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ASSESSMENT

Starting the Conversation About Alternative Grading Systems

When school leaders take great care in raising the idea of changing grading systems, they increase the odds of getting buy-in from parents and students.

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One of the most iconic elements of American schools—right up there with yellow school buses and brass bells—is the way schools grade students. Grades are everywhere in our culture, and because they are, they're the most salient way people think about their own learning and the learning of their children.

Anxiety about grades has hit new highs this spring and summer, as *many districts*

(<https://www.wbaltv.com/article/baltimore-city-schools-make-grading-adjustment-to-help-students-struggling-with-courses/36547596>)

debate *new grading policies*

(https://www.fox5vegas.com/news/education/student-mask-policy-grading-system-hot-topics-during-ccsd-board-meeting/article_a82619c2-de93-11eb-8647-b71ea92c5b83.html)

and news outlets worry about the *number of students who received Fs*

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/23/us/failing-grades-covid.html>) during the pandemic. Because grades are more controversial than ever, it's more important than ever to make sure that what grades communicate to families and students aligns with the values of educators.

In my organization's *recent podcast series on grading*

(<https://thecontinuingeducator.buzzsprout.com/>), academics and practitioners alike agreed on the characteristics of an effective grading system. Good grading systems identify the purposes and intentions of grades. They engage students as copilots in the learning process, allowing them to take ownership over the processes and products of learning. They avoid grading student effort or other behavioral characteristics of students that distract from a focus on learning and that can lead to inequitable outcomes. They provide reassessment opportunities so that students can continually show their improvement. Finally, they keep at their center a focus on reporting learning so that little confusion exists about how a student got a particular grade or how they can improve it.

Despite this strong consensus, there's still a gap between what good grading policies look like and what happens in most schools. Instead, students, families, and the public see grades as a permanent measure of the kind of student you are. That attitude stops the conversation about how learning grows and matures.

It also has a deep impact on *students' mental health*

([/article/4-reasons-teachers-are-going-gradeless](#)). When we talked to students close to us about grading, one fifth grader told us a low grade made her "disappointed about herself." Another told us a low grade makes him "break out in tears, literally." Whatever else can be said about them, these comments show that traditional grading is failing its key purpose: helping students and families understand what they've learned.

Grades should represent *not who a student is but where they are in their learning*

(<http://www.ascd.org/Publications/Books/Overview/What-We-Know-About-Grading.aspx>), *one point in an ongoing journey*. Whether your school system is considering a shift toward standards-based grading or competency-based grading, *rethinking student feedback*

(</article/making-sure-your-students-are-actually-processing-feedback>), or looking at any of the other high-value approaches to reforming grading policies and procedures, it should begin by clearly articulating for teachers, families, and students why the change is being made, what high-quality grading looks like, and what the benefits of high-quality grading are for them. When you're staging a conversation about the *purpose of your grading system* (</article/finding-clarity-assessment-and-grading>), there are several big ideas to keep in mind.

3 STEPS TO STARTING THE CONVERSATION

1. Involve stakeholders: Find ways to involve students and their families so they understand the reasons behind changing grading systems and what those changes mean for learning. The stakes of these conversations are high: Grades have historically given students access to higher-level coursework, athletic eligibility, and the best colleges and universities. Understandably, parents don't want their students to lose out on these opportunities for success.

Having conversations during informal activities like a back-to-school night or an informational table during an extracurricular activity can help reduce the emotional stressors present at higher-stakes interactions such as a school board meeting.

Make sure that caregivers are hearing both from administrators and from the teachers they most trust. To succeed at changing hearts and minds around grading, school systems need to show that grading reforms have tangible, specific benefits for them.

2. Plan for follow-up conversations: Prepare teachers to have in-depth conversations with families about what their children have learned and are ready to learn next. Start by making sure that teachers are aligned on how they'll grade, and offer professional learning opportunities on how to assess students in more authentic ways.

Families are naturally curious about what good school performance looks like. As the role of grades in your district or school changes, they will look for you to guide them toward other ways of understanding learning. Teachers should be prepared to have conversations about the types of performance assessments, formative activities, and other pieces of evidence that may not find their way into the final grade. Parent-teacher conferences should always include this learning evidence.

3. Tap into parents' experiences: Find ways to build empathy and rapport across your school community by talking to students' family members and caregivers about their own grading experiences. Imagine asking your students to interview a parent about their grades in school or regularly making space for a family member's reflections in your newsletters home. Your PTA can support having more structured conversations with the community about what your school's grading culture should look like.

Because everyone has been to school and gotten grades, talking about their experiences can be a great opportunity to help folks think about the kinds of schooling experiences they want for their own children. You'll likely get back a variety of stories that will illustrate their feelings about school, both positive and negative. These stories provide invaluable data about how to connect with your community across a variety of issues.

Rather than creating stress and conflict, communicating about grades can be an opportunity to build family engagement and draw attention to the meaningful learning activities taking place in your classroom, school, and district. Changing mindsets can be hard work, but it is also the prerequisite to ensuring that a new grading process has support for the long term.

A high-quality, student-centered grading system that all stakeholders understand and believe in can be the cornerstone of a process that rewards student agency, deep conversations, and high levels of engagement around student learning.

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