



TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES

How Teachers Can Create an Equitable Grading System

By Jennifer Gunn

[fFacebook](#) [tTwitter](#) [pPinterest](#) [inLinkedin](#) [✉Email](#)

Grading is one of the most challenging and emotionally charged conversations in today's schools. Teachers are protective of their right to grade, but inconsistent grading practices and the ways they can inadvertently perpetuate achievement and opportunity gaps among our students make grading an issue of equity. There are grading practices that are more bias-resistant and motivational that can improve learning, minimize grade inflation, reduce failure rates, and create stronger teacher-student relationships and more caring classrooms. Let's take a look.

Get Relevant Teaching Content and Updates Delivered Directly to Your Inbox. Subscribe Today!

Join

Perpetuating inequity

opposite: that fairness is honestly reporting academic performance regardless of effort,” says [Joe Feldman](#) in his book [Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classroom](#). “Because each teacher’s grading system is virtually unregulated and unconstrained, a teacher’s grading policies and practices reveal how she defines and envisions her relationship to students, what she predicts best prepares them for success, her beliefs about students, and her self-concept as a teacher.”

The implications are profound and disturbing: we may have perpetuated inequities in our classrooms and schools for years without realizing it. Our use of inaccurate and inequitable grading may have barred students from getting in the college they wanted, kept them out of honors classes, and prevented them from graduating.” So, what can we do? Examine our systems and be willing to let go of an industrial model of grading (the idea that only some can achieve success and meet expectations on a curve) for a more 21st-century viewpoint (where everyone can achieve success given the right supports and opportunities).

Making grades meaningful

Most teacher grade books are broken down into categories like Classwork, Projects, Homework, Exams, and Participation, but it’s important to truly consider just how much subjectivity is involved in one’s grading policy and just how much that practice evaluates learners based on compliance. “Inequity is woven into our current grading practices in an even more obvious way: categories included in grades such as “effort,” “growth,” and “participation” are based entirely on a teacher’s subjective judgments,” [says](#) Feldman. “We know that teachers interpret student behaviors differently based on the student’s race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Including these criteria makes a grade more reflective of how the teacher interprets a student’s actions than what the student knows and can do.” Knowing this, we must consider what is truly worth evaluating. The answer? A student’s mastery of skills and content. If we remove elements like behavior and compliance — they can be dealt with in a more restorative context — and solely grade on mastery and growth, we can free students from the shackles of subjectivity, bias, and evaluation on anything but their pure demonstrations of learning.



SHARE professional learning - Teaching Through The Coronavirus Pandemic course



Making grades consistent

In one classroom, a student may be doing terribly because they missed a few homework assignments. In another, they may be doing well while missing the same few assignments. In yet another room, the student could be doing all the homework and still failing because they don’t participate in class discussions. Managing ever-shifting and uneven grading policies through the school year can make it difficult for young learners to meet expectations and success. While some may argue that managing a multitude of expectations is good preparation for life, our young learners and particularly those who need to learn how to succeed, may need some consistency. When schools work together to establish clear learning objectives, clear evaluation systems, and overall consistency, students are better able to navigate and drive their success.

Rethink the zero

There is so much debate about the zero. While some argue that doing nothing warrants a zero, some educators use the zero for non-compliance, absence, behavior issues, and non-mastery. On a 100-point scale, where A, B, C, and D are 10 points apart, the zero puts the F over 60 points lower. A 50 or 55 is still an F. Do we need to grade using the harshest F possible? A zero is devastating to an average as well as a student’s motivation. There are many factors that contribute to a student missing an assignment and it’s our job to help that student learn and demonstrate that learning through revision and continued opportunities for mastery. “Grading should communicate information about student learning in school, not punish students in ways that make recovery from transgressions impossible,” [says](#) [Thomas Guskey](#), professor at the University of Kentucky who’s done extensive research on grading. “To recover from a single zero percentage grade, a student must achieve a minimum of nine perfect papers. Attaining that level of performance would challenge the most talented students and may be impossible for most others, especially those who struggle in learning. A single zero can doom a student to failure, regardless of what dedicated effort or level of performance might follow.”

Grades can’t represent everything

The truth is, grades cannot represent *everything*. They can’t encompass a student’s behavior, ability to meet deadlines, mastery of content and skills, participation, effort, professionalism, attendance, punctuality, neatness, and likeability — all without regard to any of the real-life obstacles and personal growth that may be occurring. It may feel like adding an attendance and lateness grade will deter students from lingering in the hall. It may feel like adding compliance to a class grade is the extrinsic motivation needed to compel students to fall in line, but the truth is it’s just too much packed into one measurement system. Feldman argues the following:

If you're using grades for compliance, really ask yourself: Is it working? Chances are, it's not and students are progressing through school not really mastering or receiving the evaluation they need. In letting go of our very embedded notions of grading, we just might set our students free.

To read more on this topic, check out [*Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classroom*](#) by Joe Feldman.

Join Resilient Educator

Subscribe To Our Newsletter To Get Content Delivered To Your Inbox. Click or Tap the Button Below.

Join



You may also like to read



Cultivating Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

How Teachers Can Help ELL Students Create a Community

How a Teacher Can Create a Community Website

Teacher Lesson Plans for Special Education Students

5 Ways Online Teachers Can Create Engaged Class Discussions

Self-Care for Teachers of Traumatized Students

Tags: [Assessment Tools](#), [Mid-Career Teacher](#), [New Teacher](#), [Teaching Impact](#), [Veteran Teacher](#)

Also of Interest:

[Cultivating Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity:...](#)

[Helpful Health and Rejuvenation Resources for...](#)

[Career Options With A Master's in Education Policy](#)