

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.

One alternative approach is to assign an *I* or “Incomplete” grade with explicit requirements for completing the work, as described in Policy #3. Students who do not complete their work or do not turn it in on time, for example, might be required to attend after-school study sessions and/or special Saturday classes until their work is completed to a satisfactory level. In other words, they are not “let off the hook” with a zero. Instead, students learn that they have certain responsibilities in school and that their actions have specific consequences. Not completing assigned work on time means that you must attend special after-school sessions to complete the work. Implementing such a policy may require additional funding and support. Still, the payoffs can be significant. Not only is it more beneficial to students than simply assigning a zero, it’s also fairer. In addition, it helps make the grade a more accurate reflection of what students have learned.