



Research Brief

Grading

Question: Are grades an accurate reflection of student learning?

Summary of Findings:

What do grades mean? Is there a commonly understood and acceptable definition for what a grade stands? Have you ever received a grade that was not an accurate indicator of what you knew about the subject? According to Stiggins as cited by Marzano, “Schools exist to promote student achievement. ... If students achieve, schools are seen as working effectively. Grades are supposed to reflect a student’s level of success in learning the required material” (Marzano, p. 27).

The current grading system is approximately 100 years old. In the 1700s, students were given feedback but not grades. In 1780, Yale University began using a 4.0 system that is similar to the current system. In the 1830s, Harvard University implemented a point scale that was divided into divisions. By 1897, Mt. Holyoke College designed a letter grade system that is the most universally and widely one used today. According to an extensive survey, about 80% of schools use letter grades from the fourth grade forward. Does the current assessment system accurately and appropriately represent what a student knows and can do?

There were several common themes and concerns throughout the literature.

- A grade not only represents what a teacher has determined the student has learned, but it also includes things like homework, effort, participation, attitude and attendance. Therefore, there is a lack of consistency about what the grade actually represents.
- Grades are often used as a threat, which in some way is supposed to motivate students to do better. “...low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning” (*Grading policies that work against standards...and how to fix them*).
- Naming one valedictorian. This puts students into a highly competitive situation where often the differences between their grades are a fraction of a percentage.
- Grading on a curve forces competition where there are definite winners and losers. Because of this, students may feel anger and animosity and choose not to apply themselves. Their grade most likely does not accurately demonstrate what they know and can do.
- Students may not make good grades but will achieve AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) while others may have high grades but do not meet AYP.
- Homework often plays a significant role in determining a student’s grade and not necessarily because the skills translated into other assignments, but because they either did or did not do it or do it well.
- The weighting of grades plays a dominant role in a student’s GPA.



Research Brief

Typically grades are used for:

- administrative purposes in determining student promotion and retention
- student feedback about what they have achieved in a course
- guidance to establish appropriate course placement for students
- instructional purposes to determine students' strengths and areas for growth and how to group them
- motivation and to positively reward students

Some districts are exploring a grading system that uses A, B, C, and I (incomplete). It was stated that for students who may see an "F" as an easy way out, that grade is no longer an option. If a student receives an I, they are held accountable to pull up the grade by attending after-school tutoring, Saturday school, and/or summer school. Other districts are experimenting with eliminating "Ds" because if it is not an option, students may strive for a "C." In one high school English department in California that had implemented this policy, during the first grading period they found that 50 of those students who typically earned "Ds" had gotten "Cs," however, 100 students' grades went to an "F."

Schools need to work together to discuss and develop criteria for grading that is accurate, fair and consistent and must make the meaning known to all stakeholders. Stiggins stated, "It is our ethical and pedagogical responsibility to understand and apply only acceptable grading practices. ... Our challenge is to do the very best job we can assigning accurate, interpretable grades" (*The principal's role in report card grading*). Questions to consider:

- What is/are the purpose(s) of grading?
- What is the definition of a grade?
- Why grade?
- What should a grade represent?
- What role should homework, attendance, effort, behavior and participation play in a grade?
- What traits are not a part of measuring learning?
- Should grades be weighted? What supports that? What does not support that?
- Is the grading system fair and equitable? How?
- What learning results are expected?
- How are summative and formative data used? What part should each have in a grade?



Research Brief

Online Resources:

- A story of motivation and effort in learning
A description of a grading policy in VA that only uses tests and quizzes in determining grades is provided in this article.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0NTQ/is_2003_Sept_16/ai_107801518
- California schools experiment with deletion of D's
A brief explanation of the elimination of "Ds" by an English department in a CA high school is given.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2003/05/07/34grade.h22.html?querystring=Grading&print=1>
- Competitive grading sabotages good teaching
Reasons why competitive grading interferes with good teaching are discussed in this article.
<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/krumbol.htm>
- Grade A perfect
This article briefly explores four questions that are critical when establishing a grading policy.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4002/is_200410/ai_n9459888
- Grading policies that work against standards...and how to fix them
Descriptions of the benefits and weaknesses of using the curve and an "I" in student grading are provided in this article.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3696/is_200012/ai_n8921332
- Grading with points: The determination of report card grades by high school science teachers
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3667/is_199803/ai_n8797491
A description of two different methods used by science teachers is presented in this article.



Research Brief

- In change of grading policy, no A's for effort
A brief overview of a grading system in the process of being implemented is described.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33050-2004Aug25.html?nav=hcmodule>
- New Mexico district switches to reporting 'performance levels'
This is a very brief description of a grading system used in Albuquerque's elementary and middle schools.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/01/12/18brief-3.h24.html?querystring=Grading&print=1>
- The principal's role in report card grading
Eight guidelines that should be in place for an equitable and fair grading system are fully described in this article.
http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/bin.asp?TrackID=C7C5ULWDDBYT8Y2A7HNTM_YA2GZRGAPCP&SID=1&DID=48619&CID=596&VID=2&DOC=FILE.PDF
- The trouble with rubrics
Some issues with the use of rubrics are explored in this piece by Alfie Kohn.
<http://www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/rubrics.htm>
- Waukesha school officials considering a new grading system
Some ideas for a new grading system in a district in WI are described in this article.
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MJG/is_2_4/ai_114479065

Book

- Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.
This book covers the gamut of the history of grades, to issues in policies and procedures, as well as some suggestions for grading systems and considerations.



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