High School has helped them gain admission and win scholarships to many of the most selective colleges and universities in the nation.

Recognizing excellence in academic performance is a vital aspect of any learning community. But such recognition need not be based on arbitrary criteria and deleterious competition. Instead, it can and should be based on clear models of excellence that exemplify our highest standards and goals for students (see Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Educators should take pride in helping the largest number of students possible meet these rigorous criteria and high standards of excellence.

**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.

Policy #4: Using Zeros in Grading

Another related grading policy that hinders the implementation of standards-based reforms is the use of zeros. Many teachers assign zeros to students’ work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late. That zero, however, seldom reflects what a student has learned or is able to do (Raebeck, 1993). Instead, zeros are assigned to punish students for not displaying appropriate effort or demonstrating adequate responsibility (Canady & Hotchkiss, 1989; Stiggins & Duke, 1991). Obviously, if the grade is to represent how well students have learned or mastered established learning standards, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark (Guskey, 2004).

The impact of assigning zeros is intensified if combined with the practice of averaging to attain a student’s overall grade. Students readily see that receiving a single zero leaves them little chance for success because such an extreme score so drastically skews the average. That is why, for example, in scoring Olympic events like gymnastics, diving, or ice-skating, the highest and lowest scores of the judges are always eliminated. If they were not, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores (Guskey, 2002a).

Some teachers defend the practice of assigning zeros by arguing that they cannot give students credit for work that is incomplete or not turned in—and that is certainly true. But there are far better ways to motivate and encourage students to complete assignments in a timely manner than through the use of zeros, especially considering the overwhelmingly negative effects.

Solution

Students must learn to accept responsibility for their actions and should be held accountable for their work. Nevertheless, no evidence shows assigning zeros helps teach students these lessons. Unless we are willing to admit that we use grades to show evidence of students’ lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility, then alternatives to the practice of assigning zeros must be found.

Policy #5:

One alternative with explicit regard to Policy #3. Students must be evaluated in on time, for instance sessions and/or responsible to a satisfactory grade with a zero. Initiatives in school districts, completing and implementing after-school strategies may require the same significant changes. Assigning a zero will be a more accurate representation of the student’s effort.

Policy #5:

Teachers todo in determining the points in the procedure (see Brookh... 2001; McMinn, 2002). Sources of evaluation include:

- Major
- Class
- Reps
- Stud
- Exhi
- Lab
- Stud
- Journ
- Class
- Oral

Teacher particular scores in grading. Without validity of grading (Guskey, 2004).