

Rick Wormeli's Responses to a Parent of a High-Achieving Student with Concerns About Grading Changes

Hi Rick: I went full blast ahead and began implementation of the "fair isn't always equal" policy. It was very SUCCESSFUL with faculty – I mapped out a 10-day plan prior to the first day of school – and yes, we're taking baby steps, focusing on skills-based grading, no zeros and reassessment opportunities.

Yesterday was our first day of school. Below I have copied part of what a parent wrote to our principal. I have an idea of how to respond, but you are brilliant with words, so before I advise our principal, I wanted to know if you could give me some advice."

Parent's Letter:

(Child) came home extremely distraught today. She informed me that the grading/homework system has changed so that it seems to encourage students who may not be high achievers (even below average) to succeed and get the same grades as those that do. Based on what she's told me, students such as herself, who work very hard to get "A" and "B" grades will be achieving these grades while working hard and studying. While the students that don't work as hard - or hard at all - will be "rewarded" by being "allowed" to re-take tests and hand in homework late without any consequences (as long as it's handed in before the end of the quarter).

If this is so, why should any student work hard to succeed if they will be "handed" a "do-over" and end up with a "B" grade at least. This truly does not seem fair to hard-working students and also is not indicative of the real world. It's also sending a very bad message to those who do not aim high, incorrectly giving them the impression that they will be rewarded for late, lazy or inadequate work. This is truly unacceptable. They will not be allowed to repeatedly re-take tests until they get a "B" in college, and what kind of message is this sending to those that work hard and to those that don't?

Why are low-to-mid achievers being rewarded when the high achievers are not? What benefits do the high achievers get? My daughter was so proud to be an honor roll student, but based on this system, everyone will be an honor roll student! I definitely need you to put this in perspective for me, because if this is going to be the case, we will seriously consider moving our daughter to a better performing school. I cannot see how this wouldn't lower the reputation and standards of _____ School.

Rick's response:

Thanks for writing, and for taking on these new challenges. It's good to hear of the great successes you're having with faculty too. Keep on taking those baby steps!

My first thought in reading this is that somehow communication with parents broke down. That's very fixable. The problem would be whether this parent was rational in her stance (I'm assuming it's a mom writing, but that may be wrong). She comes across as someone who simply hasn't thought about it much, someone making an impulsive reaction rather than a well-considered one. We all do that from time to time, especially when it comes to our own kids, so I'm not too worried about the parent. She says she wants perspective; that's hopeful.

I've annotated my comments throughout (in bold and brackets). I hope this is helpful. Let me know how it goes.

_____ came home extremely distraught today. *[Her teachers did not explain this well enough; otherwise she would not be upset. She would be hopeful and excited. Students get this right away, so something fell through here.]* **She informed me that the grading/homework system has changed so, that it seems to encourage students who may not be high achievers (even below average), to succeed and get the same grades as those that do.** *[Exactly. Those who are not high achievers are encouraged to become so. We want them to be successful and even achieve at high levels. Where's the concern here? Don't we want all students to be successful? It's hard to name a school where this is not the mission. This is what all parents and teachers want.]*

Based on what she's told me, students such as herself, who work very hard to get "A" and "B" grades will be achieving these grades while working hard and studying. *[Yes, and to be honest, they will be working harder than they normally do because teachers are much more evidentiary – specific, high-quality evidence of learning must be submitted. There is no padding" or buffering grades with extra points here and there for behaviors and products not directly listed in the criteria for excellence. This is actually more demanding of students, not less.]*

While the students that don't work as hard - or hard at all - will be "rewarded" by being "allowed" to re-take tests and hand in homework late without any consequences (as long as it's handed in before the end of the quarter). *[We need to change the metaphor: Grades are not rewards, affirmation, validation, or compensation. They are communication; that's it. If we keep them as rewards, students, teachers, and parents all enter a bartering relationship, and that is incompatible with evidence-based grading (standards-based grading).*

Grades are first and foremost an accurate report of what students know and can do against standards, not reward for hard work. A student works for six weeks on a project but his project represents only a D" level of mastery. He worked sincerely and did not slack off or demonstrate anything less than full integrity, but he just couldn't get it correct – He still doesn't get higher than a D" just because he worked hard and was so sincere. If he were to get a C" or higher because we factored in all his hard work, this would knowingly falsify a grade and that is an ethical breach. Is this what the parent is asking the teacher to do in these circumstances – falsify a grade? If so, that parent is better off taking her child to another school with less integrity.

Grades have nothing to do with reward. The students who re-do work of any sort may not go on with the rest of their lives until the work is done, or at least they will be burdened with it while trying to take the next steps in their lives. They have a series of re-learning and re-assessment experiences to do, and this re-do experience haunts their every moment until it's re-done. It's much, much harder to re-do than it is to do it correctly the first time around. (I would list for parents all the steps required in re-doing work here.) In addition, it's a false assumption that students build moral fiber and respect for deadlines by slapping them with an "F" or a 0" for work not done. This teaches nothing but resentment and cheating. To recover in full from being irresponsible or from not knowing something teaches way more than attaching a label to the earlier poor work. If we don't let students re-do assignments and assessments, then

we've turned over their education to their immature selves, and that's abdicating our responsibilities as teachers. We've also said three things that are unacceptable:

- 1) This assignment has no educational value yet I gave it to you anyway,*
- 2) Since you didn't do all this work, I'm going to let you off the hook from doing it (How does that teach responsibility?), and*
- 3) It's okay if you don't learn this, which is the most heinous one of all. If a student is acting irresponsibly, we don't back off and wag an admonishing finger from afar, we jump in and walk the student through his full recovery.]*

If this is so, why should any student work hard to succeed if they will be "handed" a "do-over" and end up with a "B" grade at least. *[As implied by the comments above, students very quickly realize the heavy demands of re-doing work, and they avoid this as much as possible. They find the re-doing process very demanding – It's no treat for any student. It represents hope and true adult leadership of youth.]* **This truly does not seem fair to hard-working students and also is not indicative of the real world.** *[Re-think this: We're not teaching adults, we're teaching students. To demand adult-level proficiency when they are first morphing into young adults is abusive, not sound pedagogy. Try learning to play a new musical instrument or learning a new software package on the computer. You're a thousand times better after months of practice than you are in the first week.*

According to several studies in cognitive science, the typical person must do something new 24 times or more just to get to 80% proficiency. We want students to become proficient, but it takes time to reach that stage. Pilots take off and land hundreds of times every year as practice – in flight simulators – to maintain their proficiency in navigating airplanes with real passengers. Website developers create dozens or hundreds of Websites before they become proficient and efficient. Surgeons practice on dozens of cadavers and simulators before doing real surgeries. We know that practice is valuable to learning. If that's the case, every student should do 24 or more persuasive essays just to learn how to do them well. We don't have time for that in a typical school year, but for the few times when we push for the important stuff to be truly learned, parents should celebrate a teacher who demands work be re-done. It is FAR MORE preparatory for the real world to re-do.]

It's also sending a very bad message to those who do not aim high, incorrectly giving them the impression that they will be rewarded for late, lazy or inadequate work. This is truly unacceptable. *[You're right, and it's not acceptable: No lazy or inadequate work will be accepted. That's why we're standards-based. The student does the assignment until it meets the standard, and the evaluative criteria are intense. To say it must all be done at the same level of quality as everyone else by this one particular day of this particular week flies in the face of all we know about how humans learn. We all learn at different rates. This stance hides behind the factory model of schooling, and we have all the proof in the world that it is not the best way to teach students of any age. We're simply catching up to the promise of what schooling can be.]*

They will not be allowed to repeatedly re-take tests until they get a "B" in college, and what kind of message is this sending to those that work hard and to those that don't? *[Actually, this is not true in all universities. It's a very clear and constructive message: Stay on course, work hard, ask questions when you don't understand, and try to keep up with deadlines so you don't have to go through the re-do process. As mentioned above, this*

teaches students how to manage their time and respect deadlines far more than receiving an F” does.]

Why are low-to-mid achievers being rewarded when the high achievers are not?

[There is absolutely no reward for either group other than the sense of well-being that is felt when a person achieves well, in addition to the chance to pursue other opportunities once that level has been achieved. Those feelings are very motivating, and without hope of obtaining them there is no motivation to continue for those who struggle, and there is only panic in those who are high achieving yet fall short on this one assignment. We're here to coach students through these moments, and that means walking side by side with students as they recover in full, not judging them failures and moving on.]

What benefits do the high achievers get? *[They learn more, mature faster, and they have far more doors opened to them. They take more responsibility for themselves and are far more autonomous in college and career training paths.]* **My daughter was so proud to be an honor roll student, but based on this system, everyone will be an honor roll student!** *[Wouldn't that be terrific? Everyone is successful? Wow! That's exactly what every school says in its mission statement and literature. Is your daughter's only source of identity and pride that she surpassed others? Is that really what we want to promote to the next generation? If so, she will be sorely ill-prepared for the larger world. How about instead, she thinks: I worked hard, learned and grew a lot, thought of ideas I never considered before, made a contribution to the world, became something more than I was when I started -- and so did my friends. This was a good year."?]*

I definitely need you to put this in perspective for me, because if this is going to be the case, we will seriously consider moving our daughter to a better performing school. *[This parent has presented no evidence on the performance of the school, only on her concerns with the policy. Again, this is understandable if she's upset, but you may want to point this out to her – the school's performance hasn't been discussed.]* **I cannot see how this wouldn't lower the reputation and standards of _____ School.** *[It actually would increase the reputation and standards of the school. The Admissions Committee would be grateful: The grades would mean something. Students would actually know their stuff or they wouldn't get high marks, and they will be far more independent and good time managers than students from schools who don't teach this way.]*