MINDSHIFT

How Teachers Are Changing Grading Practices With an Eye on Equity

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This is the second article in a two-part series about equitable grading practices. The first article sets up some of the challenges. In this post, learn how teachers are addressing this issue.

Nick Sigmon first encountered the idea of "grading for equity" when he attended a mandatory professional development training at San Leandro High School led by Joe Feldman, CEO of the Crescendo Education Group. As a fairly new high school physics teacher, Sigmon says he was open-minded to new ideas, but had thought carefully about his grading system and considered it fair already. Like many teachers, Sigmon had divided his class into different categories (tests, quizzes, classwork, homework, labs, notebook, etc.) and assigned each category a percentage. Then he broke each assignment down and assigned points. A student's final grade was points earned divided by total points possible. He thought it was simple, neat and fair.

Looking back, however, Sigmon said this kind of system made it seem like teachers were setting up rules to a game. "They say these are the rules and whatever the score works out to be that is your grade," he said.

Feldman's training questioned whether that approach to grading is fair. Feldman laid out a case against giving points for homework and extra credit, and is absolutely against the 0-100 point scale that dominates many classrooms. He maintains that for grades to provide an accurate picture of what students know, they shouldn't include behavioral things like homework and participation. And, he says when every teacher has a different set of grading practices it's not only erratic, it's inequitable.

"A lot of those ideas [presented by Feldman] questioned the reasons behind our grades," Sigmon said. "And so it's easy to get defensive about your grading policy or get defensive about those ideas. There was definitely part of me that was resistant and I could see why other teachers would be resistant. As a teacher you want to believe that you're doing the right thing and that your grades are meaningful and that you've figured out a system of grading that makes sense."

But as Sigmon looked at the logic and supporting data Feldman presented and tried tweaking a few things in his classes, those challenging ideas started to make sense to him. He realized the way he graded was largely based on his own experience in school and beliefs about what students "should do." But when he started to see each teacher's grading policies as a set of arbitrary rules students are expected to follow, as opposed to a coherent indication of what a student knows, he was ready to make a change.

"I have to be more thoughtful. My grades now are meant to be an accurate reflection of a student's mastery of the standards set by the state in high school physics," Sigmon said. If a student can display their knowledge of those standards without doing the homework, he shouldn't be penalized for that in his grade, especially because students all have different responsibilities outside of school that can make getting homework done difficult.

The first thing Sigmon did was think carefully about what it means to show mastery of each standard the state expects him to teach. He asked himself, "What can I expect high school students to do with this content?" That became the qualification for a B grade. To get an A students had to go beyond that. Earning a C meant the student was close to understanding, but

not quite there. Getting a D would be very little understanding, and an F would be almost no understanding at all.

"It feels biased and subjective and that's because it is," Sigmon said. "I have to kind of trust myself as the professional to judge their understanding of a certain concept. That's a tough adjustment to make."

Sigmon doesn't grade by assignment anymore; he grades by standard. That means he's not assessing things like lab work, classwork or homework anymore. "Those things are all practice," Sigmon said, although important practice. He only wants to include information that directly relates to their ultimate understanding of the standards in their grade, which he reasons, is supposed to reflect what they know at the end of his course, not how compliant they are.

Like many teachers who hear about this style of grading, Sigmon was worried students wouldn't do homework at all if points weren't attached to it. And, in fact, he did see a dip in homework completion at first. But, when students started to see their quiz and test grades drop because they weren't doing homework, they made the connection pretty quickly. Now, Sigmon says his students' homework completion rate is higher than ever, and even better, they have no reason to copy each other's homework.

"I was really surprised because after students started failing the assessments they started realizing the only way to improve their grades was to improve their understanding," Sigmon said. There are still a few kids who try to do as little as possible, but some will even email him for extra questions to get more practice.

Grading and Equity

This kind of standards-based grading approach is a growing trend in some corners of education. It's part of a push to make sure kids are actually mastering the information they're supposed to learn, not just playing a points game. That reasoning is compelling to some teachers who are excited about shifting pedagogy, but Joe Feldman thinks he has an even more compelling reason that schools should start making a shift in how they grade -- equity.

Feldman has worked in education a long time, first as a high school teacher, then a principal, and later as a central office administrator. He's been around enough schools and classrooms to know that even when teachers have worked hard to align their curriculum and assessments in order to provide coherence for students, the experiences students have in each teacher's class can be vastly different. That's because each teacher grades differently, allotting a different percentage for tests, participation, homework, and even things like effort. Some teachers

accept late work with no penalty, others allow students to do extra credit to make up work; some allow retakes on tests and quizzes, others don't. For students, the result is a thicket of different rules that must be navigated each year or class period.

"The more I really investigated and researched it, I found it wasn't just an issue of consistency," Feldman said, "it actually had implications for equity in schools. Many times the grading practices teachers use inadvertently punish students with fewer resources."

The way Feldman sees it, teachers use grades for much more than indicating whether students have mastered the academic content. For example, teachers often deduct points for late work because they want students to respect deadlines and learn responsibility. Or, they know that engagement is important for learning, so they include participation as a portion of the grade. Grades, then, become a behavior management tool, a motivational tool, and sometimes an indication of mastery too.

Take the common practice of averaging grades, for example. One student might come into class with no experience writing a persuasive essay. The first time he tries, he turns in a terrible essay and gets a low score. The next time he improves, and by the end of the semester he's nailed it. But that student will always have a lower grade than the student who came

into class knowing how to write a solid persuasive essay, perhaps because of a summer camp opportunity, and never progressed much further during the year. The second student will get a better average grade, even though she didn't show growth in her writing.

"That's really inaccurate to describe a students' work like that," Feldman said.

To be clear, Feldman is not saying that teachers consciously develop inequitable grading systems. He knows from experience that the opposite is true. Many teachers go to great lengths to remove bias from the process, doing things like covering student names while grading. The trouble is that some long standing grading practices may be perpetuating bias anyway. Take student participation as an example.

"If I grade on participation and I'm looking for: Are they looking at me? Are they taking notes? Are they not talking when I'm talking? They are descriptions of how that teacher learned," Feldman said. "And they believe that if other students exhibit those qualities they're more likely to learn." But, he says, that's subjective, which means a whole portion of a students' grade could be filtered through a teachers' unintentional bias towards the style of learning they prefer. The way to get rid of this potential bias in grading is not to reward participation in final grades.

"This elicits a lot of different emotions form teachers," Feldman said. "I've had them cry, yell at me, walk out of the room, write me off as some sort of nut. But as I work with teachers they'll start to confront the idea that what they believe about students may not be true."

Feldman understands this reaction from teachers. Education has become more top-down with mandates from the state and district level making teachers feel that their professional judgment is not valued. Grading practices are often the last bastion of autonomy a teacher has and independent grading is enshrined in many teacher contracts. When principals or districts try to suggest ways to make grading more equitable, they are often met with accusations that they are infringing on classroom autonomy.

Feldman says the only way teachers come around to what he proposes is by looking at the data, deeply discussing the ideas, and trying some of his strategies in their own classrooms. That's what convinces most of them to dig in and make changes.

Strategies

One easy way to dip a toe into more equitable grading is to get rid of extra credit. Often these assignments are things like, go to a museum and submit a report, or write an extra essay.

"These things depend on a student having the time, money, resources to be able to do those," Feldman said. More importantly, they're beyond the curriculum and shouldn't be required for the student to understand the material.

Another strategy Feldman recommends is requiring retakes if students score below a certain level. Right now, many students take a test, get a score and move on. The learning stops there. Feldman thinks a more equitable practice is to encourage students to learn from the errors they made on the test and take it again.

"Teachers have told me that when they suggest to students that they're going to have to retake it there's resistance from students, but they ultimately appreciate the teacher doing that and build a stronger relationship," Feldman said. "There's no clearer message that your teacher cares about you than that they won't let you fail."

And teachers can put parameters on retakes. They may say students can only retake after demonstrating growth on the missed skills, or they may require students to go back through the homework and pick out the questions related to the skills they missed. This not only requires students to reflect on mistakes, but it also reinforces the value of homework for learning.

Importantly, after the retake, teachers should enter the best score in the grade book, not an average. To Feldman's thinking, students shouldn't be penalized for putting in the extra work to understand the concepts. If they show they know it, they should get credit. And Feldman has a response for teachers who say that students need to learn to meet deadlines and pass tests the first time -- very few measures of adult learning are one-and-done. People can retake their driver's tests, their teacher licensing exams, their SATs and MCATs.

In a world of high stakes tests, the discrete skill of test taking may be worth teaching students individually to make sure they know how to face the exams when they come. But Feldman would prefer teachers were honest with students about test-taking as a skill, as opposed to rolling it into the course grade.

Feldman also doesn't think behavioral things should be included in the grade because they don't reflect mastery of content. That doesn't mean a teacher can't keep track of things like on-time work, organization, or other scholarly behaviors. Perhaps after the next test the teacher can then sit down the student and point out the relationship between some of those tracked behaviors and a poor test performance.

"It opens up a much wider range of conversations teachers have about the purpose of behaviors and their relation to academic success," Feldman said.

He also doesn't think teachers should give grades for group work. It's too hard to determine if the individuals have mastered the content in those settings. That doesn't mean group work isn't valuable, it just means the assessments should be individual.

"We want people to collaborate well because when you collaborate well you make a better product and there's a great reward to doing that work," Feldman said. "We think it will increase their individual learning. The only way to know if they were effective in their group work is to see if they improved in their individual learning."

This also prevents one or two students in a group from doing all the work. And, it reflects the inherent value of skills like collaboration and communication because when used on a group project they lead to success.

"There are certain strategies that have been used year after year that are just a barnacle on the ship," Feldman said. "Teachers feel they just have to do it." And often the systems within a school building make it hard to break free. The 0-100 scale, for example, is the default setting on many high school online grade books.

Feldman hates this scale for many reasons, but the biggest one is the destructive power of a "zero" for missing work. He contends the scale is weighted

towards failure because 0-60 represents failing, whereas there are only 10 points between every other grade delineation. And if a student gets a zero on an assignment, it's almost impossible to climb out of the hole that creates in their grade. Many students just give up. They know it's mathematically impossible to pass after that.

One tweak would be a 50-100 scale, although Feldman understands that psychologically it's hard to give a 50 to a student who did nothing. That's why he prefers a 0-4 scale, with none of the nit-picking over a few points to get from a B+ to an A-. Students either meet the requirements for proficiency or they don't. They exceed the requirements or they don't. Feldman sees the gradations in-between as unnecessary and leftover from a points-based system.

While he doesn't disagree with all of Feldman's points, Ethan Hutt, an assistant professor of teaching and learning, policy and leadership at the University of Maryland, College Park, worries that taking process out of student grades sends the wrong message. He contends students do need to learn to be conscientious, responsible, hard working and to seek help. In his classes, those are the students that succeed. Homework and other incremental assignments build those skills.

"The foolish thing is to teach students that the only thing that matters is the disembodied work product,"

he said. He thinks it's silly to expect teachers to separate the work from everything else they know about that student. And on a broader scale, he wonders if learning to "play the game" is such a bad skill to teach. Much of life is about learning to navigate bureaucracy and hierarchies, so why shouldn't students start learning to do that in school?

Putting It Into Practice

"I didn't feel good about what I was doing when I was assigning grades, so I was very much ready for something like this," said Sarah Schopfer, a 10th grade English teacher at Colfax High School in Placer County, California.

She knew her grades were subjective, but didn't know how to change them. She noticed that a lot of her grading was based on participation, and the same handful of kids always participated. Those were also the kids who would do whatever she asked of them. But she knew there were other kids who wouldn't "play the game," and whose grades didn't reflect what they could do.

"So that would show them failing," she said. "And then they think they're stupid and they're not. They just do things differently."

She admits changing how she grades was hard at first. She was uncomfortable with the 0-4 scale and had to

change how she teaches to focus more on building relationships with students, as well as helping them find intrinsic motivation.

"It completely rocks your world and that's why some teachers don't," she said. "I can see the hesitation." But still, Schopfer said shifting her grading practices is the best -- and hardest -- thing she's ever done in teaching.

"The biggest changes that I felt comfortable doing right away were that we don't put things in the grade book that are behavior related," Schopfer said. If kids are late, acting out in class, or not participating it doesn't go into their grade anymore. "I know that scares the hell out of teachers because they're like, how do I get them to turn things in on time?"

This question forced Schopfer to sit down and look at her assignments closely. Some projects were fun and glittery, but didn't align with the standards as well as she thought, so she jettisoned them. Now she focuses on making the rubrics clear and transparent. She wants her assessments to be accurate. And she promised her students she won't give them busywork, a commitment she takes seriously.

"Now I manage my class with relationships," Schopfer said. "They have to trust you. They have to respect you. They have to want to do things for you

because you've shown them that the things you ask them to do are important and matter."

She says students still turn things in on time, but when they can't for some reason, they apologize to her and let her know when they will be able to get the work in. She doesn't have as many students sitting in class who think they're bad at English. They have opportunities to redo things, to learn from their mistakes, and that's motivating.

"Ultimately to me there's no question. It's an ethical issue," Schopfer said. "Now that I know this I can't go back. It's not equitable."

When she asked students what they think of the new grading system, here's what she heard:

"It makes sense. All assignments add up and relate to learning overall. You have to do the work to be able to do the next step. You have a clear purpose for us, and the grade is just a side aspect."

"You realize that we are people. We have crazy home lives, or some of us do. This makes my life less stressful, and they are accurate. I'm learning."

"You are treating us like adults, but with a cushion."

"The old grading methods are straight hypocritical and don't make sense when you think about it."

Nick Sigmon has also asked his students about their perspectives on his new grading system. He was shocked by how clearly students see through traditional grading.

"Students are very much aware that school is a game and that your grades aren't based on how well you understand something, but on how well you play the game," he said.

When he surveyed his students, many thanked him for moving to a more transparent form of grading, one that forced them to be responsible for their work, but in a clear, transparent way.

Sigmon has also found that changing how he grades has created a shift in his teaching by giving him a more clearly defined goal. "Now that I have established what my grades mean and what they're based on then everything works backwards from there," he said. "I know what students need to be able to show, what they need to be able to do. So I had to rethink everything to make that the focus."

For example, Sigmon has stopped doing the typical "I do, we do, you do" formula for a new concept. He realized that perpetuated memorizing a procedure, not deep understanding, especially when all the practice problems are a clear imitation of the test questions.

"It's changed the kinds of questions I ask," Sigmon said. "I try to always ask questions the students have not seen. It's the same concept, but being applied in a new way."

For his part, Joe Feldman wasn't sure these practices would work when he first started developing them, so he invested in external evaluation of grade distribution among teachers who were changing their grading practices. The results from independent evaluator Leading Edge Advisors showed that the rates of D's and F's went down, but the number of A's also went down. One immediate response to this might be that teachers lowered their expectations, but Feldman says grading this way actually made it harder to do well.

The decreases in D's and F's were clustered among Latinx, African-American, low-income, and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Meanwhile the decrease in A's mostly affected white students. "It reflects how the current system has been benefiting and punishing certain students disproportionately," Feldman said.

He also wanted to test the accuracy of grades in this new system. He found that when teachers graded with his proposed equity strategies student course grades more closely correlated to their standardized test scores, indicating that the teacher's assessment

that a student mastered a standard was aligned with that same demonstration on the tests.

All of this is strong proof for Feldman that it's important to have conversations about grading with teachers. He knows teacher experiences will drive change -- they must have opportunities to try out strategies and see the effects themselves -- but district leaders also have to provide the tailwind for this to become a reality. And that's where he sees the biggest challenge to this work.

"[District leaders] know it's going to require a lot of relationship building with teachers and parents. And some aren't really sure it's worth it," Feldman said.

This is the second article in a two-part series about equitable grading practices. The first article sets up some of the challenges. Read an excerpt from Joe Feldman's book "Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms" to learn one principal's journey in recognizing how inequitable grading was affecting her students.