

COMMENTARY

Grading Standards Can Elevate Teaching

By Joe Feldman

November 11, 2014

With the common-core transition in full swing, we are in the midst of a radical shift in how we think about our K-12 standards, curriculum, and instructional strategies. Districts are spending most of their professional-development time and resources helping teachers and instructional leaders with these profound changes. There is one overlooked aspect of teacher practice, however, that is generally neglected in our common-core professional development: grading.

 [Back to Story](#)

A surprisingly powerful lever for teachers to critically re-examine and improve every single aspect of their practice, grading may seem ancillary to our reform work—more a technical issue of tallying points than a substantive one—but teachers' grading systems are woven into the very fabric of their day-to-day work. Neglecting this element of instruction constrains our reform within an evaluation and reporting system that many educators readily admit is flawed.

When I started teaching high school 20 years ago, I received no preservice guidance about end-of-term grading. And so, like my colleagues, I developed grading algorithms that verged on precalculus functions. I felt that everything my students did—or *didn't do*—in my class was important. I tried to measure every element of student performance in a grade, assigning different percentage weights to categories—tests, homework, participation, attendance, and extra credit (to name just a few). I gave zeros for absent work, took off points when it was late or the student misbehaved, and used every other grading practice that is common in high schools. My grade would describe everything about that student, I thought—except that it described nothing.

When a single grade represents a composite of disparate elements of performance, it becomes nearly impossible to convey or understand what it represents in total. For example, what is described by the "B" on the report card? That a student mastered the standards, but came late every day? That the student understood half the standards, but persevered to complete every assignment and extra-credit offering? That the student aced major assessments, but was often disrespectful? No wonder so many students (and their parents) look at their progress reports and grades with a sense of inevitability and resignation.

There are other problems with our current system of grading. There is ample evidence that teachers have different interpretations of similar behaviors, all too often based on the racial, gender, or socioeconomic identity of the student. Categories such as "participation" and "effort"

threaten to be more reflective of a teacher's interpretation of a student's actions than what the student actually knows and is capable of doing.

The problems are multiplied when every teacher constructs her own grading system. A high school student who sees five to seven different teachers a day has to navigate five to seven different grading systems. When a course is taught by several teachers (for example, Algebra 1 or English 9), two students who performed equally in different classes could receive entirely different grades.

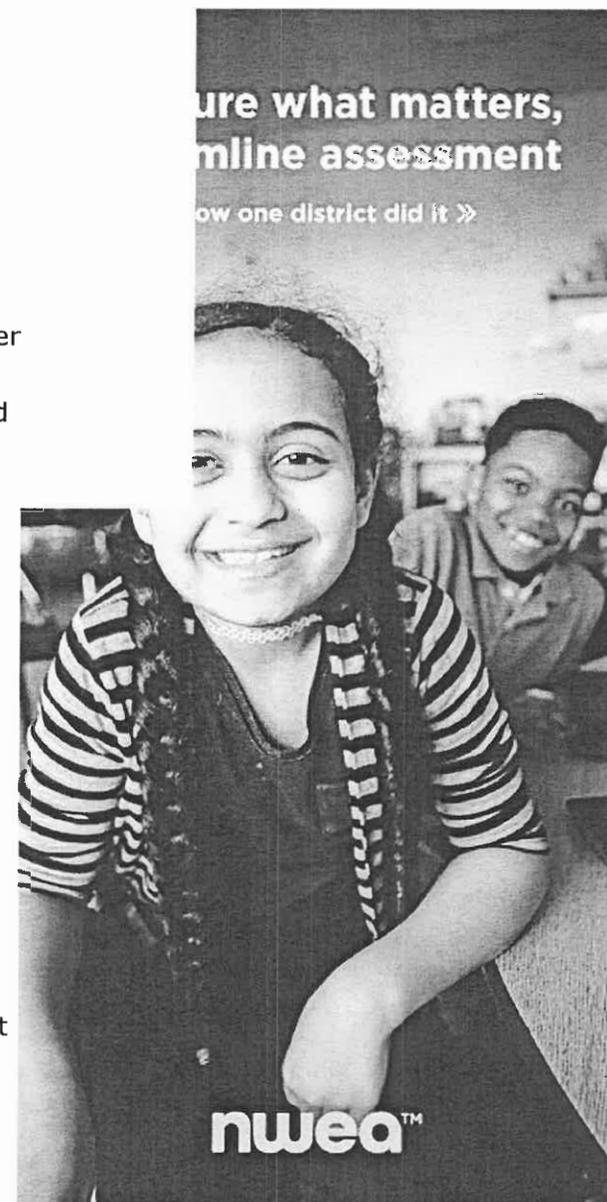
Grading is also a reflection of a teacher's professional judgment about a student—a symbol of her evaluative expertise. Yet, rather than bolster our professionalism with a clear and accurate system of grading, we damage our own credibility when we use one that is vague, arbitrary, and different for every teacher.

There is a critical need to address these concerns. The grade is the most enduring feedback a student receives, influencing how she thinks about a course, a subject, and even herself. (Many of us can recall how the grades we received affected our self-image and our perception about what we were "good at.") As educators, we rely on grades to help us make key decisions about students. Within schools, we use grades to determine a student's promotion, athletic eligibility, need for additional support, and suitability for graduation. Outside the K-12 arena, colleges, the armed forces, employers, and scholarship-funders rely on high school transcripts, making decisions about students that can have a profound effect on their lives' trajectories.

After teaching, I went on to become a principal and a school district administrator; now I am a coach for instructional leaders and an education consultant. In my current position, I have seen teachers from California and Wyoming to Georgia and New York struggle with a range of issues, including the technical calculations, data input, and deeper principles and purposes of grading. Nearly all administrators readily admit that their teachers' grades are flawed. And yet teachers receive almost no support for grading in most preservice, in-service, or professional-development study. Why, with this clear need for change, is grading so often a silenced dialogue in schools?

Those who have tried to broach conversations about grades with teachers know the perils: Few other subjects of a teacher's practice are so intertwined with each day's lesson and a sense of professional identity as her grading system. To many teachers, asking them to change their grading practices suggests a challenge to their autonomy and professionalism—a reaction that reveals how tightly grades are tied psychologically, emotionally, and philosophically to their deepest thinking about their practice.

We need to create a structure that allows each teacher to question her own understanding and beliefs about grading; for example, the assumption that giving zeroes will motivate students to work harder and better equip them to earn a passing grade. This fallacy runs counter to what we know about motivation and is also



"We need to create a structure that allows each teacher to question her own understanding and

mathematically incorrect. Zeroes often consign students to a failing grade, regardless of their subsequent performance.

the beliefs about grading."

In 2011-12, I tested this design with a dozen teachers in a medium-size district in Northern California. Together, teachers examined conceptual and empirical research around grading, reflected on their own grading practices, piloted new practices in their classrooms, shared results with their colleagues, refined their prototypes as a group, and then repeated the cycle several times. We saw results we had hoped for: Teachers improved the accuracy of their grading practices, and their students' passing rates increased significantly. Participants experienced what one veteran teacher described as "the most authentically collaborative experience I've had professionally." But what was truly remarkable were the unintended consequences.

In addition to the improvements in their grading systems, the teachers' reflective inquiry changed other aspects of their teaching, including their homework assignments, formative assessments, and even the language and cultural norms of their classrooms. Teachers spoke about the transformative effect this cycle of inquiry had on their professional identities, altering their entire perception of their roles, responsibilities, and relationships to their students.

They finished the year questioning long-held assumptions about the purposes and practices of grading, and realizing that accurate and fair grading can be a productive tool for building trust with students. Teachers and their students felt empowered by this new approach and found it to be a more efficient way to understand their own work.

Two years after the pilot series concluded, these profound effects continue. One teacher noted that he "could never go back" to the old way "of grading and of being" in his classroom.

Discussions that ask teachers to talk about grading are hard, emotional, and confusing. But we need to free ourselves from an antiquated, unclear, and essentially discredited system that weakens teachers' effectiveness and their credibility. Improving grading practices isn't an optional add-on to our common-core work. It is the linchpin to the effective use of the common standards and all they represent. It is one of the best ways to truly change what happens in our classrooms.

MORE OPINION



[Visit Opinion.](#)

Joe Feldman is the CEO of Crescendo Education Group, which is based in Oakland, Calif., and provides teacher professional development on grading and assessment practices. Previously, he was the director of charter school development for New York City's education department and the director of K-12 instruction for the New Haven schools in Union City, Calif.

Vol. 34, Issue 12, Page 22

Published in Print: November 12, 2014, as **Grading Standards Can Elevate Teaching**