

Grading Late Work

If a student turns in work a day late, most teachers grade the assignment, but lower the grade one full letter grade for being late. Two days late equals two letter grades lower. We continue with three and four days and lowering grades until it's a complete failure, and the student wonders, "Why bother?" Surprisingly, many teachers and parents continue to encourage the student to do the missing work even though it's still an F, as if doing the work would teach them the content. I disagree.

Driving an assignment into the ground like this doesn't serve anyone. While there should be consequences for not meeting deadlines, we can still spend time investigating the situation before arbitrarily lowering the grade. In addition, keeping up students' hope that hard work even after the deadline will deliver a positive response in the grade works. Very few students learn from experiences in which there is no hope for positive academic recognition for mastery obtained.

One of the first things to consider is whether the student's late submission of assignments is chronic or occasional. If it's occasional, then it's easy to be merciful: Let the student turn it in late for full credit. Teachers turn things in late all the time, as do workers in every profession. The idea that "You can't get away with turning work in late in the real world, mister" isn't true. Flights are delayed every day, cars are not fixed until the day after they are promised, and dentists often run a bit late as the day progresses. The student has earned our goodwill and flexibility with weeks or months of on-time performance, so we can extend the courtesy.

If it's chronic, however, it's time to teach the student about the power of being on time. There are many already-mentioned ways to do this, but because your colleagues do it and it seems reasonable, you may have to lower the grade for each day late. The problem, of course, is that this new grade is tainted and is no longer useful to the differentiating teacher.

In this situation, record two grades for the student: one that represents his level of mastery or performance regarding the material, and one that reflects the late penalties. For example, a student could earn an A/D. When it comes time to document progress and inform instructional decisions, use the accurate rendering of mastery, not the grade decreased by the tardy response. Your decisions and documentation will be useful.

Reconsider whether it needs to be a whole grade lower for each day late in order to be of consequence to the student. It doesn't. Take a few points off for every day an assignment is late, but not a whole grade. A whole grade lower is punitive, a few points off is instructive. The student will still learn, and you keep the experience from becoming a vicious black hole to both parties. Even more important, the grade stays close to being an accurate rendering of mastery.

No matter what, if a student is chronically late with assignments, we have to investigate. We don't simply admonish the student and record the F. There is something wrong. It could be the level of instruction, the student's home schedule, an emotional issue, lack of resources, cultural insensitivity, miscommunication, auditory processing issues, or something else. We help students advocate for themselves, not just hold them accountable. Student accountability without purpose is one reason why students drop out and schools fail. If students leave—physically or emotionally—there's no one to teach, and if that's the case, why are you wasting time reading this book? We teach and assess in ways that keep students in school.

Let's deal with late work in ways that lead to students' personal investment and to learning the material.

Grading Special Needs Students in Inclusion Classes

Grading in an inclusion class can be awkward if the regular education teacher and the special education teacher do not share the same philosophy regarding each person's role in the inclusion class. To ease grading issues, then, it's wise for inclusion partners to clarify and mutually agree on their roles and grading philosophies and for the school administration to clarify how grading will be done for special education students included in mainstream classes.

The most effective and accurate approach used by most of us who've been teaching inclusion classes over the years is to consider all students in the classroom as the regular education teacher's students, not some of them belonging to one teacher and some belonging to the other teacher. The regular education teacher has his or her eye on the mandated curriculum and each student's progress toward mastering it. The special education teacher may or may not have expertise in the class's curriculum—a definite advantage if she does, but not always realistic in every situation. The special education teacher brings expertise regarding how best to teach students with the identified needs as well as dedicated focus on the student's individualized education plan (IEP) goals. He or she informs the regular education teacher of those goals and works with him or her to make the accommodations necessary for the student to maximize achievement in the class.

When it comes time to complete report cards, philosophical agreement is critical. If it's not there, there's a lot of unproductive friction. For example, if the regular education teacher believes providing accommodations for special needs students dilutes the rigor of learning and accountability for those students, he or she will think any high grades earned do not equal the same high standards of excellence earned by regular education students who've also earned high grades. The regular education teacher will have trouble record-