

Challenging the Grading Paradigm, Part 1



Submitted by Ben Mainka on Tue, 10/19/2010 - 12:27pm

One of the most controversial but important conversations raging in education right now is the implementation of a standards-based grading and reporting policy that places student learning at the foundation. For administrators, this issue is one that is not safe to address as parents, teachers, board members, and principals themselves have deeply rooted beliefs surrounding grading practices. However, as educational leaders, sometimes we have to be willing to address things that are not safe. Doug Reeves compares suggesting a change in grading policy to a politician suggesting social security reform. It is very well documented that legislators on both sides of the aisle agree that social security is in serious trouble. Yet even in the face of such obvious facts, you will rarely see a politician discuss any type of meaningful reform because it is a political “death sentence” for that person. With regards to grading, research is also clear that what we have always done is not necessarily best for students and the learning process. However, it is also unsafe for a principal to challenge the reigning paradigm.

At Fowlerville Junior High School, our teachers are committed to addressing several concerns relating to grading practices that hinder a culture of learning. Notice how I said teachers? That is because they are the engine that drives a change in practice, and without their understanding and support, you are at a huge disadvantage. Our staff is very committed to this issue, but that did not come without deep conversation and analysis of our current practice. Student success remains a top priority for our staff, but it is difficult to change after years of formed habits no matter how logical the change. With that said, I believe that teachers care deeply about doing what is best for their students. Resistance will certainly come, but deep down, the vast majority of educators want to do the right thing. With lots of support and persistence, we can tap into this foundational “common ground” to have meaningful reform surrounding grading. Your staff will really need to understand that student learning remains the top priority, and that all of our policies and procedures need to support that priority.

Over the next few months, I will be diving into a specific topic each week such as: handling late work, zeros, extra credit, common assessments, behavior included in the academic grade, reporting on standards, and the formative assessment process. My hope is to continue building awareness of these issues and encourage those of you who are starting these conversations in your buildings. I can guarantee if you decide to address this in your building that you will meet resistance. Not just resistance from staff, students, and parents, but also from your own established paradigms. However, you should take great comfort in knowing that you are challenging this resistance for the overall benefit of your students. As Michael Fullan states, “some things are worth fighting for”, and I believe that a fair, accurate, and meaningful grading policy is one of them.

Each week, look for a new post surrounding this topic. I am collaborating with several principals around the state who are far more accomplished than I am, and I know that you will have support out there if you need it. Good luck to all of you and I look forward to working with many of you through this journey.

“Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life... as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”

- Booker T. Washington

Challenging the Grading Paradigm, Part 2 (Behavior in Academic Grades)

Submitted by Ben Mainka on Sun, 10/31/2010 - 11:38pm

A little over a week ago, I posted the first part of a series entitled, "Challenging the Grading Paradigm." The goal of this series is to build awareness of a very important curricular issue in public education today – grading that promotes learning. I previously discussed the basic dilemma that educators face with regard to this topic, which are deeply imbedded paradigms about how we have always evaluated students. My goals are to tell the story of the work the teachers are doing at Fowlerville Junior High School (FJHS) and to build a general awareness within our field about how to tackle this big issue. In this second part of the series, I will be discussing the biggest challenge (in my opinion) of moving to a standards-based grading system that promotes learning. The issue of removing behaviors from the academic grade is a gigantic undertaking, but I am a believer that if you can accomplish just this one thing, you will instantly increase the accuracy of your grading system. In the words that follow, my hope is to show not only the reasons why we need to do this, but how we can start at a building level.

In order to frame the discussion, when referring to behaviors and dispositions relating to grades, I am really referring to three categories of classroom behaviors. The first behavioral category is what I consider work habits. Work habits are typically learned or habit behaviors such as meeting deadlines, completing assignments and tasks, organization, neatness of work, or even participating in class. The second category is respect, which typically refers to things like working in groups or teams, following classroom rules, ability to avoid discipline referrals, and basic manners and respect for others. The last category, attendance, is fairly self-explanatory and refers to tardies, unexcused absences, or just the amount of school missed in general. These three categories are sometimes called different things, but whatever they are called, they have traditionally been used in academic grade calculation.

It is not hard to see that things like work habits have been used to influence teachers' grading practices. Consider the typical example of students who do not turn work in on time. What usually happens to these students? Well, most often they lose a certain percentage of their grade due to not meeting the deadline. If there is not a percentage penalty, they may even not be given the opportunity to turn things in once the deadline is made. I remember back when I first started teaching, and this was a regular part of my classroom policy. I viewed this policy as very acceptable because it was teaching students discipline and how the real world works. As I reflect on my own practice in the past, I make two distinct observations. First, meeting my deadlines and following my set procedures became more important than student learning. Secondly, our perception of what the "real world" is does not sometimes match reality. My biggest "light bulb" moment for this occurred when I was an assistant principal at the high school level having discussions with staff on this topic, and a particular teacher was adamant that she would not accept work late. She claimed that if she allowed students to turn work in past the deadline, it would promote laziness and not prepare students for the real world. Ironically, two weeks after this discussion, that very same teacher came to me and asked for a one-day extension on posting her grades. Of course, I humbly allowed her the extension without bringing up our prior conversation; I just wish she could have known what I was thinking at that moment. As you can see, work habits are a regular part of how we grade students. In fact, I would say that teachers commonly use work habits to significantly impact the academic grades that they assign.

Respect as a behavioral category is rather difficult to quantify, leading to increased subjectivity. However, there is little doubt that this often impacts student achievement. If you think back on your own education, can you remember the teachers or professors in whose classes you could get a decent grade simply by saying all the right things and making their lives easier. I can tell you that I personally survived my high

school calculus class this way. I performed horribly on the assessments, but I figured out early that my teacher was a baseball fan and I made sure to provide him with a steady stream of Detroit Tiger memorabilia. This is not to say that teachers who fall into this trap are being dishonest or unethical, because quite frankly I think this is a psychological part of human nature. If you have an affinity toward someone, you will likely try to help him or her. However, I think that if you look at this situation objectively, you could see how sometimes students who are very kind and likeable get a little boost when it comes to the subjective part of grades. On the flip side of that, students who are defiant and rude often get their payback in the form of a lower academic mark.

It is fairly easy to spot whether attendance plays any significant role in your grading policy. For example, do any of you have student handbooks that require reductions in points or straight zeros for unexcused absences? How about classroom policies that call for a percentage of the overall grade to be reduced if the student accumulates too many tardies? How many of you would have your blood pressure spike if I brought up loss of credit policy? (sorry to any of you high school principals). I think you see my point that even attendance shows up in our academic grades from time to time.

The purpose of illustrating these examples is not to downplay their importance. In fact, let me be crystal clear: I THINK THAT THESE BEHAVIORS ARE AS IMPORTANT, IF NOT MORE IMPORTANT THAN, THE ACADEMIC GRADE. The issue is certainly not that we should ignore this behavior or stop holding students accountable. Instead, we should address this behavior in a way that keeps our academic grade accurate and holds students MORE accountable at the same time. For this issue, at FJHS we have decided to separate behaviors from the academics. Students at FJHS will receive an academic grade as well as a character (or behavior) score. Their behavior is based on a comprehensive and standardized look at the areas that I have touched on previously (if you would like to see the documents we are using, just contact me and I will provide them). Now parents are getting a solid look at an academic mark that is not muddied by behavior, and they get a meaningful assessment of their child's character (behavior) that is not simply a citizenship score of one, two, or three that are vague and undefined. Taking this a step further, we are attaching this character score to extra-curricular eligibility. In essence, you could be getting straight "A's," but if you are disrespectful, fail to meet deadlines, don't do your work, and are a behavioral problem, you could be deemed ineligible to participate in dances, plays, concerts, or sports teams. Lastly, we feel that the carrot is always stronger than the stick, so we have very meaningful rewards and recognition programs for students who are receiving high character scores throughout the year.

It is very important to recognize that when we have traditionally given academic consequences for behavior, the students we thought we were punishing or teaching responsibility did not care about the consequence. For example, if you told a student who never meets deadlines that they are going to lose points off of their grade if they continue turning things in late, they probably do not care about the consequence. Consider the following analogy: if you tell a person who hates broccoli that she will be unable to eat broccoli anymore if she fails to meet your demands – you should plan on your demands not being met. In the same way students who are typically at-risk for these types of behaviors tend not to place too much value on their academic marks and are therefore not motivated by punitive academic consequences. Also, students who exhibit these types of negative behaviors should be held accountable. However, how we hold these students accountable is the big question. We must maintain the division of behavior and academics by assigning a behavioral consequence for negative behaviors, and if an academic consequence is necessary, it should only come from the honest assessment of a student's learning and academic performance.

There are many schools that are trying to determine how to pull behavior out of their academic grades, and many resources and research pieces exist for you to learn about this. Dave Powers in Hudsonville is doing some phenomenal things in this area as well. His staff calls these behaviors life skills, and they completely separate these things from the academic grade. I would also recommend reading Ken O'Connor's book, "The 15 Fixes for Broken Grades," as it is a fast read and sheds some additional light

on this topic. At this point you can probably see why I referred to this part of the journey as a “gigantic undertaking,” so I would suggest you start small. I encourage you all to begin discussing this area and see if there are even little things you could do to hold students accountable in a different way for their behavior. Check back in a week or two for part 3 when I discuss alternatives to the 100 point grading scale. Thanks for reading and good luck

Challenging the Grading Paradigm, Part 3 (Alternatives to the 100-Point Scale)

Submitted by Ben Mainka on Thu, 12/02/2010 - 9:30am

A little over a month ago, I posted the first part of a series entitled, “Challenging the Grading Paradigm.” The goal of this series is to build awareness of a very important curricular issue in public education today – grading that promotes learning. I previously discussed the basic dilemmas that educators face with regard to this topic, and then in the last article, I discussed removing behaviors from the academic grade. In part three, I will discuss alternatives to the 100-point grade scale and the statistical problems with the 100-point scale. This article is sure to drum up lots of controversy as this is the most common scale still being used in most schools, but please give the next few paragraphs an objective look.

Before we can really have any type of meaningful discussion on this topic, we need to first agree to some common assumptions. First, I still believe that most people in our field want to do what is best for children. I do not think there are many people out there that want to intentionally harm students emotionally or academically. Therefore, regardless of your feelings on this topic, we all want what is best for students. The final assumption that is very important is that we agree on a typology of evidence. Basically, we understand that there are several different levels of informational evidence. Doug Reeves does a really nice job explaining the five levels of evidence:

1. Opinion – “This is what I believe, and I believe it sincerely.”
2. Experience – “This is what I have seen based on my personal observation.”
3. Local Evidence – “This is what I have learned based upon the evidence that includes not only my own experience but the experiences of my friends and colleagues.”
4. Preponderance of Evidence – “This is what we know as a profession based upon the systematic observations of many of our colleagues in many different circumstances in many different locations and at many different times.”
5. Mathematical Certainty – “Two plus two is four, and we really don’t need to vote on whether that statement is agreeable to everyone.”

It is almost impossible to reach mathematical certainty in most conversations that we have in our field, and very rarely do we find it in our discussions as we try to influence positive change. Most of the time, the best thing we can do is get to level four, a preponderance of evidence, which is very good. However, with regards to some elements of these grading discussions, mathematical certainty should play a strong role in the examination of policy. At this point, hopefully we can agree that we all want what is best for students, and that there are clearly different levels of informational evidence that can be considered when evaluating issues.

Let us start with looking at our commonly held practice of using the 100-point scale. For as long as I can remember, it has just been assumed that teachers use the 100-point scale for all of their grading efforts. For example, if you received a 78% on a test, that would be 78 out of 100 points and result in a C+. Another way that the 100-point scale manifests itself is when teachers set their classes up by points such as: Project A = 25 points, and Lab B=50 points, Notebook/Journal=10 points, etc. At the end of the marking period or semester, the teacher tallies up all of the points earned and divides that number by the

points possible and if you received 60% of the points, you receive a D-. Most of you should be nodding your head at this point recognizing the use of this type of system. If you have not seen this as a professional educator or used this type of system, you are in a very rare group of people. The ugly truth behind this practice is that it is statistically ridiculous and incredibly inaccurate. Mathematical and statistical evidence can prove that a 100-point scale is incredibly flawed; unfortunately, this has not stopped the use of this system on an alarmingly broad scale. I believe that this is mainly due to the fact that opinion and personal experience are the main sources of evidence that we use. This is very ironic for our field where we lay claim to being progressive, looking at facts and data, and objectively looking where evidence takes us. However, no matter how overwhelming the evidence is, personal experience and opinion in education remain the most powerful force in discussions on policy. The prominent use of the 100-point scale is evidence of this.

What is the real problem with the 100-point scale you ask? The issue is that when you assign a student anything lower than a 50 on a 100-point scale you violate the basic principle of ratios. In Michigan, part of the fifth grade GLCE is teaching students about the principles of ratios, i.e. A is to B as 4 is to 3; D is to F as 1 is to zero. The ramification of using the 100-point scale is that you will almost certainly get a statistically inaccurate score when grades are calculated. Most schools have a variation of the following scale:

A= 90-100
B= 80-89
C= 70-79
D= 60-69
E= 0-59

If you look at this closely, each grade range is roughly ten points with the exception of the E which is sixty. This means that anything less than fifty points would be in violation of the principle of ratios. Obviously the most damaging effects are seen when a zero is awarded on this scale, but anything less than fifty is inaccurate none the less. For example, if a student has received a zero on the 100-point scale, their score would be six times lower than the next grading interval. The only way you could make this scale accurate is to have a label for each mark below 50 points like this:

E= 50-59
F= 40-49
G= 30-39
H= 20-29
I= 10-19
J= 0-9

I cannot imagine many schools educating their parents on awarding a "J" on a report card so this is probably not going to be happening. Hopefully you can see how using the 100-point scale defies mathematical logic and accuracy. In fact, if we go back to our typology of evidence, we know that using this scale and the calculations that occur go against mathematically certain evidence. There does not need to be a lot of discussion on this, because it is a fact, which is the catalyst for this conversation.

Understanding that using the 100-point scale is not a best practice, I would like to propose several alternatives that you could use in your building. Also, I will share the scale that we will be using here at Fowlerville Junior HS. Each of the following scales has pros and cons, which I will briefly discuss, but the one thing that they all share is reliability and accuracy from a number-crunching standpoint.

50-point Floor Scale

The first scale I would propose is a 100-point scale with a 50-point floor. What this means is that you

would still use points or percentages like it has been done traditionally, however 50-points would be the lowest grade that you could assign. Again, each grade range interval would be roughly ten points and would like this:

A= 90-100
B= 80-89
C= 70-79
D= 60-69
E= 50-59

You can obviously see the difference here, and that is that teachers would not be able to assign scores lower than fifty points. The benefit of using this scale is that you do not really need to change your mindset very much to the new system. Most teachers would be comfortable using this scale from a familiarity standpoint, but this system has one extremely large hurdle – the emotional attachment to the zero. In my opinion, this scale is almost impossible to sell to teachers because of the fanatical attachment that people have to the mighty zero. I guarantee that you will hear things like, “I refuse to give something for nothing!”, “This is falsifying grades!”, “How can I “give” 50 points to a student who does nothing!” Actually, I challenge you to find many other topics that bring up more emotion than this type of a system. That being said, these attachments are based on opinion and personal experience and not a preponderance of evidence or mathematical evidence. You are essentially “correcting” the scale by putting the floor at 50 points. You are not “giving” anyone 50 points, but 50 points is the lowest score on your scale. Essentially, 50 points is an E, just like a zero is an E on the traditional 100-point scale. This scale has merit and is a much improved first step from the traditional 100-point system, but I would caution you to the staff response.

The 4-Point Scale

The second scale that I would suggest is the 4-point scale. One of the great things about this scale is the simplicity that exists within it. The basic premise to this scale is that teachers would use rubrics with various indicator levels (depending on the assignment) with the highest level work being four and the lowest level being worth zero. There are a couple big advantages here, and the first is probably the biggest for moving this change forward. First, teachers can assign a zero on this scale without causing statistical inaccuracy. This can occur because zero is the lowest score which is only one interval below the next lowest score just like all the others. In essence, the principal of ratios remains in-tact. The next advantage to this scale is that it really works nicely with colleges as most universities are already on this scale. The only real flaw with moving to this type of a scale is that you would need to invest some time coming up with well-crafted rubrics to score the assessments that you are using. Overall, the ties to GPA and the college level coupled with simplistic accuracy make the 4-point scale a great option to consider. For a very complete and thorough look at the 4-point scale, I would recommend you pick up the book “Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading” by Robert Marzano.

12-Point Scale

The third scale is one that we are moving towards utilizing here at FJHS; the 12-point scale. The first thing that needs to be clear about this scale is that it is not actually a point system at all. Really the 12-point scale is a way to provide a numerical representation of a letter grade. The scale looks like this:

12= A
11= A-
10= B+
9= B
8= B-

7= C+
6= C
5= C-
4= D+
3= D
2= D-
1= E
0= No Attempt

The 12-point scale shares some of the advantages of the other options such as the statistical accuracy, and also the ability to assign a zero. However, one advantage to this type of scale (you could also do this with the 4-point) is that you can use any type of scoring method that you want. For example, as a teacher, I could use rubrics, points, percentages, or any other method to score individual assignments. Then, I would take that score and convert it to the 12-point scale. That may seem confusing, but it is actually quite easy because the bottom line is this: what letter grade should the student receive on their assignment? If I gave a test, and a student scored a 40%, their grade would be an "E." An "E" would be a "1" on the 12-point scale and therefore a "1" is what would be entered into the grade book. The disadvantage to the 12-point scale is the learning-curve at the beginning as teachers try to memorize the conversions. However, it will not take very long before people start to realize that a "C" is a "6", or a "D" is a "3". Soon, people will not even need to look at the scale because it will be memorized. In my opinion the 12-point scale is a great scale that is very well-rounded. I think that this scale has the most upside which is why we have decided to implement it.

Presented here are three examples here of alternatives to the 100-point scale, but there are even more out there. The key is that we address the misuse of the 100-point scale in almost all of our schools. As I discussed earlier, most all of us truly want what is best for students. However, even the most well-intentioned grading systems can be riddled with inaccuracy. My hope is that you dive deeper into this area and continue to challenge outdated paradigms. Always remember, you have the highest level of evidence (mathematical certainty) on your side, and any other evidence for the accuracy of the 100-point scale will come from opinion and personal experience. Thank you for taking the time to read these articles, and I hope you find them mildly informative. There are many others who have done much more extensive work in these areas. Please do not hesitate to contact me for resources or for contacts of others who can really help you engage in these conversations. In a couple weeks look for part four of this series which will address alternatives to assigning zeros.