

Grading Practices & Assessment Considerations

(This synopsis contains many ideas from ASCD Education Update, Volume 40, No. 8., 1998)

Overview

Grading is the most idiosyncratic things we do. There is little agreement among educators on what should be included in a grade, whether the grade is criteria- or norm-referenced, and whether grades should be to motivate, communicate, or both. Only 30 percent of U.S. school districts have grading policies and it is difficult to know how many teachers in these districts actually follow the policies. Precision of feedback is the primary goal so that students can set realistic goals for themselves to improve their learning.

1. Limit the attributes measured by grades to individual achievement.

Such things as effort, participation, or attitude should be reported separately, which may require an extended report card format. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for educators to make the mistake of using their assessment policy for things that ought to be addressed by behavior or discipline policy.

2. Sample student performance.

Many teachers are trying to be careful not to mark everything students do, and they don't include all marks in the final grades. They provide feedback through formative assessments and include only summative assessments in grade calculations.

3. Grade in pencil.

Generally, it is wise to emphasize the most recent information when grading progress. For example, it makes little sense to average the marks of a student in the first week and the last week of a keyboarding class; the most recent marks offer the best the best assessment of the student's keyboarding skill. When possible, it is a good idea to offer multiple opportunities to improve marks. This doesn't mean teachers have to offer unlimited chances to pass a test or improve a paper. Some teachers require students who want to retake an assignment to demonstrate that they have done additional work to increase the chance that they'll do better the second time around.

4. Relate grading procedures to the intended learning goal.

The emphasis given to different topics or skills in a class should be reflected in the weight they have in determining the final grade. (The typical method is determining final grades by allotting 40 percent to tests and quizzes, 20 percent to homework, 20 percent to class participation, and so on.)

5. Use care "crunching" numbers.

One of the biggest quandaries is what to do when a student gets a zero on an assignment. Zeros are problematic, in and of themselves, because they often presume that no learning has occurred. But they become especially problematic if teachers average scores to determine a student's final grade. If scores on all assignments are simply averaged, a single zero can yield a grade that doesn't really reflect the student's performance. Teachers might consider using students' median

score. If a student earns a zero on a major assignment, however, teachers might give an incomplete until the assignment is made up.

6. Use criterion-referenced standards to distribute grades.

In addition to other problems, grading on a curve does not allow all students to see how close they are coming to high standards of performance. If all students reach the standard, it is okay for all students to reach the highest grade.

7. Discuss assessment, not grading, with students at the beginning of instruction.

Most educators are realizing that criteria for quality work should not be a mystery to students. They help students see and *understand* the grading schemes and rubrics that will be used to judge performance. In many cases, grading schemes and rubrics are co-created with students.

Additional considerations

- For each new area of study, teachers might work with students to compose a letter to parents or family that outlines what is being studied, the performance standards parents/family/students can expect, and the percentage of the grade that different standards will be designated. For example, one standard might be that an effective oral presentation will be 10% of the final grade.
- Consider agreed upon, common district-wide or school-wide rubrics that help students, across content areas, master literacy and learning skills such as vocabulary, details, organizing ideas, skills, processes, and behaviors that contribute to personal and community success. (Heidi Hayes Jacobs recommends school-wide rubrics in writing so that every teacher shares responsibility for teaching reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Vocabulary is the best predictor of overall success on any achievement measure. Speaking is the first way into a good job.)
- Many schools are trying to be especially careful not to confuse standards with standardization. They strongly believe that the idea that "all kids can learn" does not presume that all human beings can learn the same thing in the same way at the same time. One of the things they do to avoid the trap of homogenizing curriculum, instruction, and assessment is to teach conceptually. For example, when the topic is the Civil War, the concept might be conflict. When the topic is planets, the concept might be systems, when the topic is equations, the topic might be balance (Carol Ann Tomlinson).
- Bring in experts for the community to work with teachers and students to ensure that tasks and scoring systems are authentic. For example, an editor of a local paper might help create a scoring rubric based on what she or he looks for in a good article. Students might interview a panel of community experts to create criteria based on a range of opinions.
- Consider a dissertation and defense model where students create inquiry-based projects with support of a committee with teacher, peer, parent, and community representation. An excellent resource on this topic is *Assessing Student Learning: From Grading to*

Understanding, David Allen (ed.). Teachers College Press, 1998.

- Hold quarterly demonstrations for students to display work of their choice.
- In many schools, educators at all levels are trying to actively model for students and for the community their own interest in growth. This also includes evening programs where parents, teachers, and students learn together.