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**Effective Grading Practices**

**The Case of the Illogical Grades**  
Lissa Pijanowski

A Georgia school district investigated its grading practices and realized that the whole system had to change.

Sherlock Holmes was a detective known for using deductive reasoning to solve difficult cases. Our school district uncovered its own tricky case when we investigated our assessment, grading, and reporting practices and discovered that these practices were not always logical. Over the last 10 years, leaders and teachers in Forsyth County Schools in Georgia have studied research and best practice, engaged in collegial conversations, and worked collaboratively to define a K–12 assessment, grading, and reporting system focused on student learning.



**Reviewing the Evidence**

We began our investigation with a review of the evidence—looking into grade books and determining what was assessed and recorded. As we sifted through the data, we asked a series of key questions: Which grades reflect students' mastery of standards? Which grades reflect behavior and effort? How are grades weighted? Are grades based on high-quality assessments? Do students have the opportunity to recover from a failing grade? Do the grades reflect learning over time?

At the heart of the investigation was a need to clarify the purpose of grades. In *Transforming Classroom Grading*, Marzano (2000) identifies five purposes of grading: administrative functions, feedback about student achievement, guidance, instructional planning, and motivation. He goes on to state that the most important purpose for grades is to provide information or feedback to students and parents, and he emphasizes that academic achievement is the primary factor on which grades should be based.

Our district's faculty has a long-standing commitment to student learning, but the way we assessed and assigned grades didn't always reflect that commitment. If we believed in mastery learning and understood that mastery happens at different rates for different learners, then the logical answer was to change practices to reflect that belief.

**Changes Afoot!**

Although it may be logical to change practice, for some reason it's often easier to change standards and curriculum than to change grading practices. A teacher's grade book has long been considered that teacher's domain and what is contained therein, a reasoned judgment by a professional. Forsyth County district leaders have come to realize that the only way to change practice is through a grassroots effort. Involve teacher leaders, invest in making them experts, and empower them to share how changed practice has affected student learning.

In our county, we have chosen teacher teams each year to help design new ways of reporting and to grapple with grading and assessment procedures. Additionally, those teachers implemented changes in their own classroom and gave feedback to the district. Each year, pilot report cards were tested and redesigned prior to full implementation. The teachers involved during the pilot year serve as ambassadors across the district.

Teachers in Forsyth County agreed to implement these three key actions, recommended by Ken O'Connor (2007):

- Separate behaviors from academics to ensure that the grade accurately reflects achievement.
- Emphasize summative grades determined by high-quality assessments aligned to

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standards.

- Offer relearn and recovery opportunities in which students demonstrate learning over time.

Although these three practices are the cornerstones of our philosophy, teachers still have autonomy regarding such practices as dropping a lowest grade, weighting most recent achievement, and allowing students to make up missed assignments. As teachers have become more sophisticated in their understanding of assessment, grading, and reporting, these key actions have become more widely accepted. Beginning in elementary grades, the changes have followed our students into middle school, and now in 2011–12 into high school.

**Behavior and Academics**

To separate behavior from academics, middle school administrators and teachers collaborated to identify student behaviors that foster success in the classroom. They determined that assignment completion, participation, responsibility, and interpersonal skills were the four most important behaviors. Not coincidentally, these four behaviors had been frequently incorporated into assignments and entered into grade books. However, when a teacher includes these work habits and behaviors in a student's grade, that grade no longer reflects what the student knows or is able to do in relation to the standards.

Instead of making these behaviors part of students' academic grades, Forsyth middle school teachers created a set of specific expectations for the four work habits they deemed important and scored students on a scale of 1 to 3 for each category. These scores were reported to students and parents but were not part of the students' grades. (See fig. 1 for the scoring guide.)

Figure 1. Work Habit Categories Scoring Guide

Score	Assignment Completion	Participation	Responsibility	Interpersonal Skills
	<i>The student completes work by the designated time/date and according to instructions.</i>	<i>The student pursues learning through active involvement.</i>	<i>The student adapts to classroom practices.</i>	<i>The student interacts with others to create a positive learning environment.</i>
1. Noncompliant	Fails to complete assignments or submit work; struggles to follow directions.	Disengages from the learning environment; responds only to teacher prompts.	Requires frequent redirection; strays off task; disrupts learning environment; fails to follow class procedures.	Lacks flexibility when working with peers; isolates self.
2. Successful (standard)	Produces completed work on a consistent basis by the by the designated time/date; follows directions.	Engages in activities and discussion.	Is a self-starter; remains on task; asks questions for clarification when needed; applies strategies for meeting learning goals; follows class procedures.	Works well with peers; listens and speaks respectfully; questions ideas rather than the person.
3. Initiating	Demonstrates new applications and examples of standard.	Leads others to participate; explores new class ideas and approaches.	Displays independent initiative; maximizes opportunities; solves problems.	Adjusts to a variety of classroom roles; mediates; influences others to learn.

The successful implementation of the work habit categories in middle school has led upper elementary and high schools to reconsider their practices. Grades 4 and 5 were already reporting work habits separately, but they decided to adopt the middle school work habits categories and scoring beginning in the 2011–12 school year. The high school teachers have also committed to separating work habits and academic grades using the same system beginning in 2011–12. This approach provides continuity for students and parents and communicates clear expectations as students move from grade to grade.

**Summative Grades and High-Quality Assessments**

To address the second key element, Forsyth has defined a continuum of assessment, grading, and reporting that is appropriate for different levels of learners. On report cards, the weights for summative and formative assessments, as well as the reporting on mastery of standards and student work habits, now vary by grade level, as seen here:

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- **Kindergarten–Grade 3.** Report cards show each content area broken down by standards, and a score of 1–3 is assigned according to student mastery, using a common rubric with performance indicators.
- **Grades 4–5.** Report cards show numeric averages out of 100 that are based entirely on summative assessments, plus a score of 1–4 to indicate student mastery of each content-area standard. Initiative and work habits are reported separately using the common rubric in Figure 1.
- **Middle School.** Report cards show numeric averages for academic achievement, with 80 percent of the grade based on summative assessments and 20 percent on formative assessments. Initiative and work habits are reported separately using the common rubric. (Before 2010–11, grade weights varied from school to school.)
- **High School.** Report cards show numeric averages for academic achievement, with 75 percent of the grade based on summative assessments and 25 percent on formative assessments. Initiative and work habits are reported separately using the common rubric. (Before 2011–12, grades were 60 percent summative and 40 percent formative.)

The balance between summative and formative work differs from elementary to secondary on the basis of student need. Although all assessments are aligned to standards, school and district leaders agreed that parents and students needed more feedback in the early years on performance against standards. We also found that having formative work count for a portion of their grade was important to secondary students. Our middle school pilot started with a 100 percent of the grade coming from summative assessments, and we found an unintended consequence when students asked, "Does it count?" When the answer was no, students would not do their work.

Teachers realized that if formative work was to inform the learning process they needed work to evaluate. The policy changed so that formative work would count for 20 percent of the final grade. Likewise, the high schools made the final grade 75 percent summative and 25 percent formative. Now, secondary students are more willing to do the work and are becoming more knowledgeable about their own learning process through formative assessment.

Once teachers achieved consensus on grades for report cards, the need for common assessments became evident. Teachers in the elementary schools have worked to develop common formative and summative assessments aligned to standards. Secondary teachers focused on common summative assessments. These assessments correlate to grade level and course pacing guides and are shared across the district. Assessments continue to be revised and enhanced.

### Relearn and Recovery

Designing and implementing relearn and recovery opportunities have brought about the most significant shift for students, parents, and teachers. In a successfully differentiated classroom, teachers often allow students to redo work and assessments to demonstrate mastery of content (Wormeli, 2006). To support the ideals behind mastery learning, offering opportunities to relearn content that the student did not master on the first attempt is imperative. Forsyth teachers grant recovery opportunities for summative assessments or assignments on the basis of the student's initial grade, formative evidence indicating the student's likelihood of success on another assessment, and the student's commitment to engage in relearning the content.

The shift in thinking from "that isn't fair" to "fair isn't always equal" has taken several years. Initially, teachers worried about the additional work that this practice might create for them, but they found that their students were learning more and that their work habits improved when these opportunities were available. Some parents thought that it wasn't fair for another child to get a second attempt when their child achieved on the first one. Although this sentiment still lingers among some, the district has worked diligently to communicate that learning for *all* students is the goal.

Students have come to realize that the opportunity to recover from a failing grade means they still have to learn the content. Students are expected to relearn material through tutorials, face-to-face help sessions, additional practice, and more. Students have become more committed to getting it right the first time because they know that teachers aren't going to give up on them or allow them to fail.

### Solving the Mystery

Forsyth's quest to solve the mysteries of grading led to a few key findings:

- Educators must have the will and the courage to tackle the grading issue. Begin with defining the purpose of grades and then align practices.
- Communication is key. Never underestimate the need to inform stakeholders about changes in grading and reporting and explain why they were made.
- Changes in assessment, grading, and reporting must begin with classroom teachers. Involvement of teacher leaders throughout the process is the reason our district has been able to make this shift.
- A grade only has integrity if the assessments on which it is based are of highest quality and aligned to standards. Assessment literacy must be part of professional learning, and assessment development must be an ongoing process.

The investigation has taken years, and this case may never be entirely solved. However, Forsyth County Schools now has clearly defined its beliefs about student learning and acted on those beliefs in a thoughtful, purposeful way to eliminate illogical grading practices.

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*Author's note:* Learn more about Forsyth County Schools' grading and reporting practices at [www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/page/239](http://www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/page/239).

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