Design Clear Grading and Reporting Guidelines

When each teacher designs their own unique grading system, consistency becomes impossible. Clear, collaboratively-designed school guidelines for grading and reporting, known and followed by everyone, help create a school culture that supports all students.

Examples from the Field

Casco Bay High School in Portland, Maine has designed a clear set of grading guidelines that are shared with students, parents, and teachers in a document called the Casco Bay Family Grading Guide. This grading guide ensures that all teachers have consistent policies for late work, retakes, and the grading of formative and summative assessments. Students who go to Casco Bay High School are not confronted with a dizzying assortment of grading policies as they move from class to class; on the contrary, there is a consistent set of expectations all students must rise to in every class. They can count on their teachers to grade the same way.

A Minnesota school district* that has been ranked highly in the state because of its students’ high proficiency scores has a district-wide Secondary Grading and Reporting Pupil Achievement Policy. This policy document includes clear expectations for the use of scoring criteria, alignment of grades with the standards, and the reporting of non-academic factors (such as habits of work or collaboration) separately from the achievement grade. It also provides a clear framework for how much weight formative and summative assessments have in the calculation of a final grade, how extra credit can and cannot be used, and when teachers can use zeros.

Frank McCourt High School in New York City, a member of New York’s Mastery Collaborative, uses its Mastery-Based Grading Policy to establish clear guidelines for how student work will be graded and how those grades will show up in the school’s reporting systems. This policy document contains a conversion chart that shows how the 1-4 grades that teachers assign using rubrics are converted to grades on the 100 point scale for end-of-year reports and transcripts. The McCourt School’s emphasis on consistency and calibration in their grading system, combined with their dedication to problem-based learning and strong systems of feedback and support, has enabled them to achieve 79% mathematics proficiency, 95% reading proficiency, and a 97% graduation rate among their students.

For all of these schools, the grading guides are not documents that live in a folder somewhere; they are frequently-referenced blueprints for the work of all teachers in each school. Because the documents are utilized, shared with students and families, and collaboratively revised when necessary, they enable teachers to build systems that are consistent from classroom to classroom.

What We’ve Learned

For schools that are considering grading changes in order to achieve greater consistency, a good first step is to examine current grading practices, beliefs, and guidelines. Start by exploring the impacts of your system on your students. Read and discuss relevant articles. Use this guide to explore how other schools have done this work. Visit another school with well-crafted practices. Include students, school leaders, teachers, and community members in your conversations. Subsequent changes in grading practice can be explicitly linked to the conclusions that are drawn by this team.

*We are still awaiting final permissions to use the name of this school district in this guide.
Once the school has established clear guidelines for grading and reporting, teachers need additional technical training to actually implement these agreements. Hands-on training should be provided both with student work examples and with the gradebook software. It is also critical that teachers be given ample time for scoring student work collaboratively, using their common rubric, so that they can calibrate their judgments. Teachers often refer to this collaborative scoring time as the best professional development they have ever received.

Quotes from the Literature

“According to Carifio and Carey (2009), ‘Many schools lack a coherent and uniform grading policy, resulting in extensive variations in student assessment from teacher to teacher, and even between students taking the same course with the same teacher.’ It’s therefore crucial that all schools and districts have public, published policies and procedures that all teachers are expected to follow and for which they can be held accountable if students, parents, or administrators identify concerns with their grading practices.’” —O’Connor, K., & Wormeli, R. (2011, November). Reporting student learning. Educational Leadership, 69(3), 40–44.

“School leaders are ultimately responsible for students’ grades. Although teachers assign grades for students' work, it is school leaders who are ultimately accountable for those grades when challenged.” (McElligot and Brookhart, 2009).

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- This Grading Audit can be used to design surveys or discussion questions that schools can use to assess how consistent the grading practices are in their school.
- Protocol for Collaborative Scoring can be used to organize and run collaborative scoring sessions.