about it in ways that challenge colleagues on the right questions.

Focus on the Main Issue

The main issue is not what scale to use, how often to report, how many grades to combine, or how to combine them. These secondary issues can be decided only after you answer the main questions: What meaning do we want our grades to convey? and Who is (are) the primary intended audience(s) for this message?

Standards-based grading is based on the principle that grades should convey how well students have achieved standards. In other words, grades are not about what students *earn*; they are about what students *learn*. To what degree do you and your colleagues believe that? If you do agree, what are the advantages to you and to your students? If you don't agree, why not? That's the discussion to have.

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Don't Get Sidetracked

Starting the conversation with anything but the main issue will result in at best superficial, and at worst harmful, change. Many schools get caught up in debates that amount to tinkering with the reporting scale while maintaining otherwise conventional grading practices.

For example, some districts begin grading reform discussions with whether to assign zeros for missed work. This discussion is an artifact of the percentage-based grading scale. It may feel like a big deal, but it's a technical detail. Change the grading scale (for example, to letters), and you change the problem.

Other districts abolish certain grades, for example adopting a "no *D*" policy. This results in a truncated, but still conventional, grading scale. As Grant Wiggins (1998) observed, "Getting rid of grades lower than *B* makes as little sense as not reporting batting averages under .300" (p. 252).

Secondary Issues Will Follow

I cannot emphasize strongly enough that getting sidetracked with details of scaling (letters, percentages, or rubrics? Zeros or not? No *D*s or *F*s?) or policies (What should we do with late or missing work? How can we report behavior? What will we do about academic honors and awards?) before you tackle the question of what a grade means in the first place will lead to trouble. Logic, my own experience, and the research and practice of others (Cox & Olsen, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2010; McMunn, Schenck, & McColskey, 2003) all scream that this is the case.

Grading scales and reporting policies can be discussed productively once you agree on the main purpose of grades. For example, if a school decides that academic grades should reflect achievement only, then teachers need to handle missed work in some other way than assigning an *F* or a zero. Once a school staff gets to this point, there are plenty of resources they can use to work out the details (see Brookhart, 2011; O'Connor, 2009). The important thing is to examine beliefs and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of grades first. Without a clear sense of what grading reform is trying to accomplish, not much will happen.

What many schools find as they try to establish purpose for their grading system is that they have to deal with teachers' beliefs and long-standing habits and experience, not only about grading but also about learning, effort, discipline, and classroom management. Teachers who are skeptical about standards-based grading need safe, honest conversations about their beliefs, coupled with collegial agreement to try some new things and see how they inform those beliefs.

How to Begin the Conversation

The discussion points in the box titled "[Which Do You Believe?](#)" on p. 14 can be useful in opening a dialogue about purpose, audience, and personal beliefs about grading.

Note that the term *grades* in this list of statements means grades for school subjects (such as mathematics) and/or standards (for example, mathematics numbers and operations) and does not refer to every symbol on a report card. Additional symbols on report cards can communicate information about students' learning skills, citizenship, attendance, and growth or progress. Teacher-written comments can communicate a wide variety of observations, evidence, questions, and conclusions about students. For now, we are just talking about academic grades.

In most schools, beliefs about these statements will vary. Not everyone believes that grades should reflect only achievement. I know plenty of teachers who firmly believe that grades should reflect what students "earn" in the classroom by doing their work, following directions, and behaving.

The first task in grading reform is to reach consensus (or at least, "I can live with that" status) on purpose and foundational issues. Here are some ways to begin that conversation. One of these might work in your school or district—or you could combine elements of several of them. Remember that the purpose is to talk about the issues, getting people's real feelings on the table.

[Vote, Compare, Discuss](#)

In small groups at a faculty meeting, have each colleague indicate his or her own agreement (a check) or disagreement (an X) with each of the four discussion points on p. 14. Then poll the group to see where there is agreement (all checks); disagreement (all Xs); and mixed opinions (some of each).

Begin the discussion with the areas of agreement. Ask whether the disagreement could be reframed as "I'm not there yet." Require all statements of opinion to be supported ("Why do you believe that?"). Strive to understand what your colleagues are saying, even when you don't agree.

[Debate](#)

Randomly assign teachers the pro or con position for the first discussion point, four or five on each side. Whether they agree with their assigned position or not, have them prepare for a debate in which they assert that position and support it with logic and evidence, including evidence that they find in resource material. The team's presentation should include anticipating the arguments of the opposing side and preparing a defense for these, also using logic and evidence.

After the formal debate, the whole faculty can reflect on what was learned.

[Local Expert Panel](#)

If a few teachers in your school or district (or a neighboring one) have experimented with standards-based, learning-focused grading practices, invite them to participate in a panel discussion. Each can briefly describe his or her strategies and the results. Listeners can ask their own questions or some of the following questions:

5. [Building Academic Vocabulary: Teacher's Manual](#)

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- How did you learn about standards-based grading?
- What do you think are the most important reasons educators should be interested in standards-based grading?
- How did you talk with students about changing your grading practices? What responses did you receive?
- Have you talked with any parents about changing your grading practices? What responses have you received?
- Did your school have a standards-based grading committee? If so, how did it form, how often did it meet, and what did committee members talk about?

Fishbowl

Give a small group of teachers the discussion points on p. 14 and ask them to share their thoughts about these statements. (Give them advance notice so they can prepare and be satisfied that they are sharing what they really feel.) Have the rest of the group observe until these colleagues are finished discussing the statements among themselves. Then, have individuals in the larger group share what they have learned.

(By the way, any of the methods above can be fishbowed: Colleagues chosen to be observers remain silent during the first discussion or debate and are given time to comment later.)

Moving the Conversation Along

When schools or school districts begin discussing grading practices, they usually have an agenda. A team of administrators may have decided that district grading practices and policies should move from conventional to standards-based, learning-focused practices. Or the push for grading reform may come from teachers who see a disconnect between standards-based instruction and conventional grading practices (Brookhart, 2011).

Whatever the source, the agenda should be no secret. However, that doesn't mean that the conversation should be about how to make people agree to go along with the agenda. All opinions need to be heard, and people's right to hold them should be affirmed. Educators will be much more receptive to new ideas—even those that challenge their own opinions—that come from colleagues who understand where they stand and why.

For example, someone always asks, "Why would students behave if I can't grade them down if they don't behave?" Listening carefully, you may hear the colleague who voices this opinion also saying, "We need to develop some alternatives for handling behavior." Good point! Most of the time, it won't be a matter of changing people's minds, but rather of addressing their concerns. As conversations about grading reform continue, that kind of discussion will lead to productive change.

What Happens Next?

Districts that decide to base grades on standards for achievement have begun the journey. What many such districts do next might surprise some readers: They engage in professional development about *learning*. Of course, grading reform requires some professional development about how to implement technical aspects of a new policy. But what districts find when they grapple seriously with grading is that they have questions about learning.

To succeed with standards-based grading, teachers need to develop teaching and learning strategies, formative assessment strategies, and coaching strategies at least as much as they need to develop grading plans. They need to develop skill at differentiating instructional avenues to the standards so that most students can reach them. They need to develop skill at discerning when alternate routes to common standards won't work for some students and how to modify standards for these students. They need more strategies to deal with advanced students, including how to teach and assess truly advanced work.

Supporting the Larger Mission

To successfully reform grading, start by having productive conversations about what grades should mean and who the main audience for grades should be. Productive conversations about grading must deal seriously with educators' long-standing beliefs and entrenched practices. Have those conversations about foundational issues, not details.

In the process of establishing a new grading mission, use strategies to make sure everyone is heard and understood. Challenge beliefs respectfully and look for the underlying concerns. As grading reform work unfolds, developing technical and policy details that make sense in support of the agreed-on mission will turn out not to be such a big deal. Respectfully helping everyone arrive at the decision that grades should reflect learning—*that's* the big deal.



Use these discussion points to start a conversation about grading.

- Grades should reflect achievement of intended learning outcomes—whether the school is using a conventional, subject-based report card or a report card that represents these intended learning outcomes as standards.
- The primary audiences for the message conveyed in grades are students and their parents; grading policies should aim to give them useful, timely, actionable information. Teachers, administrators, and other educators are secondary audiences.
- Grades should reflect a particular student's individual achievement. Group and cooperative skills are important, but they should be reflected elsewhere, not in an individual's academic grade.
- Grading policies should be set up to support student motivation to learn. A student should never reach a place where there is no point doing any more work because failure is inevitable.

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