



CHAPTER 11

Six Burning Grading Issues

Record a Zero or a Sixty?

A student does not turn in a project. You record a zero in the gradebook. When it comes time to determine the student's mark at the end of the grading period, you have to make a decision: Do I keep the zero or turn it into a sixty in order to make the grading scale fair? (Note: Some teachers choose fifty or seventy as the new value.)

Few aspects of grading cause as much consternation among teachers as this one. On the surface, it seems like the student could literally sit on his or her rear end and do nothing for an entire grading period and still earn sixties on all the tests and projects. It's wrong, we think, to give students points when they didn't do anything—in fact, it's cheating. This is a very understandable conclusion on the part of teachers, but it's incorrect.

When we turn students' zeros into sixties in our gradebooks, we are not giving students something for doing nothing. We're adjusting the grade intervals so that any averaging we do is mathematically justified but, even more important, that any grade we determine from the pattern of grades is a valid indicator of mastery.

Consider the intervals for each grade in the 100-point scale. In many classrooms, an A ranges from ninety to one hundred, a distance of eleven points. B's, C's, and D's have almost the same range, ten points each. When it comes to an F, however, there is a sixty-point range of possibility. A zero has an undeserved and devastating influence, so much so that no matter what the



I never give zeros. If an assignment is forever missing, it goes in my book as a fifty. That's an F-, punishment enough. Entering zero has devastating mathematical consequences on grade averages, often putting students into an irrecoverable position. Why bother to keep working when you know nothing you can do will bring that average up to passing? I want them working, not shut down.

If we entered grades as forty/A-, thirty/B-, twenty/C-, ten/D-, zeros would be OK. But, with ninety/A-, eighty/B-, seventy/C-, and sixty/D-, fifty is an F-. Entering zero in the gradebook is the equivalent of giving a kid a K-. For that reason, if a kid miserably fails a test—for example, a score of 35 percent—I put it in as fifty/F-.

Fifty/F- is low enough. If kids never turn in work, or consistently fail tests, they will still average an F and fail. But, if they just have a few bad days, they can raise their average with quality work and pass.

—Susan Bischoff, secondary teacher

student does, the grade distorts the final grade as a true indicator of mastery. Mathematically and ethically this is unacceptable. Figure 11.1 shows the negative impact of a zero on the 100-point grading scale.

Does a string of perfect papers for a grading period combined with one paper not submitted equate to a C+ level of mastery? No. The B+ is a more accurate rendering of what the student knows and is able to do as a total, which is what we are trying to portray with grades. In addition, if the zero was earned in the first half of the grading period or even just once in a consistent string of other grades, and we are grading on a trend because we want to be current in our evaluation of the student's mastery, we might even drop that one score and use the majority of grades, and the most recent, so the student earns an A for the grading period.

In Virginia Beach, Virginia, school board member Emma L. Davis argues against recording zeros for students who didn't do work or scored less than sixty on assessments using a 100-point system. She compares the practice to taking temperature readings over time.

Consider trying to find the average temperature over five days and recording eighty-five, eighty-two, eighty-three, and eighty-six, then forgetting a day and recording zero. The average temperature would be sixty-seven, a figure that does not accurately show the weather from that week. If those temperatures were grades, a student would fail after consistently earning B's and C's. (Gruss 2005)

A reminder: In differentiated classes, the grade must be accurate in order to be useful. We avoid any practice that would decrease a grade's accuracy.

The 4-point grading scale is also guilty of this concern, if we use it to calculate percentages. The zero we would use on the 4-point scale if the student didn't turn in the paper doesn't keep the student's percentage the same as would be obtained by using the sixty points we give the student's zero on the

Figure 11.1 Negative Impact of a Zero on the 100-Point Grading Scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Percentage	Grade
0, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100	83	C+
100, 100, 60, 100, 100, 100	93	B+

100-point scale. In fact, the percentage on the 4-point scale when we incorporate the zero is the same as the percentage we record when using a zero on the 100-point scale. See Figure 11.2.

To reconcile this, we have to declare 1.0, not zero, as the failing and/or unscorable level on a 4.0 rubric. A 1.0 is what we record if a student doesn't do his work or gets less than an F on the test. If we use 1.0 as the bottom score of a 4-point grading scale, the resulting average is more in line with our goals of not penalizing a student's average beyond repair for one assignment not completed. See Figure 11.3.

When determining the overall grade using the 4-point scale, however, most of us use the mean—we add the scores and divide by the number of scores. When we do this, the zero does not have as devastating an impact on the overall grade as it does when turning 4-point scale scores into percentages (100-point scale). See Figure 11.4. To mitigate the undue, negative influence of a zero on the overall grade, teachers use smaller, rubric-size, grading scales.

While the B shown in the figure is closer to the student's actual mastery, given so many A's earned, it's not entirely accurate. Most of us grade on a trend and would record an A if this student earned this many A's in a row. We'd be looking at the median and mode, not the mean.

Of course, in both scales, we can record an I for "Incomplete" for the short term, and later record zeros or sixties, or adjust that scale to 1.0 for failure if the student doesn't do the assignment.

If the bottom line for a differentiated class is to make grades as accurate as possible, it makes the most sense to round zeroes and any grade less than a

Figure 11.2 Comparing the Negative Impact of Zero on the 4-Point and 100-Point Scales

Test Scores for Six Tests	Percentage	Grade
4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 0	83	C+
100, 100, 100, 100, 100, 0	83	C+

Figure 11.3 Using 1.0 as the Low Score on the 4-Point Scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Average	Grade
1.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0	88%	B

Figure 11.4 Using the Mean on the 4-Point Scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Mean	Grade
0, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4	3.3	B
1, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4	3.5	B+

sixty (or seventy) to a sixty (or seventy) when we average grades on a 100-point scale. If this is difficult to accept, then recording an I for missing assignments that later turns into a zero if not completed is probably best, though we may not choose to use the zero as we document progress, provide feedback, or inform our instructional decisions subsequently.

This is one more proof that grading scales and systems we currently use do not always support our teaching/learning goals. There's more than enough compelling justification to pursue alternative forms of feedback and record-keeping that don't require us to use less than desirable math manipulations to communicate student achievement. We're waiting for someone to step up to the plate and figure it out.

Potential concern: Some of us may be afraid that a student who earns a zero that has been adjusted up to a sixty can brag about how he can achieve those sixties without learning or producing anything. We're afraid other students will try it.

Think about this for a moment. In most school districts in which sixty and below is an F, this means failure. What sense does it make, then, for the student to claim to classmates, "Hey, check it out: I didn't do the project, and I still got an F," which is what he or she is declaring. The correlation between hard work, learning, and achieving success is still clear: If we act irresponsibly and/or don't learn, we fail, and failure is failure, no matter the degree.

Adjusting zeros to sixty is not giving students something for having done nothing. It's adjusting the grading scale so that it is ethically justifiable, so that each grade has an appropriate amount of influence on the student's summative evaluation and the grade can be used in decision making. Marking zeros as sixties still means the student failed; it's just using the upper, more constructive and recoverable end of the F range. If grades are to be accurate—and they have to be accurate in order to provide feedback, document progress, and inform our instructional decisions—then we have to adjust all zeros accordingly. An F does not state that the student is misbehaving or a cognitive "loser." It means only that the student failed to demonstrate mastery. The cause isn't important. Whether it was due to immaturity or lack of understanding, our response is the same: investigate and take action.

Grading Gifted Students

For some students, the regular classroom does not meet their needs. It is too slowly paced and too simplistic, or prevents them from using and demonstrating their advanced understanding and skills. They have the mental ilk and skill sets that go beyond what is typically found in children of their age.

Within this group, however, there are gradations of giftedness. Some are advanced beyond the regular classroom, but not so far as to be considered