

Communicate Information About Learning

Effective grading systems communicate information about learning to help students be proactive, overcome failures, and excel. In equitable schools and classrooms, grades will never be used as rewards, punishments, or tools to force compliance.

Examples from the Field

In Waukesha, Wisconsin schools, a district of approximately 12,000 students, standards-based grading has been a reality since at least 2009, is [guided at the district level](#), and applies across the PK-12 continuum. District guidelines include the directives that multiple assessment opportunities will lead to more accurate grades and that risk-free practice activities “should not be ‘counted’ towards students’ course grades.” Waukesha’s guidance further states “Homework should always serve a valid learning purpose; it should never be used as a punitive measure.” And, “If homework is late or incomplete, the grade cannot be lowered.”

A Minnesota district’s* public schools, serving approximately 11,000 K-12 students, have adopted a policy of grading and reporting that explicitly prohibits the use of non-academic factors in calculating students’ grades. They identify behavior, homework completion, and other characteristics and habits as not allowed.

“Course grades will reflect the level of the student’s academic achievement. While nonacademic factors may be highly valued and often contribute to the student’s academic achievement, they should be reported separately from an achievement grade. Relying upon these factors, if merged with achievement evidence, can mask important learning problems and contribute to miscommunication about the student’s knowledge.”

In Kittery, Maine, a system serving just under 1,000 students, and a long-standing member of the League of Innovative Schools, the Shapleigh School is a 4th-8th grade building with a [clear, family-friendly guide to grading and reporting](#). These same grading and reporting practices and beliefs (see page 2) are shared across the K-12 system, including:

“Principle: Grades should clearly communicate what students know and can do.

Practice: Shapleigh School reports student mastery of specific skills and concepts within a course. Traits like participation and effort are scored separately.”

In all of these schools, we find a focus on determining whether students have attained the intended skills and knowledge, as well as a focus on generating grades based upon that determination. Further, we see clear guidance that while non-academic factors matter and may be reported, systems are carefully designed to ensure that these factors do not inflate or deflate academic grades.

**We are still waiting for final permissions to use this district’s name in the guide.*

What We've Learned

A clear grading system is a powerful tool in the effort to build a school culture of learning, connection, persistence, and excellence. If all teachers demonstrate to students that they are using grades to communicate strengths and weaknesses and to help the student improve, this will bolster and strengthen the culture of learning in the building. If teachers set the bar high through their common scoring criteria, provide exemplars of outstanding student work, and work with students to revise and improve until the bar is met, this will bolster and strengthen the culture of excellence in the building.

As schools work to build new grading systems or revise existing ones, they must find ways to engage all groups that use the current systems to see what information it does and does not communicate. Special education teachers, English language learning teachers, paraprofessionals, students, parents, employers, and institutions of higher learning can all play important roles in these conversations.

Quotes from the Literature

“In discussing what actions to take, one teacher admitted, ‘We really don't know why most of them are failing. In fact, a whole group of them may actually understand the content but have compliance issues. We just don't know any other way to grade.’ That admission proved to be the turning point for developing a rigorous yet responsive grading system that measures student understanding of the content standards.”

No Penalties for Practice, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and Ian Pumpian, EL Magazine November 2011

“Guskey (2009) noted, ‘no studies support the use of low grades as punishment. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning’ (p. 14). Motivation is enhanced when students are provided accurate information about achievement, have clear learning goals, and study in an environment that supports learning by not including diagnostic and formative assessment in grades and by being positive and supportive, not negative or punitive.”

O'Connor, K. (2009, January). Reforming grading practices in secondary schools. *Principal's Research Review*, 4(1), 1–7.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- [Elements of Effective Instruction](#), Element #2, Clear, *Shared Outcomes* stipulates that: “The learning outcomes are shared and internalized by teachers and students. These outcomes anchor and guide the choices of instructional activities, materials, practice assignments, and assessment tasks. Outcomes are understood and used by students to set goals, guide learning, and prompt self-reflection.”