

CONVERSATIONS

**About**

Grading

Grading practices are often learned and followed in isolation.

Working together, teachers can uncover the differences and areas of consensus in their grading practices.

Teachers can use research to safely examine what works—and what doesn't—and apply it to their own practices.

grades often are determined by the unspoken values and beliefs of an autonomous teacher, but technology is making grading practices more transparent to parents, students, and educators. The ability to view the grade books of teachers who are teaching the same course in the same district is increasingly raising questions and challenges to what were once unquestioned grading practices. To address those questions, we often facilitate conversations with groups of educators about their grading practices and beliefs.

### **Assessing Current Practices**

Talking with educators about how to combine academic and nonacademic factors into grades has given us insight to how teachers define a grade. Even when teachers use common assessments, the differences in how they calculate a grade can be dramatic.

Our dialogue begins by asking teachers to deduce the values and beliefs about grading that teachers have by looking at different grade books. (See figure 1.) We give teachers examples of grade books and ask them what values and beliefs are evident in each one. As the conversation unfolds we ask, If someone looked at your grade book, what does it say about what you value?

After uncovering the range differences in grading practices of teachers, we then echo an exercise used by Reeves (2008). We hand out a worksheet containing grades from two students (see figure 2) and ask the group what final grades those two students should receive.

Group members signal if Student 1 should have an A, B, C, D, or E with a quick hand raise. The process is then repeated for Student 2. Most groups don't agree on what grade each student should receive, but present a range of answers from A to E. Colleagues look at one another in disbelief. Within the same building, using the same grade book, can one teacher think that a student deserves an A but another think that the same student deserves an E?

Given such inconsistency, it's no wonder that there is confusion whether teachers *give* grades or students *earn* them.

As we continue to point out the need to come to consensus on grading practices, we inquire, "In all the classes that you have taken in preparation to become an educator, and all other courses since, how many classes have you had in grading? Five? Four? Three? Two?" When the chuckles subside, one or two people may indicate that they had a single course on grading. Tradition—replicating what they experienced as students or what was demonstrated by a cooperating teacher or mentor—is most often the way that teachers developed their grading practices.

**Discussion guide available at [www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0412](http://www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0412)**

Figure 1

Grade book 1		Grade book 2		Grade book 3		Grade book 4	
Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50
Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50
Homework 1	10/10	Project	50/50	Homework 1	+	Pop quiz 1	0/10
Homework 2	10/10	Report	20/20	Homework 2	+	Pop quiz 2	0/10
Homework 3	10/10	Journal 1	10/10	Homework 3	+	Pop quiz 3	0/10
Homework 4	10/10	Journal 2	10/10	Homework 4	+	Pop quiz 4	0/10
Homework 5	10/10	Journal 3	10/10	Homework 5	+	Pop quiz 5	0/10
Homework 6	10/10	<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>B</b>	Homework 6	+	Pop quiz 6	0/10
Homework 7	10/10			<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>E</b>
Homework 8	10/10						
Homework 9	10/10						
Homework 10	10/10						
P/T Conference	25/25						
Syllabus	25/25						
<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>A</b>						

### A Framework

Our process of creating a consistent grading policy has evolved over the years. To uncover current practices and develop consensus, we have found success using the following five steps:

1. Develop the need for the conversation by uncovering grading differences among teachers
2. Learn from others—read articles and books about grading practices and look for areas of disagreement between what you believe and what you read
3. Research a specific aspect of grading by looking at what is currently done in your school and comparing it to research from the field
4. Replicate the results of colleagues to build a body of data
5. Reflect on the data and research results, looking for the actualization of your values and beliefs in supporting student learning.

The following is an example of this five-step process in a district.

### Telling Stories

After discussing the differences in their grading practices and participating in some group reading (steps one and two), teachers are encouraged to research or pilot an aspect of grading they find curious, uncomfortable, or contentious (step three). By discovering the actual impact a practice has on their kids, in their building, teachers obtain firsthand evidence of why they should or should not consider implementing it. Most educators are willing to do research, especially when their current practices are being challenged. We have found that the topics of separating academic and nonacademic factors, grading and weighting homework, and changing grading scales are often the most explored areas. Researching such areas can change an educator's perspective.

For example, a secondary math teacher took up the charge to bring back evidence about why teachers should continue to average academic and nonacademic factors into a single grade. He separated the academic and nonacademic factors in each of his five classes and then recalculated the final grade for each student. At the next meeting, he shared the results:

- 83% of the students earned roughly the same grade using just academic criteria (differences

mostly changing from B to B+ or C to C-)

- 10% of the students who earned passing grades would fail if nonacademic factors were removed (moving from as high as a B- to an E)
- 7% of his students who had been failing would earn passing final grades using just academic factors (some moving from an E to as high as a B+).

The teacher told the group that he was often frustrated by “those” teachers—his students’ former teachers who had given Bs or Cs when it was clear that the students did not know the content. His research showed him that the nonacademic factors he used to compute his students’ final grades were masking the lack of learning of 10% of his students. He was, in actuality, one of “them.”

As a result, he adjusted the list of students he was recommending for support and after-school tutoring sessions. He also decided that he needed to give his students’ future teachers more accurate information about the proficiency levels of their new students.

The teacher also decided to address the 7% of students whose grades were negatively affected by nonacademic factors. He met with a student who was able to demonstrate academic proficiency, but her missed assignments,

Figure 2

Student 1		Student 2	
Test 1	98/100	Test 1	63/100
Test 2	95/100	Test 2	67/100
Project	50/50	Project	25/50
Presentation	45/50	Presentation	30/50
Journals	45/50	Journals	30/50
Homework 1	0/10	Homework 1	10/10
Homework 2	0/10	Homework 2	10/10
Homework 3	0/10	Homework 3	10/10
Homework 4	0/10	Homework 4	10/10
Homework 5	0/10	Homework 5	10/10
Homework 6	0/10	Homework 6	10/10
Homework 7	0/10	Homework 7	10/10
Homework 8	0/10	Homework 8	10/10
Homework 9	0/10	Homework 9	10/10
Homework 10	0/10	Homework 10	10/10
Syllabus	0/10	Syllabus	10/10
P/T Conference	0/10	P/T Conference	10/10
Extra Credit	0/30	Extra Credit	30/30
<b>Final Grade:</b>		<b>Final Grade:</b>	



discovered, and in so doing, they uncovered new questions to research and talk to the group about (step five).

### Conclusion

Examining professional practice in terms of grading begins with finding consensus on what educators believe is important for students to know and be able to do. Exploring whether they provide common, consistent communication about their students' abilities can be challenging.

In many cases, grades embody educators' core beliefs about educational theory, philosophy, and what they value in educational outcomes. But it is possible to have common, consistently implemented grading practices that support student learning if teachers can uncover their shared values and beliefs and adjust their practices to reflect them. PL

### REFERENCE

- Reeves, D. B. (2008). Leading to change: Effective grading practices. *Educational Leadership*, 65(3), 85–87.

*Kristine Gullen is the high school consultant for Oakland Schools in Waterford, MI.*

*James Gullen is an assessment consultant for Oakland Schools.*

*Nickolas Erickson-Guy is a student at Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, MI.*

A list of additional resources is available at [www.nassp.org/pl0412gullen](http://www.nassp.org/pl0412gullen)

poor attendance, and other nonacademic factors had prevented her from receiving a passing grade. The teacher decided to talk with the student about the importance of arriving to her first-hour class on time, ready to learn, and to complete her homework—the student would need similar skills to succeed in the “real world.”

The teacher learned that the student was living with an aunt because her father had lost his job and her family had lost their home. Her father recently found work, but it was out of state. Getting to school—after helping her younger siblings in the morning—and having all her homework completed was difficult. The student said that she was trying her best, yet she was still failing. And she wondered whether she should still try to come to school at all.

After hearing this story, the group

members had a powerful conversation about what they value and believe: What was the message that grades were sending kids? Were teachers getting the results they were expecting? Were their grading practices helping or hindering student learning?

Other teachers were challenged to replicate the results of separating academic and nonacademic factors and recalculating grades to see whether the first teacher's results were an anomaly or whether their own results would confirm his experience (step four). The new data would inform the professional conversation on grading and how it was affecting student learning in the district.

As the teachers reflected on their own practices in light of the first teacher's research, the conversation came full circle. They explored adjusting their practices because of what he

Article 2: Conversations About Grading by Kristine Gullen, James Gullen, and Nickolas Erickson-Guy		
Collaboration	Personalization	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
<p>Technology is making grading more transparent for all school stakeholders. How does collaboration with school staff members and community members improve educational outcomes for students?</p> <p><b>What strategies can we initiate at our school to first reach grading consensus with our staff and then communicate to our school community how our grading policies improve learning outcomes for our students?</b></p>	<p>How can reviewing the academic and non-academic factors used in grade computation possibly change the perspective of what students have achieved and learned in each classroom?</p> <p><b>How can we initiate discussions at our school to better assess student learning outcomes? How can we reach consensus on the practice of weighting academic and nonacademic factors in determining student grades?</b></p>	<p>What is the consensus process recommended by the authors for establishing a professional grading framework that will help teachers evaluate what a student knows?</p> <p><b>How might we initiate a grading discussion with our staff so that our student evaluations better reflect the learning and mastery of the academic standards in each content classroom?</b></p>
<p><b>Want to know more?</b></p> <p>Carey, T., &amp; Carifio, J. (2011). Minimum grading, maximum learning. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 11(7), 42–46. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/pl0311carifio">www.nassp.org/pl0311carifio</a></p> <p>Dillon, R. (2010). Data as a social justice tool. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 10(2), 32–35. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/pl1010dillon">www.nassp.org/pl1010dillon</a></p> <p>Erickson, J. A. (2010). Grading practices: The third rail. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 10(7), 22–26. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl_mar10_erickson.pdf">www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl_mar10_erickson.pdf</a></p> <p>Erickson, J. A. (2011). A call to action: Transforming grading practices. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 11(6), 42–46. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/pl0211erickson">www.nassp.org/pl0211erickson</a></p> <p>Fleenor, A., Lamb, S., Anton, J., Stinson, T., &amp; Donen, T. (2011). The grades game. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 11(6), 48–52. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/pl0211fleenor">www.nassp.org/pl0211fleenor</a></p> <p>O'Connor, K. (2009). Reforming grading practices in secondary schools. <i>Principal's Research Review</i>, 4(1). <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Portals/0/Content/59158.pdf">www.nassp.org/Portals/0/Content/59158.pdf</a></p>		

Article 3: Creating a New Reality by Vicki Urquhart		
Collaboration	Personalization	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
<p>How did the creation of a purposeful community at Goldwater High School use commitment and collaboration to turn the school's vision statement into effective practices?</p> <p><b>How might purposeful collaborations be used at our school to identify and improve student outcomes and to support staff members as they initiate changes in traditional practices?</b></p>	<p>What actions and strategies did the staff at Goldwater use to improve student engagement and improve the educational outcomes of their students?</p> <p><b>Which strategies could we implement at our school to focus the involvement of staff members, parents, and community members on building trusting relationships that increase the motivation and engagement of our students and improve their learning outcomes?</b></p>	<p>What strategies did the staff members of Goldwater implement to increase not only students' engagement in their own learning but also academic rigor in the classroom of each graduating senior?</p> <p><b>What additional initiatives could we implement at our school to increase opportunities for our students to develop critical thinking and communication skills and master rigorous content standards?</b></p>
<p><b>Want to know more?</b></p> <p>Hartzman, M., &amp; Mero, D. (2011). B. F. Terry High School: Commitment makes it happen. <i>Principal Leadership</i>, 11(9), 26–30. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl_may11_bfterry.pdf">www.nassp.org/Content/158/pl_may11_bfterry.pdf</a></p> <p>NASSP. (2009). <i>Breaking ranks: A field guide for leading change</i>. [See "School culture evaluation exercise," pp. 60–61.] Reston, VA: Author. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Product-Detail?ProductId=2016">www.nassp.org/Product-Detail?ProductId=2016</a></p> <p>Protheroe, N. (2009). Developing a system for effective data use. <i>Principal's Research Review</i>, 4(5). <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Portals/0/Content/60779.pdf">www.nassp.org/Portals/0/Content/60779.pdf</a></p> <p>Richardson, J., &amp; Mero, D. (2011). <i>Making the mathematics curriculum count: A guide for middle and high school principals</i> (2nd ed.). Reston, VA: NASSP. <a href="http://www.nassp.org/Product-Detail?ProductId=2015">www.nassp.org/Product-Detail?ProductId=2015</a></p>		