CHAPTER 8

# Why Do We Grade, and What About Effort, Attendance, and Behavior?

*This coming year, our principal wants us to build in an attendance component in our grade—25 percent—students will start with one hundred points, and lose ten for every absence. I understand why—we had kids who missed sixty days this year, and still managed passing grades. However, this skews the grade away from whether or not the objectives of the course were met. Should we fail a student who meets our objectives just because he was absent? But on the other hand, if you think of school as the child[ren]'s "job"—they would not hold the job if they were gone that much from work. I am torn.*

—Cossondra George, secondary teacher

We can teach and students can learn, even brilliantly, without any sort of grade being in the picture. It happens all the time. Consider those mini-epiphany moments students and teachers experience in their studies; they most often do not relate to whether a student will be graded on a task. Imagine these scenes: the class when a student realizes via a peer critique that he or she needs to make a concluding sentence to connect the supporting evidence of a paragraph back to its main idea, the time when a student successfully titrates a solution in chemistry class, or when a student blends white paint faintly across a downshaft of yellow light to soften the sunbeam that spills through an opening in a window's curtain in a painting of a summer afternoon. Or how about that first grader making the

> Grades as motivators breed dependence, reduce risk-taking, creativity, and value.
>
> —Rick Stiggins, educator and assessment expert

leap from word+word+word as reading to reading words in clusters and drawing meaning from the enclosing punctuation marks? Grades were not only unnecessary, they would have been in the way.

So why do we grade students? Most teachers say that they grade students because they are required to do so. This response suggests most teachers see grading as a "necessary evil" rather than a positive function. Why is this? Perhaps it's because grading can be tedious, making teachers feel like they're drowning in a sea of papers, projects, and accountability. With their teaching and grading, teachers have to be fair, brilliant, diplomatic, patient, foresightful, and immediately responsive to 180 students, their parents, and administrators.

This is tough to enjoy. One stack of three- to four-page papers from 180 students, for example, can take more than twenty hours to grade at seven minutes per paper, only ten hours if we spend half that time per paper. How are teachers supposed to do this during their fifty-minute planning period each day, along with assessing the other assignments they've given, writing lesson plans, returning parent phone calls, writing college recommendations, completing teacher narratives about students up for local screening committees, attending committee meetings, sponsoring clubs and sports, ordering supplies for next year, standing in line to photocopy enough copies of the geometry review packet for next week, fixing the computer that keeps freezing, finding that copy of that other resource book that will better meet the needs of Keisha in second period, and eating lunch? Grades and grading philosophies can be contentious, and because teachers are so stressed about many aspects of their jobs, they view negatively anything that threatens to add to their already overburdened schedule. Besides all this, evaluating others and their work is difficult. It takes a mental and emotional toll.

In their more contemplative moments, however, teachers delve deeper and find reasons for grading. Their responses can be boiled down to these six:

- To document student and teacher progress
- To provide feedback to the student and family, and the teacher
- To inform instructional decisions

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- To motivate students
- To punish students
- To sort students

Notice the dividing line between the top three and bottom three. The first three reasons seem the most useful and worthy. They work. Those three roles for grading enable us to live up to the promises of schooling, helping

teachers teach and students learn. We need to document, provide feedback, and guide our decisions on a regular basis in order for students to achieve in our classes.

The bottom three reasons, however, cross a line. When we grade to motivate, punish, or sort students, we do three things: we dilute the grade's accuracy; we dilute its usefulness; and we use grading to manipulate students, which may or may not be healthy. The bottom three reasons tend to take us away from our goals as teachers, but we use grades in these ways to function in our schools. It's not always wise to do so, and it's worth noting why we are grading students.

We don't want to become mired in playing games with grading, such as when we negotiate with students that if they do the task, they'll get a high grade regardless of what they learn, and that if they don't do the task, they'll get a low grade regardless of how purposeful the assignment was to their learning. Suddenly we're emphasizing compliance, not learning, and we're off course.

*A surprise to some:* Low grades push students farther from our cause, they don't motivate students. Recording a D on a student's paper won't light a fire under that student to buckle down and study harder. It actually distances the student further from us and the curriculum, requiring us to build an emotional bridge to bring him or her back to the same level of investment prior to receiving the grade. Guskey and others have documented this effect (Guskey and Bailey 2001). Given this, imagine a student earning a string of poor grades—how motivated will he or she be?

High grades also have issues. Alfie Kohn says that high grades have a little bump in motivation—students who earn an A want to earn another one. This is short-lived, according to Kohn, works only on the part of some students, and is extrinsic, meaning it doesn't help students' intrinsic motivation to achieve success later.

Here's a working premise for the remainder of this chapter's discussion.

> A grade represents a clear and accurate indicator of what a student knows and is able to do—mastery. With grades, we document the progress of students and our teaching, we provide feedback to students and their parents, and we make instructional decisions regarding the students.

If we accept this premise, the rest of our discussion will make sense; however, some of the currently popular grading practices become questionable.

For example, should we incorporate behavior, attendance, or effort into an academic grade? If the grade represents the number of days students attend school in addition to what students have mastered, it can no longer be used to accurately document mastery, provide feedback, or guide instruc-

> Finding the balance between challenging students and encouraging students is difficult, I know. Some policy makers are concerned that too many teachers are taking the easy way out, in the sense that, instead of searching for ways to reach kids that don't respond to traditional methods, they grade the kids on "effort." This keeps down the F's on the grade reports, but it can result in passing kids along from grade to grade until they get old enough to disappear.
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> —John Norton, educator and moderator, MiddleWeb listserv

tional decisions. Sure, some schools, particularly high schools, use the lure of passing grades to get students in danger of dropping out to attend class. High schools in Fairfax County Public Schools in northern Virginia, for instance, have a policy that three unexcused absences from a class results in an automatic F. While this policy keeps some would-be class-skippers from checking out early every day, the F may or may not be an accurate portrayal of the student's mastery of course content.

Instead of toying with grades in ways that lead to false indicators of mastery, middle and high schools can pursue other options: analyze their structures and programs to see whether they're meeting the needs of modern students (Do they have a fully developed vocational program? Does poverty play a role in this student's lack of success?); examine the extent to which teachers differentiate instruction, which often increases motivation; examine whether their teachers are trained in adolescent pedagogy; examine students' personal lives, if necessary (Is he or she getting enough sleep and eating well? Is he or she depressed? Is there a problem with substance abuse? Is there something dysfunctional in the family?); and examine the extent to which teachers connect with families and members of the community to get students to participate in school.

> In the past I have been an absolute stickler for handing in work on time with exceptions on a case-by-case basis. I had in my mind that I was promoting excellence by doing that. . . . Over time I realized I was sending the message that timeliness was more important than learning. There are many deadlines that I miss for paperwork and the like simply because I am too busy or something came up that needed to be attended to first. That is real life. While I push my students to turn work in on time, I'd rather have the work than not because the work I assign is designed to teach and practice important concepts we're working on. I [now] post students' missing work outside their homeroom doors, and they have done a far better job of turning it in—and getting current work turned in on time.
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> —Ellen Berg, secondary teacher

Dr. Mel Levine was correct when he claimed in his 2003 *New York Times* best-selling book, *The Myth of Laziness*, that laziness is a myth. When a student manifests what seems to be laziness, successful teachers realize there is something else going on. Laziness doesn't exist. Knowing that, teachers of students who are frequently absent keep searching for what works.

If we incorporate behavior into the grade, we run afoul of our intent to keep grades as accurate indicators of mastery. Imagine this feedback to a parent: "Your son's grade, Mrs. Wilson, indicates what he knows and is able to do, in addition to all the days he was polite to others, participated in group discussions, did not steal others' property, maintained an organized notebook, and brought his pencil to class." With baggage like this attached, the grade is no longer functional. We might as well not grade academics.

Let's explore the question of incorporating participation, effort, and behavior into grading a bit further.

## Grading Participation

Many school subjects lend themselves to evaluating a student's participation: drama, physical education, band, orchestra, chorus, speech, public speaking, conflict resolution courses, among others. In these subjects and all others, however, we must consider whether students' participation is a technique used to learn the standards, or if participation is the standard itself. If participation is merely an avenue a teacher travels with students in order to arrive at mastery, then it is inappropriate to grade it. Mastery refers only to what students know and are able to do regarding the standards or learning outcomes, not the routes we take to get there. If participation is the actual skill being taught, then it's appropriate to grade it because it is the mastery we're seeking.

If we think that in a particular subject participation is gradable, then we have to agree on a standard of excellence for participation. What should be considered? The criteria will be different for different teachers and in different subjects. Possibilities include: the student's willingness to participate; courtesy toward others; attentiveness; how he or she balances listening and talking; timing; avoidance of incendiary language; the extent, relevance, accuracy, and substantive nature of his or her contribution or remarks; the manner of his or her contribution and whether it was matched to the intended audience; whether he or she incorporated proper resources, references, and protocols; and whether the student has grown over the course of the year in the application of any of these criteria. Grading can get subjective and complex very quickly.

Many classes must include participation grades, and even many activities in core classes are about participation—not necessarily the same thing as class discussion. What about the band student who knows how to read music and can answer 100 percent on "paper" tests but cannot perform due to lack of practice, off-task activities in class, etc.? What about physical education classes? Should students not have to participate, but just take a test to see whether they know the rules of various games and physical activities? Should choir students not have to perform, but still get an A if they know all of the words to a song? Should everyone in my fiber testing lab get an A even if they stood around and constantly talked about social events, and just copied the results from the others in their group? . . . In many subjects and activities the process is primary—and participation is vital.

—Margel Soderberg, secondary teacher

It may be advisable for teachers to give feedback on participation, but not to include it in the formal, end-of-grading-period grade. For example, even in drama class where participation is a huge part of the experience, there are universal concepts we want students to master. Proper voice inflection at the proper time might be one. We grade the extent of the students' skill development—the capacity to inflect voice at just the right moments in a dialog or monologue, but we don't grade students on the fact that they stood up and tried to inflect their voices. This is analogous to grading students in world civilization classes on whether they took the test. We grade the matter of the test (mastery), not the fact that they took it (participation). In music classes, do we grade the fact that students performed for us, or do we grade the skill displayed in their performances and perhaps their growth in that skill? We grade the skill and growth. It's the same in physical education—we don't

grade the fact that they played soccer for thirty minutes as heavily as we do the skills and growth they demonstrated while playing.

It might be easier to liken participation grades to work habits or homework grades. We allow them up to 10 percent influence on the mastery grade at the end of the grading period, but anything more than that unduly influences the final grade's accuracy in terms of what students know and are able to do; and in differentiated classes, the grade must be accurate to be useful.

Determining the extent of a student's participation isn't always easy, either. One student's full-bodied, maximum-intensity participation is another student's disinterested glance compared with what he or she can do. Once again, it's subjective. Sure we can tally the number of interactions a student makes, but the interactions are the medium through which they reveal mastery, not mastery itself. By limiting but not eliminating a participation grade's influence, we provide enough feedback on participation to be helpful and enough grade impact to be motivating for students.

Having said this, do we sometimes bend the rules for certain students? Yes, we're human. Is it wise to do this? Sometimes.

Secondary educator, Cossondra George, once shared this:

> *I have F. in class . . . who is always participating, always knows what is going on. A very enjoyable student to have in class. However, due to F.'s home situation, he does very little homework, and struggles socially at school. He is frequently suspended, absent, etc. . . . I cannot fail this young man simply because he turns in little outside class work to me, even when his percentage falls below the magical 60 percent. He is too much an active learner in my class. That is where "participation" comes into a grade.*

In this case, Cossondra found another way for F. to show his mastery. She gave him every opportunity to reveal his understandings via his active learning in class. Homework wasn't an avenue that worked for this student, so she chose a different route that wouldn't limit the expression of his knowledge. This is responsive teaching.

If, however, she gives him high marks just for speaking in class, regardless of the mastery levels demonstrated, she will have to record on the report card that the grade earned is based on a modified curriculum. The grade does not reflect the same level of competence in the subject as others of the same grade. This may be the best thing Cossondra can do, and it's also accurate.

The greater gift is to record accurate grades, not ones "fudged" by artificial elevation due to our sympathy for a student's home life. The reality, however, is that sometimes students are limited by their living/growing conditions and we have to consider that when grading. If we do, we mark it on the report card or in the cumulative folder for others to reference as they inter-

pret the grade. Despite the harshest conditions at home, we must portray a student's academic development accurately. If we can find alternative routes to demonstrate that mastery, we choose them.

Sometimes teachers elevate the importance of participation in an academic grade in order to stimulate students. Teacher and principal Bill Ivey says:

> *Speaking as someone who hardly ever spoke out in class until my second year of grad school (although I was always thinking and was always on-task), I learned so much more when I finally started talking—for me, anyway, there was a major difference between merely suspecting something might be true and actually putting the idea out for others to hear and confirming that one way or another. Additionally, if a student is not participating in a discussion, that is a valuable viewpoint which is missing and the whole class is diminished. It's sometimes hard to get that concept across to students, and especially to well-meaning parents who are sticking up for their kids. I do understand and support the concept that class participation takes on many forms, and I have written standards for my classes which attempt to define class participation as both a mental and a vocal process. But in the end, what's best for a class and every individual student in it is for everyone's voice to be heard, and I think it's legitimate to make that part of the grade.*

Former principal and now education consultant, Chris Toy, has an interesting take on whether or not to grade participation:

> *. . . a great quote by Einstein: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." I happen to believe that teaching our children "ways of being" matters. I won't go as far [as] to say that it matters more than academics because academic learning is certainly at the core of schooling. But to insist that affective traits, such as attitude, participation, effort, cooperation, must relate directly to a content rubric is, in my opinion, trying to count something that is not countable. I do believe that no one should be penalized for thinking and working quietly. It's not about being the center of the class. It's about showing up on time, with the tools and attitude to get the work done.*

Alternatively, we may be penalizing students who don't like to speak up when we offer bonus points or high grades to the whole class for participation, even though we know these students won't be able to achieve it. Remember, the course description does not state, "Participation in class" as one of its standards or benchmarks. It's a little disingenuous to require it for

successful grades, and grading participation in class discussions creates angst for students who want to do well but who are developmentally not ready to do so. Why put them in a pressured position of not being able to achieve something that everyone else can do readily but is not an indicator of mastery for the course? I've had a number of students over the years who feel like they've failed when they haven't earned a high grade in everything. To purposely set up a compelling goal (bonus points, a high grade) that everyone else can easily earn but they cannot seems to be a penalty of sorts.

Just making expectations or policies clear to students doesn't always mean that it's fair to invoke them. Students have to be given the personal tools to achieve those expectations as well, and that includes time, reflection, and feedback. Also, the expectations and policies have to be developmentally appropriate for the students' readiness level. Does this mean we don't push students to do things they're not comfortable doing? No. We push students all the time, stretching them all we can. The difference is when we start evaluating their stretching exploration and recording those evaluations as permanent indicators of mastery—a grade.

Of course, some of us use participation to tip the scales one way or the other for a student with a borderline grade. Educator Deborah Bova says:

> *I have always considered classroom participation (a really subjective assessment) as the "make or break" scenario. If the child has a grade that is an 87 percent and participates consistently and in a positive way, I will push the grade up to the 88 percent which is a B–. I have never used participation to take away from a grade unless it is an oral presentation which is lousy and the grade is lousy and that affects the average. I believe participation can influence in a positive way, but should never detract from academic accomplishment.*

## Grading Effort and Behavior

What about effort being woven into an academic grade? In order to answer that, someone first needs to tell us how to measure effort objectively. We don't have a commonly accepted, legally justifiable, nonsubjective method for measuring how hard or sincerely someone is working. We can provide anecdotal evidence and list the amount of time and resources students spend on a task, but identifying personal effort levels objectively eludes us. Yes, we can chart work habits in order to provide feedback and develop positive behaviors as true habits, but we do not have an accurate yardstick for effort. Comparing some students who went all out on a project with those who did just the bare minimum to satisfy the requirements is a subjective call. One student's outstanding effort is another student's quickly thrown together,

scribbled page. Declaring the extent and impact of students' efforts with authority can be difficult to defend.

We know there is a very high correlation between academic success and effort, behavior, and attendance. These are valued work ethics too, and the correlations work in almost all cases, but not all. When we mix ancillary criteria that are not meant to serve as indicators of mastery with assessments that are meant to serve as such, we can't trust the results or make decisions based on such criteria.

Karen Gruner, a chemistry teacher at St. John's Literary Institute at Prospect Hall, says: "One of life's tough lessons is trying hard and failing. It does no kid anywhere any good to give grades based on trying hard or behaving nicely because sooner or later they hit the wall of not having the knowledge the grade implied."

Some teachers will argue, however, that if we don't weave effort into the academic grades, students will fail to learn the correlation and they won't adopt such positive behaviors. Chris Toy comments:

> *It can't be just the academic standards. What makes all of us unique and so amazing goes way beyond our academic knowledge. It's got to be the whole of what we want and need kids to know in order to be successful and to realize their full potential.*
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> *Someone said, "I agree that effort, preparedness, timeliness should count for something, but I'm not sure it is in their grade." I say, why not? Could any of us have their potential reduced by not demonstrating these things? I think we do kids a disservice if these are not reflected in what we expect them to be able to do. Would any of us keep our jobs if we could not or consistently refused to work, be prepared, or show up on time?*

Toy is correct. In a perfect world, we could find a way to incorporate all the factors that matter in an assessment of a student, and the report of that assessment would be accurate and useful for everyone.

In that world, however, we wouldn't be limited by trying to quantify the unquantifiable. We are imperfect beings trying to objectify the subjective. In addition, the high stakes placed on grades as a guarantee of a student's precise mastery of something, and as tickets to success and stature, increases the pressure behind the square peg being jammed into the round hole. The current system doesn't allow for healthy and responsive grading practices that meet everyone's needs.

On the maturation side, we don't want students to think that just because they worked hard yet failed, they should get something for it. As adults, we are fired if we fail to produce what is requested, no matter how hard we've worked or how cooperative we were. So the student who works hard but

I believe that items such as "being a caring, positive, contributing member of the community," while certainly appropriate for inclusion in a school's mission statement, are not appropriate for state standards. Why? I would have a problem with measurement of this attribute. The middle school student is inherently "me centered." Do I grade on something the student has little control over—their rate of maturity? Can I legislate caring members of any community? Are they really just reflections of their home life at this stage?

—Marie Bahlert, secondary teacher

earns a D gets a D on the project, test, or report card, not a C for being mature or diligent.

In addition, we teach self-discipline and hard work in many ways, not just through report card correlations. For example, students learn more about the connection between self-discipline and higher achievement if we help them reflect on their use of time and the resultant quality of their work. If we leave it to the grade to speak for itself, it won't. The causal relationship between worry over low grades and a student's subsequent self-discipline isn't as strong as we think. It's our commentary with the grade, not the grade itself, that makes the difference.

We can also affirm hard-working students publicly, share stories of hard work leading to success, and help students keep calendars of completion. We can show students examples of poorly done work completed without regard to self-discipline or deadlines, and we can show examples of work done well and completed with integrity. We can model the message by carefully preparing our lessons instead of always teaching off the cuff. We can emphasize formative checkpoints over summative ones, again focusing on what we do en route to mastery, not just post-learning punishment or rewards.

Students who excel and receive recognition and more choices as a result of their hard work will create another positive pressure to work for some of their not-so-motivated classmates. It's never easy, but there are many ways to teach self-discipline, and incorporating effort into a mastery grade isn't the most useful way to advance that message or increase the utility of the grade.

Montgomery County in Maryland is tackling head-on the issue of separating effort from achievement in grades. Consulting teacher, Paula Schmierer, says:

> *[We are] . . . moving to a standards-based report card system. . . . There is a clear separation of work behaviors (learning skills) from academic ability—they are recorded and reflected separately on the report card. They always were recorded separately, but until now, not everyone separated them out for academic grading purposes. It is forcing teams or departments to dialogue about student learning and that has been a good thing . . . for teaching, for learning, and for parents knowing what the grade truly means.*
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> *There has had to be a mind-shift for many folks on this. . . . Learning skills definitely can play into the grades of many students. But when you separate the content skills knowledge from those behavioral skills, teachers have to take a look at why the student whom you think should under-*

> *stand the material isn't performing as you thought. Perhaps there's something else going on with that student.*

Finally, close analysis of how we report effort, academic proficiency, and other aspects of students' growth is evolving teacher by teacher, school by school. It's worth entering the conversation. Note teacher Susan Bischoff's comments, recently posted on a teacher-leader listserv:

> *In my experience, late/missing work is rarely caused by a simple decision not to do the work, but teachers often treat it that way. You're teaching your kids they can be successful when you insist on their success and accept nothing less. For some teachers, that translates into a zero-tolerance policy (ZERO-tolerance; get it?).*
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> *I've found that once I've enabled success, the child more often than not responds by gradually becoming more independent in [his or her] success. So, you're teaching responsibility rather than simply punishing kids for not demonstrating it.*
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> *On the other hand, I do admit I have a hard time philosophically giving an A when there is a lot of late work/retries. It does frequently happen. My hand SO wants to change that A to a B but I live with it. The other side of the report card and the comment area lets me tell the rest of the story. So, yes, I do believe that academics must be separated from work behaviors.*

We had a little social experiment last year. In one school the principal deducted 10 percent for each day late teachers were in turning in their recertification points and extra duty pay forms at the end of the year. You know when we're so busy and things just slip through. (They were restored of course.) But the message was loud and clear and fostered much discussion . . . that building has now adopted a policy for not penalizing student scores for being late. The expected onslaught of late work never happened.

—Marsha Ratzel, secondary teacher

Chapter 11 has more ideas on how to grade late work.

If grades are most useful to students, parents, and future teachers when they are accurate, it makes sense to question any action that distorts their final declarations of mastery. While important to life and learning, teaching techniques, such as class discussions and active participation, as well as student efforts to come to know course content and skills, are not demonstrations of mastery themselves; they are routes to that mastery. Referencing students' skill development with these techniques and experiences makes accurate declarations of mastery difficult to determine.

Chris Toy and others make good points about the value of incorporating participation and other nonacademic skills into an academic grade, but doing so would change the meaning of a grade beyond its tenuous objectivity used to standardize learning and also change it from how we've defined grades here. It would further strain the already thin attempts to objectify the subjective. Those nonacademic factors are inherent in the student's academic

achievement and corresponding marks; they lead to those marks. It seems counterproductive to muddy the waters further by doubling their influence (grading those characteristics while students are learning and also weaving them into the final graded assessments), and overtly entangling a teacher's subjective insertions regarding nonacademic factors into a grade. Specific feedback on these factors should be communicated to students and their parents, but it should remain a separate column on the report card.