Effective Grading Practices in High School

There is no agreement on which grading practices are most effective at measuring and communicating student achievement. However, a survey of the relevant literature reveals that many educators and academics agree that the long-standing practices commonly used in U.S. elementary, middle, and high schools are imperfect and that there is room for improvement. This improvement most often means a shift away from imprecise systems that attempt to represent a wide variety of factors in a single grade and a move toward practices that are designed to measure only students’ academic performance and progression toward learning goals.

Long-Standing Practices

There are a number of practices that educators have long implemented in their grading systems. Detailed within are some common traditional grading practices, most of which have been criticized by at least some educators and academics for reasons that will be fully explored. The most common grading system used in U.S. schools is one that assigns students varying numbers of points for different degrees of achievement. In order to achieve high grades, students must earn a certain number of points. According to Jeffrey Erickson, in an article critical of traditional points-based systems written for Principal Leadership, “most students are like my daughter. At a very early age, they learn the point system and how school can be about the accumulation of points, not the accumulation of knowledge and skills.” A common points-based system awards different assignments a score on a scale of 0-100. Generally, students are awarded an “A” for scores of 90-100, a “B” for scores of 80-90, a “C” for scores of 70-80, a “D” for scores of 60-70, and an “F” for scores of 0-60. A student’s scores on individual assignments are recorded in a grade book and then averaged together at the end of the semester to calculate the final grade.

Though, at first glance, a points-based system seems straightforward, the factors that influence how many points students receive on both individual assignments and final grades vary widely depending on teachers and schools. When teachers assign grades, especially final grades, they are communicating a number of messages to students with a single mark. According to Laurence Zoeckler, teachers often attempt to communicate messages that include “level of expectation, level of academic achievement, encouragement, and disappointment.” In order for students’ grades to effectively represent such varied meanings, teachers commonly assess students for a number of different factors. Provided below is a brief discussion of some of these factors.
Achievement

The one standard factor that all grading systems take into account is student academic achievement, here referring to students’ mastery of specific learning standards. In practice, this means using assignments that assess students’ knowledge of course material. Scoring achievement is perhaps simplest for exercises such as a math examination, a situation in which scores can easily be assigned depending on whether a student got the question “right” or “wrong.” In comparison, it is much harder to grade achievement for more open-ended assignments such as essays.

Student Conduct and Behavior

Whether or not to grade for student conduct and behavior is one of the more contentious aspects of the debate on grading practices. According to a study quoted in an article by Thomas Guskey, for many teachers, “grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth.” This means that students are graded on nonacademic factors such as attendance, homework completion, poor academic integrity (i.e., cheating), and their ability to turn assignments in on time. Effectively, teachers use grades both to motivate students and to punish them. Assessing students on behavioral factors, such as effort and student conduct, is a very common practice and has long been accepted by the teaching establishment. One small study found that, of 15 teachers interviewed, all “wanted their grades to reflect fairly both student achievement and effort.”

Teacher Expectations and Character Judgments

Whether consciously or not, many teachers incorporate their own expectations of individual students into the grades they award. A study of high school English teachers conducted by Zoeckler found that teachers form expectations of students from previous performances and then grade students in comparison to these expectations. The study found that when performance disagrees with these expectations the teacher’s trust in the student can be undermined. Though the results of Zoeckler’s study were not definitive, it is possible that how a student’s performance does or does not match teacher expectations could influence the grades assigned. Zoeckler’s study also found that teachers often take their judgments of a student’s character into account when assigning grades. For example, some surveyed teachers remarked that they might decide to pass a borderline student deemed to be of “good” character and fail a borderline student deemed to be of “bad” character.

From an extensive survey of the literature, it becomes clear that there is no single grading practice that has been accepted as an established standard. Instead, teachers hold a significant amount of agency in determining both how to calculate grades and what factors to incorporate into grades. Problematic Grading Practices and Recommended Solutions Numerous educators and academics agree that teachers and
schools need to move away from taking non-academic factors, such as student conduct or teacher expectations of students, into account when assigning grades. Instead, it has been suggested that the best grading practices only address student achievement and “provide accurate, specific, timely feedback designed to improve student performance.”

In order to achieve this goal, educators have recommended that a number of common practices be replaced with methods that more accurately record student performance and give students useful and specific feedback. This subsection highlights the following practices that have been considered inaccurate and details their recommended replacements:

- Grading for Behavioral Issues
- Incorporating Teacher Expectations and Judgments into Grades
- Using Zeroes as a Punishment
- Using a Points System and Averages
- Grading Homework and Other Formative Assignments
- Grading on a Curve
- Allowing Students to Complete Extra Credit

**Behavioral Issues**

If grades are intended to measure student achievement, then they likely should not take into account students’ behavioral issues. As previously discussed, many teachers use grades to assess students’ effort, provide motivation, and to act as punishment for indiscretions. Specifically, teachers award points for basic classroom behaviors such as participating in class, completing homework, bringing materials to class, and getting midterm slips signed. As a result, students who work hard can find their grades inflated, even if they do not have much mastery over the material, and students who work less can sometimes receive grades that belie their proficiency and understanding. Both of these situations reflect how factoring in behavior can distort grades.

One of the primary purposes of grades is to provide specific and accurate feedback on a student’s ability and performance in relation to the course material. When teachers incorporate behavioral factors into students’ grades, they eliminate the possibility of providing useful feedback on academic performance. An article published in *Principal Leadership* by Andy Fleenor et al. claimed, in reference to a struggling student named Amy: In regards to improving performance, students are no different than adults. Amy did not need to be told to work harder, primarily because she didn't know what to focus on. Instead of vague, behavior-based remedies, she needed specific, learning-based remedies. Instead of a “work harder” treatment, she needed a “come in for extra help on solving equations” treatment. When told to focus on specific areas, students will succeed at a much higher rate than when they are offered overly general and nonspecific feedback, such as, “You need to pay more attention in class.” In order to provide the more specific feedback advocated by Fleenor et al., it is necessary to avoid
incorporating too many behavioral factors into students’ grades. Indeed, a variety of commentators have suggested doing away entirely with assessing students on behavioral factors. One alternative to completely eliminating behavioral-based grades is to still assign grades for behavior, but keep them separate from measures of student performance. Thomas Guskey explains how, in many Canadian secondary schools, students receive one grade for academic achievement and a second grade for behavioral issues such as homework completion, punctuality, class participation, and effort. This practice still allows teachers to comment on their students’ behavior, but does not conflate this with students’ academic performance.

**Teacher Expectations and Judgments**

Some common grading practices have been criticized for not just taking into account students’ behavior in the classroom, but also the expectations and moral judgments that teachers place on students. As previously described, a study of high school English teachers conducted by Zoeckler found that many teachers compare students’ performances against how they expect the students to perform. Even though the study was inconclusive as to whether the discrepancy between teacher expectations and student performance caused teachers to change the grades they assigned, it did imply that this effect undermined the trust between students and teachers. The study suggested that, if this trust is undermined, student attitude can be negatively affected, which in turn can affect performance. The effects that teacher expectations can have on student performance were famously described by Harvard professor Robert Rosenthal in his 1968 study, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils’ Intellectual Development*. In this study, teachers were led to believe that certain students had demonstrated signs of a spurt in intellectual growth, when in reality they had been selected at random. At the end of the year, the students who the teachers expected to be more intellectually capable actually did show significantly greater intellectual development.

According to James Rhem, executive editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, Rosenthal’s study reveals how, “when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they do; when teachers do not have such expectations, performance and growth are not so encouraged and may in fact be discouraged in a variety of ways.” These results suggest that grading practices heavily influenced by teacher expectations can cause students to achieve grades that do not accurately reflect their abilities. Such grading practices have no place in a system designed to measure only students’ academic performance.
Zoeckler’s study found that teachers also let their moral judgments influence the grades they assign. This issue, like the incorporation of teacher expectations into grades, distorts grades so that they do not accurately measure academic performance. Though the obvious solution to both of these issues is simply for teachers not to consider either their expectations of students or their moral judgments of students when calculating grades, sometimes teachers incorporate these factors into grades unknowingly. As such, there are few practical recommendations for ways to overcome these issues. Rosenthal himself recognized the difficulty in overcoming the tendency for one’s own perceptions of students to affect outcomes, admitting, “we don’t know what to do with these findings.”

"Zero" Grades as a Punishment

One oft-criticized grading practice that is more easily overcome than either the incorporation of behavioral characteristics or teacher perceptions into grades is the use of zeroes as punishments for incomplete work or other student indiscretions (e.g., tardiness, academic dishonesty). Many educators and academics have criticized the practice of assigning zeroes as one that unfairly punishes students and causes their grades to reflect factors other than their academic achievement and proficiency in a subject. The problems associated with the use of zeroes are closely connected to those discussed in regard to grading students on behavioral factors.

Teachers often award zeroes to students for work that is late or incomplete. Sometimes zeroes are also assigned as a punishment for factors completely unrelated to academic achievement, such as misbehaving in class or ignoring teacher warnings. If a teacher uses a points system that determines grades by averaging together all of a student’s scores over the course of a semester, then assigning just a few zeroes can prevent a student from achieving academic success. This is true even if students perform well on all other assignments because of the way that zeroes skew averages. A student who normally receives “A”s on completed assignments can end up with a final grade of “C” due to a few behavioral infractions. One common defense for using zeroes as punishments for behavior is that there are consequences for not completing tasks in “the real world.” As valid as this argument may be, commentators who criticize grading on behavior have claimed that it is far better, and more in line with the expectations of the “real world,” to accept late assignments rather than award zeroes. According to Erickson, “in the real world, failure to complete a task rarely results in not needing to complete the task.”
Some educators and academics have suggested a number of different methods for dealing with the problems caused by assigning zeroes. One method that has been suggested is assigning students a grade of “Incomplete” for work that is not turned in or is unsatisfactory and then requiring them to complete the work at other times. Guskey suggests that students should not be “let off the hook” for incomplete work, but should instead be made to attend special after-school or Saturday study sessions until the work is completed. Another suggestion is to allow students to turn in late work for reduced marks. For example, a few points could be taken off for each day an assignment is late. An assignment could even receive two different grades, one indicating a student’s progression toward learning goals and one indicating a student’s ability to turn in work on time. These policies reduce the amount that a student’s compliance to a behavioral policy, completing work by a certain date, factors into their final grade.

Some educators and academics have recommended that the use of zeroes as a punishment for other behavioral issues than late work, such as cheating or misbehavior, should be abandoned entirely. Erickson suggests that instead of punishing students with a zero for a behavioral indiscretion (in this case, cheating), the focus should be on “learning from the mistake; determining the root cause of it; and working as a team with parents, teachers, principals, and the student to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Erickson recommends that different punishments, such as revoking privileges, should be used in place of assigning zeroes.

“In the real world, failure to complete a task rarely results in not needing to complete the task.”

- Jeffrey Erickson

In summary, using zeroes as a punishment either for late work or for behavioral issues distorts grades away from being true representations of students’ academic performance. If measuring academic performance is the ultimate goal of grades, then zeroes, as Wormeli writes, are “inaccurate portrayals of mastery that are unjustified ethically and mathematically.”

**Point Systems and Averages**

Related to the criticisms directed at the use of zeroes as punishment, the use of systems that calculate grades by averaging together the points that students have achieved on assignments over the course of a semester has also been criticized as unfair and likely to distort a student’s true academic accomplishments. Averaging in a points system that values all assignments equally can create a situation where a few bad scores inaccurately skew a student’s final grade. If students receive bad grades early in a semester they can lose all hope of achieving a good final grade, even if they significantly improve their performance.
In the place of a system that averages scores over the course of an entire semester, teachers could weight assignments at the end of a semester more heavily than those at the beginning. This would prevent situations where students lose any chance of achieving a good final grade because of a few bad grades early in a semester. This being said, it has also been recommended that teachers avoid weighting any one assignment too heavily at the end of a semester, a practice that can either inaccurately help or hurt a student’s grade. A simple strategy that can be used to combat unfair grades caused by the points system is replacing the mean with other measurements of central tendency such as median. Using the median of a student’s score to calculate grades can help eliminate a situation where a few bad scores skew what otherwise would be a good grade. For example, if on seven assignments a student scores 91, 46, 89, 92, 53, 87, and 85, then the mean of his or her scores would be 77.6, typically a “C.” On the other hand, the median of the student’s scores would be 87, typically a “B” and probably a better reflection of the student’s grades considering the majority of the scores were in the high 80s or low 90s.

Grading Homework and Other Formative Assignments

Some educators and academics have recently criticized the practice of grading homework and other formative assessments. This practice has been criticized for rewarding students for being compliant, hard workers while not necessarily communicating anything meaningful about students’ mastery over course material. These issues are compounded if homework grades are used in a points system that assigns zeroes for uncompleted assignments and calculates final grades through averaging. Students who are capable could seriously damage their grades by failing to complete a number of homework assignments.

Some commentators have gone so far as to recommend eliminating graded homework. Fleenor et al. compare homework to sports practices: Practice, in school, includes homework and classwork. This is where teachers instruct and students use that instruction to solve problems or draw conclusions or make connections. Teachers use practice to gauge progress and prepare for the future. Next are the scrimmages – “quizzes” - that enable the teacher to check the pulse of the class. Quizzes shouldn’t define a student’s success or failure, but should instead be a barometer for both the teacher and the student about the progress being made. After scrimmaging (and discussing the successes and failures of the scrimmage), it’s time for a game, or test. Under the model proposed by Fleenor et al., a student’s performance on summative assessments like tests becomes more important in determining the final grade than his or her performance on formative assessments like homework.

There are obvious concerns that students will be less likely to complete homework if it is not graded. However, at least some educators have found that replacing grades for homework completion with extensive and specific feedback does not cause completion rates to go down. Patricia Scriffiny, a math teacher at Montrose High School in
Montrose, Colorado, found that providing specific feedback, but not grades, on homework sent students the message that it was important they complete these assignments as practice. Under Scroffiny’s system, completion rates did not change and students were likely to complete as much homework as was necessary for them to master the course material. She explains: Some students don’t do all the homework that I assign, but they know that they are accountable for mastering the standard connected to it. Of course, not every student who needs practice always does so, but I am amazed and encouraged that students ask me for extra practice fairly regularly.

**Extra Credit**

The practice of giving students extra credit assignments has likewise been criticized for its tendency to distort grades away from being simple measures of performance and content or concept mastery. Erickson refers to extra credit as a “lethal practice” for the way that it rewards students for non-academic factors like bringing in school supplies. Even if extra credit is awarded for a semi-academic reason like the completion of an extra assignment, it still skews the meaning of a student’s grade because it rewards them for extra effort as opposed to achieving proficiency.

**Standards-Based Grading**

Standards-based grading is a comprehensive system that incorporates all of the remedies for ineffective grading practices outlined above. Standards-based grading is designed to assess students only on their academic performance and proficiency, not on any behavioral factors. In a standards-based system, students are measured against specific academic standards, not their peers. Standards-based grading (sometimes referred to as proficiency-based or standards-referenced grading) systems are gaining in popularity across the United States. According to an article in *The New York Times*, standards-based grading programs are “flourishing around the country as the latest frontier in a 20-year push to establish rigorous academic standards and require state tests on the material.”

According to Scroffiny, a standards-based grading system “involves measuring students’ proficiency on well-defined course objectives.” Students are graded either entirely or almost entirely on how well they progress toward these objectives. Provided below is an outline of standards-based grading practices as they have been employed by the Edmonds School district in Lynnwood, Washington. The system is presented in comparison to traditional grading practices.
Table 1: Standards-Referenced Grading Practices

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards Based Grading</th>
<th>Traditional Grading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly Related to Standards</td>
<td>Usually Related to Assessment Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Only</td>
<td>Mix of Achievement, Attitude, Effort and Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Summative Assessments Only</td>
<td>From Formative and Summative Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Information Only</td>
<td>Everything Marked Included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses Current Learning Trend</td>
<td>Uses Averages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Often Includes Group Marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derived from Quality Learning Assessments</td>
<td>Huge Variation in Assessment Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Aspects Discussed with, and Understood by, Students</td>
<td>Teacher Decided and Announced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The standard-based grading system implemented by the Edmonds School District incorporates most of the suggestions outlined in the previous subsection. This standards-based system is designed to measure only a student’s most recent level of mastery over the course material. It is very clearly designed not to incorporate factors that do not measure recent academic performance, such as behavior and formative assessments like homework, into a student’s grade. One of the most important defining characteristics of a standards-based grading system is how it treats formative and summative assessments. In order to avoid distorting students’ grades away from their actual level of proficiency, standards based grading only incorporates summative assessments such as tests or essays into a student’s grade. This being said, standards-based grading systems still value formative assessments. In the Edmonds School District model, for example, formative assessments continue to be used for the following:

- Guide instruction for individual students or for a whole class
- Introduce criteria, allow for feedback, self-assessment, and guided practice
- Focus on individual or group learning
- Informal observations, quizzes, homework, teacher questions, worksheets
- Information can be used for progress report comments
Formative assessments provide students with the opportunity to practice the skills that they are developing through the curriculum. Additionally, they give teachers feedback on their students' progression, allowing them to modify their instruction for the needs of the class. Teachers can use a student’s performance on formative assessments to supply valuable information to both the student and his or her parents. In comparison to formative assessments, standards-based grading systems treat summative assessments as the only means capable of accurately supplying the necessary information to award students grades. According to Edmonds School District, summative assessments are:

- Used to make a decision about student learning in the end
- Based on known criteria
- Used after students have been given opportunities to practice skills
- Focused on individual student performance
- Formal observations, tests, projects, reports

Summative assessments test students on specific skills or knowledge that they have acquired with the help of formative assessments. In a standards-based system, summative assessments are the main factors used to assess whether or not students have mastered the course material and to determine students’ grades. Standards-based grading is based on the assumption that it is best to only assess students at the end of a grading period, after they have gotten the chance to develop certain learning skills. Scriffiny explains that in her class she does not give a summative assessment until she is “confident that a reasonable number of students will score proficiently.”

In some standards-based grading models, students can redo summative assessments until they have demonstrated proficiency. This method ensures that students have multiple chances to become proficient at their own pace. An article published in The Oregonian on standards-based grading in Oregon public schools notes, “‘It used to be in the first six weeks, if a student got an F, they gave up,’ says Principal John O’Neill. ‘Now, they have all year to bring up the grade by retaking until they ‘get’ that skill.’”

In order to assess a student’s level of proficiency, most standards-based grading systems use scoring rubrics. Rubrics define specific learning criteria against which teachers compare a student’s proficiency level. Because rubrics measure students on specific learning goals, it is easy to provide students and parents with useful feedback. Additionally, teachers can use the information to adjust the instruction they provide to individual students. Standards-based grading systems often use a scale different from A, B, C, D, and F to record students’ grades on report cards. One common scale is 3, 2, and 1. Provided below is an example of how these scores can relate to performance standards in a standards-based grading program:
Table 3: Meanings of Scores in a Standards-Based Grading System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Meanings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Meeting the standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Progressing toward the standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Little to no progress toward standard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, standards-based grading is based on the core idea that “a grade is supposed to provide an accurate, undiluted indicator of a student’s mastery of learning standards.” In the process, a standards-based grading system seeks to imbue grades with specific meanings that are easy for students, parents, and teachers to understand.