

## **Policy #3: Using Grades as a Form of Punishment**

Although educators would undoubtedly prefer that motivation to learn be entirely intrinsic, the existence of grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth (Cameron & Pierce, 1994, 1996; Chastain, 1990). Studies show that most students view high grades as positive recognition of their success, and some work hard to avoid the consequences of low grades (Feldmesser, 1971).

At the same time, no studies support the use of low grades as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-images, many regard the low grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade, but feel helpless to make any improvement (Selby & Murphy, 1992).

Sadly, some teachers consider grades their “weapon of last resort.” In their view, students who do not comply with their requests must suffer the consequences of the greatest punishment a teacher can bestow: a failing grade. Such practices have no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affect students, teachers, and the relationship they share.

### **Solution**

Rather than attempting to punish students with a low grade in the hope it will prompt greater effort in the future, teachers can better motivate students by considering their work as incomplete and then requiring additional effort. Recognizing this, some schools have initiated grading policies that eliminate the use of failing grades altogether.

Teachers at Beachwood Middle School in Beachwood, Ohio, for example, record students' grades as *A*, *B*, *C*, or *I* (Incomplete). Students who receive an *I* grade are required to attend special study sessions to bring their performance up to an acceptable level. This policy is based on the belief that students perform at a failure level or submit failing work largely because teachers accept it. The Beachwood teachers reason that if they no longer accept substandard work, students will not submit it. And with appropriate support, they believe students will continue to work until their performance is satisfactory.

Beachwood Middle School teachers also believe that giving failing grades to students who have not performed well, despite their ability to do so, offers them an easy way out. But if teachers insist that students complete all assignments designed to demonstrate learning at an acceptable level, they are convinced that students will choose to do their work in a timely manner and at a satisfactory level of quality. The guiding maxim of the teachers at Beachwood Middle School is, "If it's not done well, then it's not done!"

Implementing such a grading policy requires additional funding for the necessary support mechanisms, of course. The special study sessions that Beachwood students who receive an *I* grade are required to attend, for example, are held after school and on Saturday morning. These sessions are staffed by teachers, volunteer parents, and older students. Students unable or unwilling to do the makeup work during the school year must attend required summer school sessions designed to help them bring their performance up to an acceptable level (Kuehner, 1998). Although these support mechanisms demand commitment and additional funding, schools implementing such programs generally find them to be highly successful (E. Bernetich, personal communication, February 14, 2004). Many also discover that in the long run, they actually save money. Because this regular and ongoing support helps students remedy their learning difficulties before they become major problems, less time and fewer resources need to be spent in major remediation efforts later on.

At all levels of education, we need to think seriously about the use of failing grades. Although honesty must prevail in assessments and evaluations of student learning, we also must consider the negative consequences of assigning failing grades to students' work or level of performance (see Roderick & Camburn, 1999). Especially in the early years of school, the negative consequences of failing grades are quite serious and far outweigh any benefits. Even in upper grades, the fear of failure is a questionable motivation device. Better and more effective

alternatives to failing grades need to be found, especially in a standards-based system. The use of *Is* or incomplete grades present a meaningful alternative, especially if the necessary resources are put in place to support those students who need additional assistance.