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

Susan M. Brookhart

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.

**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 8 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 Ds or Fs?) 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.

**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...
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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.

References

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