Do your grading practices undermine equity initiatives?

Discussions about grading, like all conversations about equity, are hard, emotional and confusing. But our grading practices exert enormous influence on how our students learn, especially those who have been historically underserved.

Positive and supportive school cultures are critical to students' academic success. We seek to create learning environments that encourage students to take risks, affirm success is always possible, strengthen relationships between teachers and students, and don't limit students based on their home environment, resources or previous educational struggles.

Yet despite our unwavering commitment to equity and the success of every child, some of our students continue to doubt that we truly care and believe in them, and academic failure continues to be disproportionately distributed along predictable lines of race and income.

Our achievement and opportunity gaps persist because we do what David Tyack and Larry Cuban described two decades ago as "tinkering toward utopia" – we change relatively minor elements of our schools and unrealistically expect to reap major improvements. If, as the quality improvement movement saying goes, "systems are perfectly designed to get the results they get," then we need to address core elements of schools in order to realize a different result.

Few elements of our schools are more entrenched than how we grade students: not simply how teachers evaluate students' work, but the much more complex system of how the grade is calculated and what aspects of a student's performance in a class are and aren't included in the grade.

Grades are the main criteria in nearly every decision we make about students, including promotion or retention, extra-curricular eligibility, course placement and college admission. Perhaps most powerfully, grades significantly influence how a child feels and thinks about a course, a subject, a school and even herself. Many of us can recall how the grades we received affected our self-image and ideas about what we were "good at." Even if we develop a loving, supportive school culture, it won't mean a thing if the way we grade dispirits students or ever tells them that they can't be good at school.

We may not realize that the grading practices most of us use are artifacts of the Industrial Revolution. Despite critical advances in how we think about children and

By Joe Feldman

learning, by continuing to use century-old grading practices that reflect outdated values and debunked assumptions, we contradict and undermine our efforts at creating a positive and academically motivating school culture. Here are some examples:

We grade so that early struggles impede success.

A century ago, we believed that a student's academic capacity was fixed and immutable, and that academic success was reserved for a small percentage of students. Today, we know that all but the most mentally challenged students can meet academic standards.

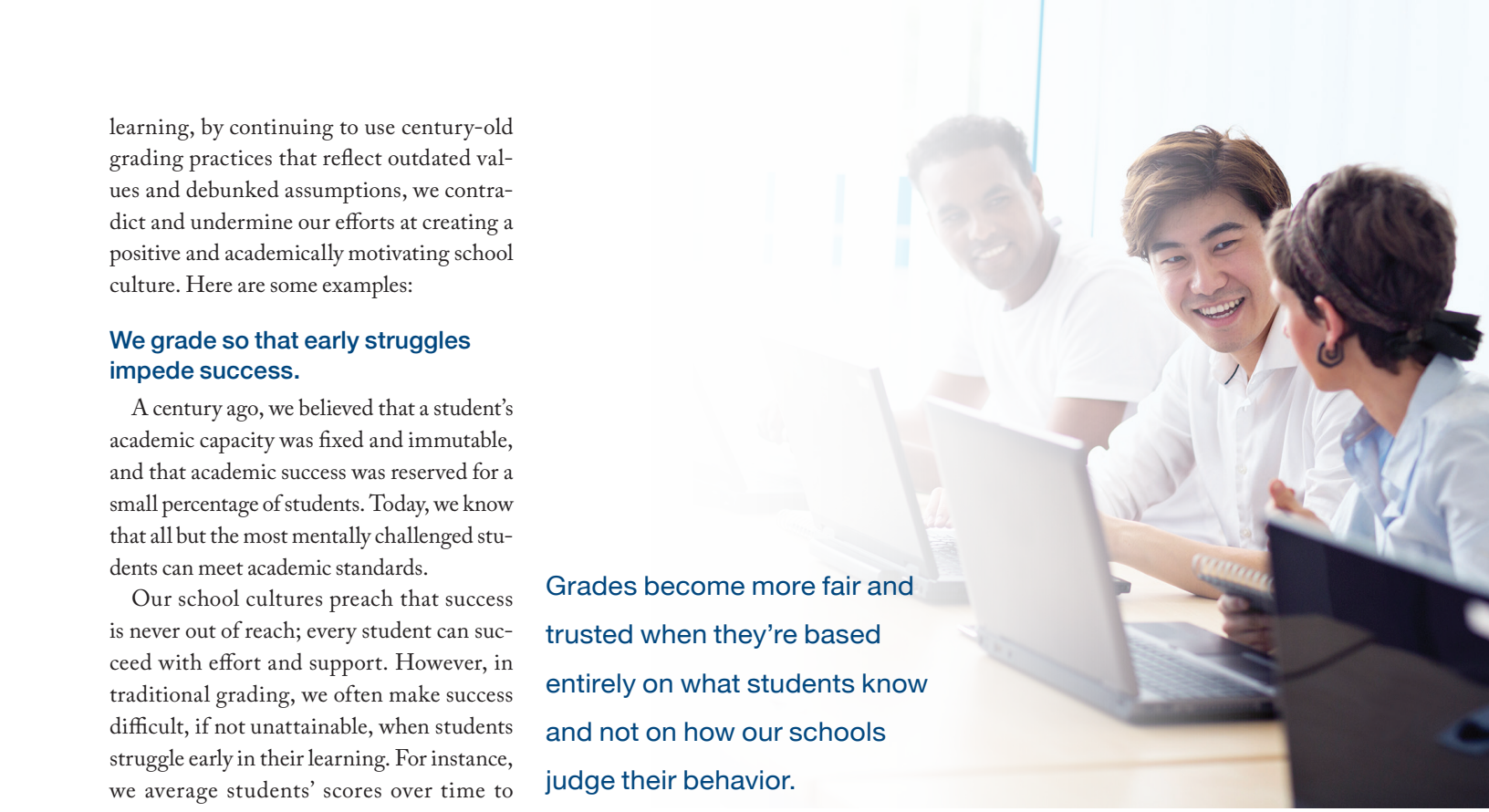
Our school cultures preach that success is never out of reach; every student can succeed with effort and support. However, in traditional grading, we often make success difficult, if not unattainable, when students struggle early in their learning. For instance, we average students' scores over time to generate a final grade. When we do this, a student's early low grades deflate and downgrade any future achievement. Beginning a term with F's and ending with A's means a student will show a C on the report card.

Not only is this grading practice mathematically unsound – no mathematician would endorse averaging as the most accurate way to describe performance over time – but it is demotivating and dispiriting to struggling students. When we average, we inadvertently undermine the message we want to send that success is always possible.

We punish mistakes.

We reject the Industrial Revolution endorsement of a "fixed mindset" because of the overwhelming research on the power of a "growth mindset." We preach the value of risk-taking, that mistakes are important and even necessary for successful learning.

In sports, we say: "You make mistakes in practice so you can do well in the game." In that vein, we assign homework and classwork for students to practice and build their understanding of skills and content, potentially through mistakes, so they can be more successful on summative assessments, when it "counts." Yet many of us score homework and classwork based on the accuracy of students' answers, even though this is precisely when we want students to make their mistakes.



Grades become more fair and trusted when they're based entirely on what students know and not on how our schools judge their behavior.

We're contradicting ourselves: We say that mistakes are valuable and necessary, but we give lower grades because of those mistakes, sending the opposite message that mistakes are unwanted and bad. It's as if we're lowering a student's batting average based on how they hit in batting practice as well as during games.

We grade based on a student's environment and resources.

We used to believe that a student's academic potential was dictated by their environment, race or gender – a concept that we wholeheartedly reject today. However, we often grade in ways that reward students who have privilege and punish those who don't.

Let's return to homework. For those who don't grade homework for accuracy, we often grade for completion. We want students to attempt the homework even if answers aren't correct. The problem is that homework completion is more often a reflection of a student's income, language and family, and this grading approach places underprivileged students at a huge disadvantage.

Which students are more likely to complete homework? The student who has a quiet, uncluttered space at home, or the student who lives in a smaller space they share with their large extended family? The student who has no other responsibilities than to complete homework, or the student who also has to care for younger siblings because of a working or absent parent? The student who has college-educated parents who can help when he gets stuck, or the Spanish-only speaking parent who never completed middle school?

Grading homework for completion rewards students with resources and punishes those without resources. Besides, if we're honest, we have no idea how much help a student receives or if it is entirely copied, so we're rewarding students not for learning from the homework, but simply for completing the assignment by any means available – certainly not a value we want in our school cultures.

We can employ more equitable and positive grading.

If we're serious about improving how historically less privileged communities experience school, how can our grading be better aligned with a supportive and positive school culture? Can our grading reinforce contemporary beliefs about a growth mindset, preserving hope and motivation even if

there are early struggles?

Can we grade in ways that demonstrate our unflagging belief that every student can meet our academic expectations, regardless of their privileges or previous experiences? Fortunately, we can, and many schools do. Here are three ways:

1) In schools that align their grading to their school cultures, grades report where students ended their learning, not where they began or the path they took to get there. In these schools, grades aren't calculated by averaging performance over time, but reflect only a student's final level of standards mastery.

These schools create a culture of retakes, redos and redemption, so that failed exams or other summative assessments can be opportunities for students to correct misconceptions, receive additional support, and try again with no penalty or limit to their score.

Elisa, a middle school teacher, describes how emphasizing final performance by allowing redos on summative assessments not only generated improved learning and higher student grades, but strengthened a positive classroom culture: "One of the children asked, 'You're giving me another chance to redo the test? Really?' Not only did the students increase their overall average, but we built a more positive relationship. Some of them were the 'bad,' 'lazy' type that have been labeled or mislabeled, I should say. They ended up being my best students. I really think it's because of this redo policy. They found me to be a teacher that wanted them to be successful, who didn't want to just put in a grade and be done with it.

"My fear (with a redo policy) was, are they going to try their hardest the first time if they know they are able to redo it for a higher grade? But I didn't run into that problem. The kids did well the first time. You would think it would be the opposite – that they wouldn't try – but the first time around, they tried harder. I think it was because they knew, by me giving them a second chance, that I had faith in them that they knew the material, that in the end they could do it. That was the whole idea."

2) In schools that align their grading to their school cultures, homework scores aren't included in the grade. Students are accountable for doing the homework, but homework is redefined. It is not an end in itself: "Do the homework because the teacher told you to." It's a means to learn: "Do the homework and you'll make mistakes, learn, and ultimately perform well on the assessment." A school culture is built in which students do homework, not for the teacher, but for themselves. Plus, when homework is no longer included in the grade, there is no incentive for students to copy homework, and the school culture becomes more about learning than getting "homework points" or losing points for not completing homework.

Danny, a middle school teacher, made this transition because of his firsthand experience with the inequity of traditional practices: "When I was a kid, I couldn't ask my mom and dad to help me with my homework because they were immigrants, and they knew less English than I did. The last thing that I want my students to experience is to fail a class for not being able to complete homework and classwork. It's not really their fault. I don't want what I went through to happen to my students. I can't penalize a student for not having their own quiet space at home to complete a homework assignment or because of language barriers.

"I explained to my students why I was not including homework or classwork in the grade, and they're totally fine with it. Everything we do in class has a 'practicing purpose' and students understand and respect that. They take homework and classwork seriously, and when the assessment comes, they give it all they've got because they know that that's where their grade is coming from. Students told me, 'I know what you're doing here – you're having us do this work, so we do well on the test.' Yes!"

3) In schools that align their grading to their school cultures, teachers don't evaluate students on criteria such as "effort," "growth" and "participation." We know that teachers interpret student behaviors subjectively based in large part on the student's race, gender or socio-economic status. Including these grading categories may be intended to motivate students or to manage behavior, but they render the grade more reflective of how the teacher interprets a student's actions than what the student knows and can do.

For students and communities that have had negative experiences with schools and other institutions of power, deleting these categories from a student's grade builds trust and goodwill. Grades become more fair and trusted when they're based entirely on what students know and not on how educators judge their behavior.

Sarah, a high school science department head, explained how grading students on their behavior can feel satisfying, but it isn't accurate or fair: "I thought that we needed to include participation and behavior in the grade. And to be honest, it can feel good to take points away from poorly behaved students. But it is not an accurate assessment of what they know.

"For so long in my class it was, 'Did you jump through all the hoops I set up for you?' as opposed to 'What did you learn in the class, regardless of how long it took you?' Now I realize that including a grade in anything other than tests and individual/original work that you can be certain was not copied is a terrible waste of time."

How do we begin?

We must tackle grading as a critical lever of school reform if we have any hope of ever seeing a substantive change in student outcomes. Yet grading is what Jeffrey Erickson calls the "third rail" of schools (2010), an emotionally fraught concept that provides power and legitimacy to teaching and learning, but that no one dares touch despite its negative impact on our teaching, our classrooms and our students.

Our first step should be to forgive ourselves. Our inherited and inequitable grading system isn't the fault of teachers or administrators; we've never had permission or tools to examine our century-old practices with a critical eye. Grading is rarely included in pre-service, induction, or ongoing professional development – an ironic and embarrassing oversight, considering that grades are at the root of school cultures and drive all major decisions about our students.

In my 20 years as a teacher and then as a principal, grading never seemed open for discussion, but now, as a consultant, I partner with schools and districts to have this discussion, to make grading more accurate and fair. Through a series of workshops and

coaching throughout the year, I help teachers critically examine traditional grading without blame or judgment, learn more accurate, equitable and supportive practices, and then prototype them in classrooms. They gather data to learn the effects of the new practices, share results with their colleagues, and repeat the cycle.

In doing this work, teachers are surprised and empowered to find that with more accurate and equitable grading, their students feel a stronger sense of ownership, control and hope – three feelings that traditional grading systems don't promote, but that most school cultures prioritize.

Grading becomes less subjective and inconsistent across teachers, more rigorous and holds students more accountable. More importantly, student failure rates decrease dramatically, particularly for students of color, from low-income families, and those with special needs – our schools' most vulnerable populations, and those who our Industrial Revolution schools weren't designed to even enroll, much less prepare for post-secondary success.

To look at grading with a critical eye, to really confront a grading system that is so deeply woven into what we think schools and teaching are, is hard intellectually, psychologically and emotionally.

Lucy, English chair at her high school and an 18-year teaching veteran, captured how some teachers experience this work: "Examining grading challenges what I've learned to do as a teacher in terms of what I think students need to know, what they need to show back to me, and how to grade them. This feels really important, messy and really uncomfortable. It is, 'Oh my gosh look what I've been doing!' I don't blame myself because I didn't know any better. I did what was done to me. But now I'm in a place that I feel really strongly that I can't do that anymore."

Making our grading practices more accurate and fair is the most important kind of equity work, confronting a deeply ingrained part of our education system and reforming it to transform an entire organization. If we have courage, commitment and love for our students, we can change the very DNA of our schools. Instead of perpetuating disparate outcomes, our schools can be designed to support success for every student.

Resources

• Erickson, J. (March 26, 2010). "Grading Practices: The Third Rail." Principal Leadership, Vol. 10 No. 7 pp. 22-24. National Association of Secondary School Principals.

• Tyack, D. and Cuban, L. (1997). "Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform," Harvard University Press.

Joe Feldman is the CEO of Crescendo Education Group, which partners with schools and districts throughout the country to improve the equity, accuracy, and consistency of grading and assessment practices. He is a former high school teacher, principal and district administrator. In April 2018, his book on grading and equity is scheduled to be published by Corwin.

Expertise. Leadership. Impact.

At Alliant, we foster learning that moves you and your team forward. We'll help you transform your collective experience into expertise, and that expertise into leadership. So that together, you can make a positive impact on schools, the students within them, and the communities beyond.

DOCTORAL, MASTER'S & CREDENTIAL PROGRAMS

Educational Leadership & Management

Educational & School Psychology

Teacher Education & Credentials

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)

Child Development

Business & Organizational Psychology

explore ALLIANT.EDU

Use code ADMINSROCK by Dec 31, 2017 to waive your app fee!

Alliant International University

Not all programs are available online or to residents in all states. Programs vary by location and modality; see the Academic Catalog for detail. Alliant is a private university accredited by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). We are an equal opportunity employer and educator. For more information about our graduation rates, the median debt of students who completed the program, and other important information visit alliant.edu/consumer.