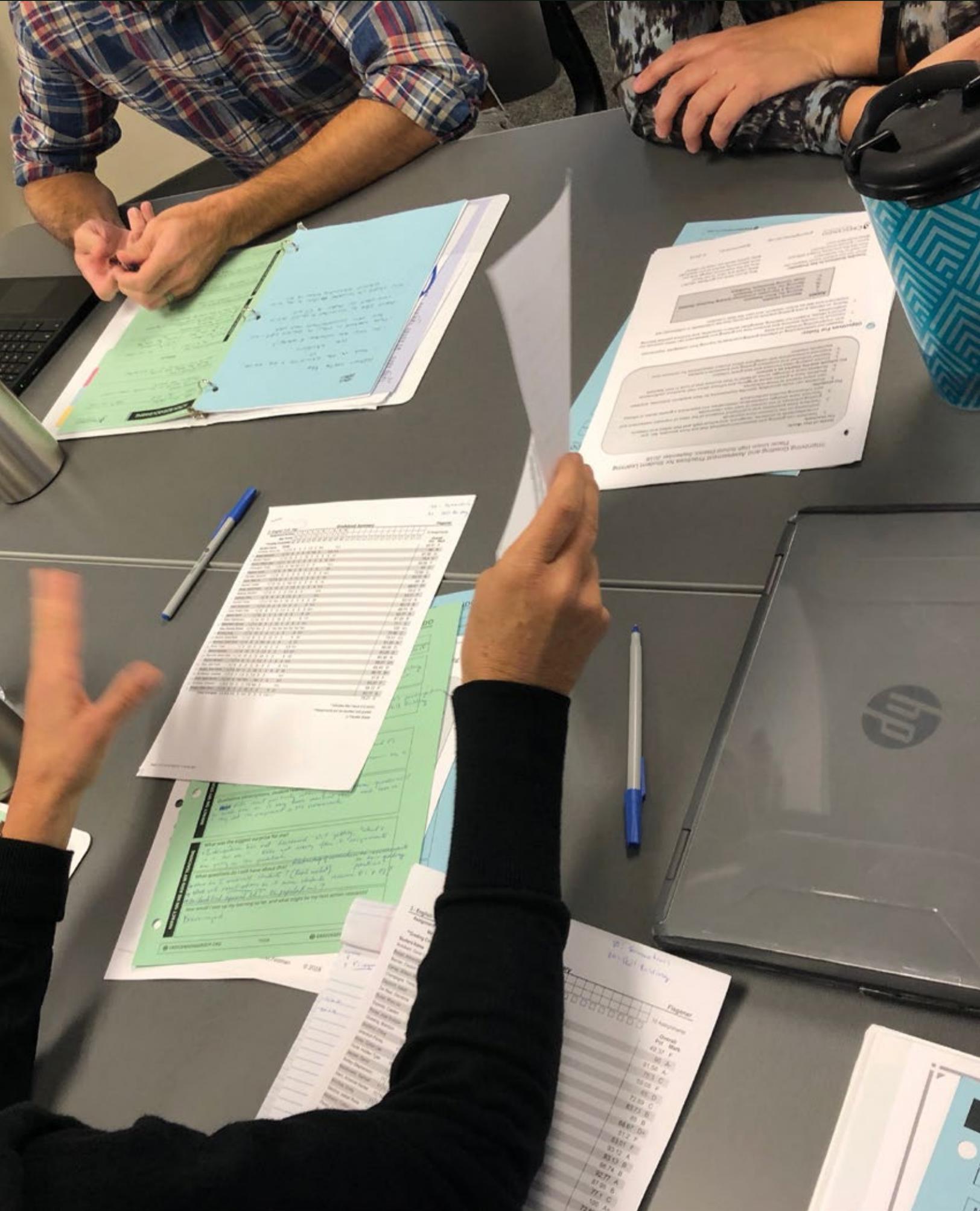


SCHOOL GRADING POLICIES ARE
FAILING CHILDREN
A Call to Action for Equitable Grading



JOE FELDMAN



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OVERVIEW

Since the Industrial Revolution, teachers in the nation's schools have assigned letter grades—the A to F scale—to describe student achievement. Grades are an essential currency of our schools. Schools, colleges, and employers use grades to determine many important, and in some cases, life-altering decisions—college admission, financial aid and scholarships, athletic eligibility, promotion, retention, awards, and supports.

But the grades that teachers assign to students—ostensibly an objective, fair, and accurate reflection of a student's academic performance—are anything but. In the vast majority of schools around the country, educators are using practices that are outdated, inaccurate, and undermine student success. In fact, grading policies actually help fuel achievement gaps, reinforcing the differences in family resources and support based on students' race and income.

Because grading is not addressed either in teacher preparation or within professional development during a teacher's career, teachers choose their own way to grade, guided by their best sense but uninformed by either research or best practices.

The consequences are predictable and disturbing:

- **Grading practices vary from teacher to teacher**, not only from school to school but even from classroom to classroom within a school, so that a grade a student receives can be more reflective of a teacher's unique approach to grading than the student's performance. Even schools with formal grading policies typically focus on surface-level consistencies, such as a grading scale, not a common understanding of what students should know or be able to do—or how to measure and report it consistently across classrooms. In addition, because teachers use uninformed and even contradictory approaches, students within a classroom can receive the same grade even though they have entirely different levels of performance.
- **Grades provide unclear and often misleading information to parents, students, and postsecondary institutions.** A student's grade is often used to capture many diverse aspects of a student's performance—academic proficiency, "soft skills" behaviors, attendance, participation, and effort, to name just a few. Collapsing all of this varied information about a student into a single grade makes it impossible to discern the student's particular strengths and weaknesses across all of these aspects, thereby rendering the grade vague and without meaning.
- **Traditional grading practices are often corrupted by implicit racial, class, and gender biases.** It is well documented that schools' disciplinary actions often disproportionately punish African-American, Latino, low-income, and special education students, and the same biases similarly impact aspects of individual teachers' grading. Even beyond implicit biases, students with greater resources are more likely to complete homework, earn extra credit, and get points for behavior and deportment. Conversely, students who have weaker education backgrounds and fewer supports are likely to be penalized even when they show growth and learning.



- **Most teachers use grading practices that use mathematically unsound calculations that depress student achievement and progress.** Current systems of grading conflict with contemporary beliefs about growth mindset and encouraging students to get better through practice and experimentation. An F and an A average as a C, for example, regardless of the progress and final achievement—a mathematically unsound way of measuring progress over time and one that punishes students for early struggles.

The result is that the grades students get are often inaccurately calculated, inflated or deflated by longstanding biases, and idiosyncratic from teacher to teacher, thereby rendering grades unreliable and even invalid descriptions

of student academic performance. What's more, because schools, colleges, and many other institutions make decisions about students based on grades—class assignments, eligibility for extracurricular activities and sports, and college admissions and scholarships, to name a few—the consequences of using this data for making decisions about students can be monumental, keeping some students from achieving success or from even getting into the pathways that lead to success, such as challenging academic course tracks. Because it is based on and continues to support flawed and inequitable approaches, the entire enterprise of grading undermines the trust many people have in schools and in the decisions these institutions make about students that can affect them throughout their lives.

However, there is a better way to grade—one based on contemporary research that more accurately and fairly describes student academic performance.

Developed by former teacher, principal, and district administrator Joe Feldman of the Crescendo Education Group, this approach uses simplified grading scales, emphasizes what students learn rather than how they behave, reflects where students end their learning instead of where they began or the path they took, is transparent to students, and builds soft skills while not including them in grades. It has been tested in high-needs public and charter schools and in elite private academies like Phillips Andover Academy and Georgetown Day, and has been validated by independent evaluators. Based on data collected from over 350 teachers and tens of thousands of students at more than 15 schools in California, the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Massachusetts, when teachers use a specific set of more equitable, research-based grading practices—practices that are more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational—this approach results in critically important outcomes that reveal how traditional grading practices have had a hand in perpetuating the achievement gap:

- **There is a statistically significant increase in the correlation between students' teacher-assigned grades and their standardized assessment scores,** suggesting that teachers' grades more accurately describe their students' academic performance. This correlation is particularly strengthened for students from lower income families, suggesting that poor students were more likely to have their performance misrepresented by traditional grading practices.
- **The rate of students receiving Ds and Fs often decreases, and decreases more dramatically for vulnerable and historically underserved student populations** (African-Americans, Latinos, students from low-income families, and students receiving special education services).
- **The rate of students receiving As decreases, and decreases more dramatically for historically privileged populations** (whites and students from higher-income families).
- **Though it may seem paradoxical to simultaneously reduce inflation and deflation, these shifts ultimately represent a decrease in grade achievement gaps** (rate of As and Fs across different student groups), reflecting a correction of the embedded inequities and inaccuracies in traditional grading. For example, in a cohort of teachers across four high schools and two middle schools in California, there was a statistically significant decrease in grade inflation overall and particularly for white, non-free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL), and general education students—students with more privileges.
- **Students and teachers report less stressful classrooms** and stronger student-teacher relationships.
- **Teachers find that learning and implementing these practices improves their work as professional educators.** Nearly two-thirds of teachers report that their changes to grading have significantly improved student learning, and 97 percent of teachers would recommend this approach to other teachers.

This report is a call to action to address a century-old pillar of our American schooling that for too long has been thought of as a necessary evil—when it has been examined at all. The critical examination of how teachers grade students might seem incidental to equity work, but without examining one of the fundamental elements of the achievement and opportunity gaps—grades—we ignore one of the structural inequities of our schools. By not correcting grading practices, schools risk undermining other initiatives aimed at improving equity. If educators, policymakers, parents, and the public are truly committed to equitable educational opportunities and equitable teaching, and deeply respect the professionalism and dedication of our teachers, they must support efforts to address the weaknesses in grading. The integrity of our schools and the future of our children are at stake.



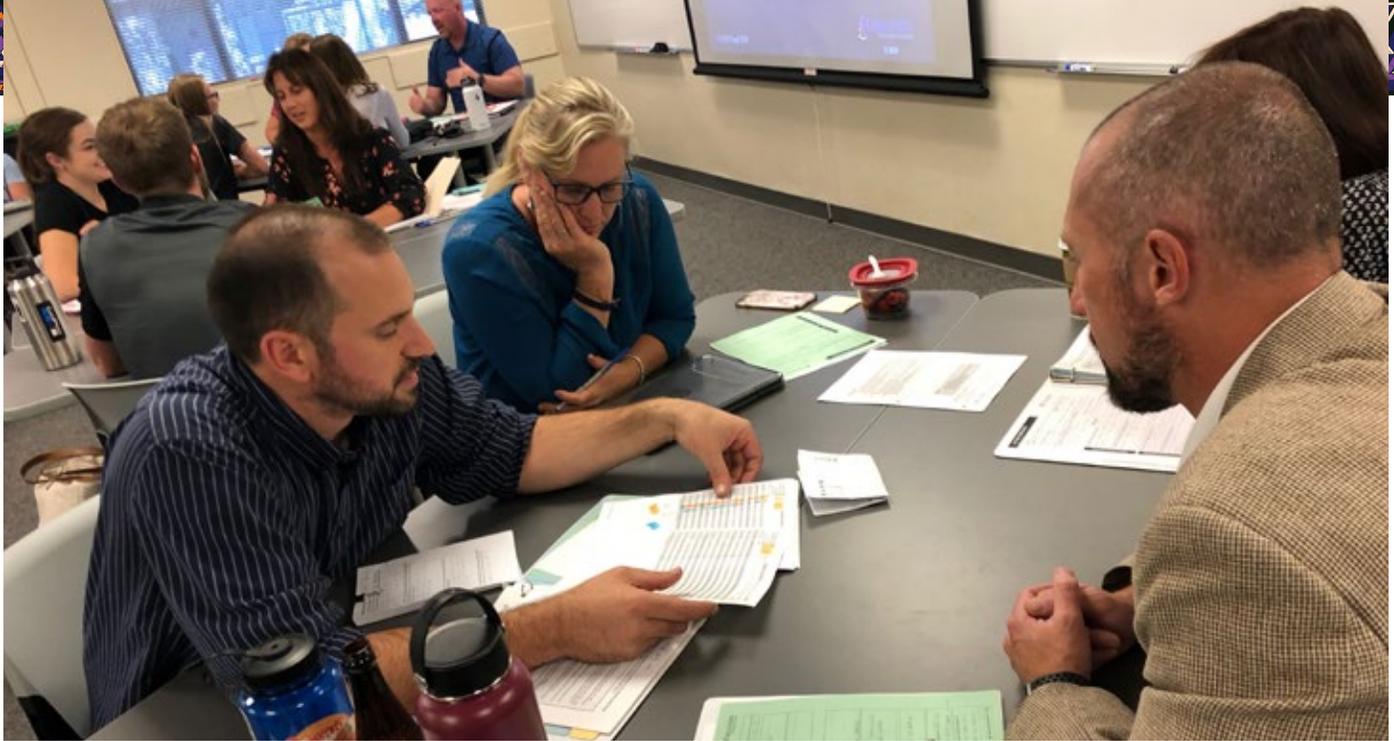
VARIABLE GRADING: A Universal Challenge

While rarely the subject of inquiry among educators, the phenomenon of variable grading is familiar to every parent. Stories abound of the teacher who refused to accept a student's essay because it had an improper heading, or subtracted points from a test because the student wrote in pen instead of pencil, or lowered a grade because the shy student seldom raised her hand to contribute to a discussion. Some teachers may allow students to retake a test on which they received a poor grade, while others teaching the same class in the same school may not. Every school principal, district administrator, teacher, and student is aware of the variability of grading, but all parties generally accept it as a necessary evil or an unavoidable cost of teacher professionalism and autonomy.

Along with variability across different teachers and classrooms, traditional grading often combines academic information—test and quiz scores, for example—with non-academic information, such as behavior and attendance. Students are awarded points not only for exam questions they correctly answer, but also for handing in homework on time, having properly organized notebooks, speaking only after raising their hands, working cooperatively, returning parent-signed permission slips, and the list goes on and on. Because a grade is a composite of so many disparate elements, it becomes impossible to understand what the grade represents. What does a “B” describe? That a student mastered the academic content but came late every day? That the student understood only some of the standards but completed all assignments on time and was kind to classmates? That the student aced major assessments and had deep understanding of the material but was disrespectful? That the student was an active and helpful participant in the daily classroom activities but had weak understanding of the content? Not only can students who demonstrate identical academic performance receive a different grade depending on their teacher's grading practices, two students with the same teacher can have identical grades but have entirely different academic profiles. Our traditional grading is not only variable, but when a grade is expected to include so many different

aspects of a student, it provides little guidance to students or caregivers about how a student performed and what each student needs to do to improve.

This confluence of academic and nonacademic information also exacerbates equity gaps. Educators and society at large used to believe that a student's academic potential was dictated by an outmoded and discredited theory of child development—the “fixed mindset” belief that academic success is simply impossible for some students because of their environment, race, or gender. While educators wholeheartedly reject that notion today, they still often grade in ways that reward students who have privilege and punish those who don't. For example, despite the current emphasis on growth and improvement, current grading policies often make success difficult, if not unattainable, when students begin the year behind their peers or struggle early in their learning. When teachers average students' scores over time to generate a final grade, a student's early low grades deflate and downgrade any future achievement, and the student's true growth is concealed and unrecognized. Beginning a term with Fs and ending with As means 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 learning over time—it is also



demotivating and dispiriting to struggling students. When teachers use averages to determine grades, they inadvertently undermine the message educators want to send to students that their success is always possible.

Teachers also assign homework and classwork for students to practice and build knowledge and skills. But unbeknownst to most teachers, to include a student's performance on homework and classwork perpetuates inequities. When teachers grade those types of learning tasks for accuracy and completion, they are actually measuring a student's family background, placing 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 the student gets stuck, or the Spanish-only speaking parent who never completed middle school? Simply put, grading homework for completion rewards students with resources and punishes those without them.

Teachers also commonly incorporate criteria in grades that are susceptible to their implicit and inadvertent biases.

it is well documented that schools' disciplinary actions often disproportionately punish African-American, Latino, low-income, and special education students because of these biases, and the same biases similarly infect aspects of teachers' grading. For example, when teachers grade students on "effort" or any interpreted behaviors, those judgments are often clouded by teachers' backgrounds and biases toward a student's race, class, or gender.

Through this lens, the equity issue is glaring, but perhaps Americans accept these profound weaknesses in schools because flawed grading is ubiquitous: regardless of the type of school—traditional public, charter, or private; rural, suburban, or urban; single-race or multi-ethnic; and large or small—teachers are using variable and, in most cases, inaccurate and inequitable grading practices. Perhaps educators, policymakers, parents, and the public allow unreliable grading because they see it as an inevitable side effect of teacher creativity, ownership, and initiative. Perhaps too many people believe that grading is impossible to change, remaining skeptical that grading practices could be more accurate or equitable, or that even if better practices existed, that changes to grading wouldn't make any difference in students' learning. Or perhaps, as the next section argues, to critically examine grading is too threatening to those whose professions depend on the integrity of grades: teachers.

TEACHING AND GRADING: An 'Island of Autonomy'

Teaching has never been so challenging and so embattled. Teachers are asked to fulfill more and more diverse responsibilities for an increasingly diverse student population with greater percentages of students of color, those whose first language is not English, and those whose families live below the federal poverty line. It is no surprise that as many as one out of three teachers report experiencing high levels of occupational stress (Borg, 1990; Johnson et al., 2005). Curricula, pacing, and other essential elements of teaching and learning are increasingly standardized at the department, school, and district levels, limiting teacher autonomy in many areas.

Amidst all of these pressures and expectations, teachers have one remaining "island of autonomy"—their grades. Teachers are the unambiguous authors of grades, the declaration of their professional judgment of student performance, and a symbol of authority and expertise. The teacher's authorship over the grade has even been enshrined into a number of states' education codes and regulations, ensuring that the grade a teacher assigns is final and may not be overwritten by an administrator (e.g., Maine §4708, Texas §28.-214), even protecting the teacher from external pressures to change the grade herself. Take, for example, Georgia's "Grade Integrity Act" (§ 20-2-989.20), which states:

No classroom teacher shall be required, coerced, intimidated, or disciplined in any manner by the local board of education, superintendent, or any local school administrator to change the grade of a student.

And even when the sanctity of a teacher's grade is not so formally enshrined, administrators know that they tread on thin ice when they talk to teachers about their grading, potentially inviting formal complaints, union grievances, and even lawsuits. It is arguably the only situation in which the power dynamic between the teacher and supervisor is inverted.

The topic of grading is so hallowed that it inhibits conversations even among colleagues. Rarely are teachers able to navigate honest and challenging conversations in which grading is examined, researched, and debated. As a result of having virtually no safe forum to discuss grading practices, teachers remain in their own echo chamber, validated by little except inertia and the vague sense that students seem to be getting the grade they deserve.

The irony in teachers' defense of grading is that most teachers dislike the act of grading. It's unpleasant, time consuming, and anxiety-provoking (Thorndike, 2005, as cited by Randall & Engelhard, 2010, p. 1376). Teachers often agonize over what grade to assign, are uncomfortable with how much grades matter, and face constant arguments, bargaining, and pleading by students and caregivers over grades. The grading and reporting of student progress, according to Linn and Miller (2005) is "one of the more frustrating aspects of teaching." Temy, a high school science teacher, shares her feeling about grading:

I felt like all of the grading was wasting my time. Yeah, students filled out a bunch of stuff, but I was very frustrated that they only cared about 'Oh, am I going to get a grade for this?' I'd say, 'Okay, fine. You're getting a grade,' but it wasn't really telling me if they'd learned something or not. It wasn't a measure of their knowledge of the content.



Perhaps teachers struggle with discussing grading because they have very little experience doing so. Grading and measurement is rarely if ever included in teacher preparation programs or inservice professional development. As a result, the majority of teachers are left on their own to decide how to grade and why, and are kept in the dark about the research on effective grading practices. Danielle, a middle school education specialist, confessed, “I couldn’t even tell you exactly what I thought about grading. I just had undefined notions of what grading is and what it should be like, and held onto that.” It’s completely understandable that most educators end up replicating what they experienced as students or following the habits of their teacher peers (Frary, Cross, & Weber, 1993; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Truog & Friedman, 1996, cited in Guskey 2009).

Despite this lack of training and support, teachers’ grading policies and practices aren’t arbitrary. Each teacher applies professional expertise and experience, and carefully deliberates over what assignments and behaviors to include in the grade and what to exclude, the relative weight of those assignments and behaviors, and the magnitude of consequences, rewards, incentives, and disincentives. Because each teacher’s grading system is virtually unregulated and unconstrained, grading policies and practices reveal how teachers define and envision their relationship to students. They show what individual teachers think best

prepares students for success, their beliefs about students, and their own self-concept as teachers. Therefore, challenges to grading practices don’t just offend teachers’ professional judgment; they can invoke an emotional and psychological threat. At the same time, however, the opportunity to think through grading practices also can represent an opportunity for teachers to become reenergized about their work by giving them the time and space to reflect on a crucial, often unexamined part of their work. Suzanne, a high school chemistry teacher, shares that the experience of learning more equitable grading practices “has been fantastic for me personally; I am enjoying teaching more than ever before.”

In the words of Lucy, a high school English teacher for 18 years:

“[Examining my own grading practice] 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. I can’t use grading as a way to discipline kids anymore. I look at what I have been doing, and I have to do things differently.”



PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE EQUITY

Fortunately, significant evidence—both from educational research and from testing more equitable practices in schools—suggests that improved grading practices can increase the accuracy and consistency of teachers’ grades. These five categories of research-based grading practices have been used by hundreds of teachers across the country to improve student learning and teacher effectiveness:

- **Practices that are mathematically sound:** Using algorithms that conform to sound mathematical principles and reflect growth and learning as well as truly describe a student’s level of mastery. Examples: Using a 0-4 instead of a 0-100 point scale; avoiding giving students scores of zero; and weighing more recent performance and growth instead of averaging performance over time.
- **Practices that value knowledge, not environment or behavior.** Evaluating students only on their level of content mastery, not how they act (or how teachers perceive or interpret their behavior). Examples: Not grading subjectively interpreted behaviors such as a student’s “effort” or “participation”, or on completion of homework; focusing grades on required content or standards, not extra credit or when work is turned in; not using grades to control students or reward compliance; and providing alternative consequences for cheating or missed assignments.
- **Practices that support hope and a growth mindset:** Encouraging mistakes as part of the learning process and building students’ persistence and resilience. Examples: Allowing test/project retakes to emphasize and reward learning rather than penalize it; and replacing previous scores with current scores.
- **Practices that “lift the veil” on how to succeed:** Making grades simpler to understand and more transparent. Examples: Creating effective, standards-aligned rubrics; using simplified grade calculations and standards-based scales and gradebooks.
- **Practices that build soft skills without including them in the grade:** Supporting students’ intrinsic motivation

and confidence rather than relying on an extrinsic point system. Examples: Using peer/self-evaluation and reflection; using a more expansive range of feedback strategies; building self-regulation.

Improved grading practices are accurate, bias-resistant, and motivate students in ways traditional grading does not, as borne out by research in multiple schools and grade levels conducted by Crescendo Education Group with two independent research groups—Elite Research, LLC and Leading Edge Advisors. Among the findings:

More equitable grading practices prevent students from having grades that are inflated or deflated.

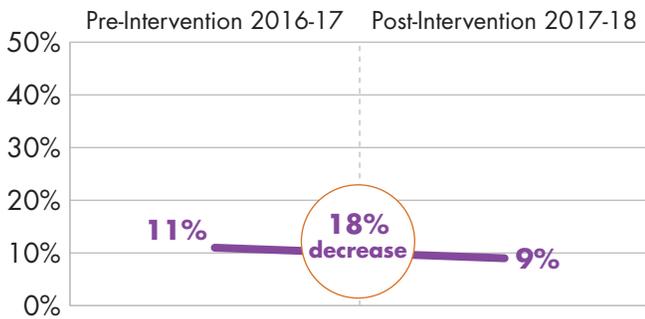
Equitable grading practices yield lower failure rates because the practices reduce the biases embedded in traditional grading, more accurately reflect academic achievement of historically underserved students, and create more motivation and opportunities for success. Similarly, because equitable grading no longer includes non-academic, compliance-related and subjectively interpreted behaviors, grade inflation is also reduced, particularly for more privileged students. Equitable grading practices have been found to level the grading “playing field” and reduce the achievement gap.

The following graphics illustrate the changes in teachers’ assignment of grades across four high schools in one rural/suburban school district. The charts show changes in the percentage of D/F and A grades assigned to different student populations by teachers at the end of a pre-intervention year and the post-intervention year.

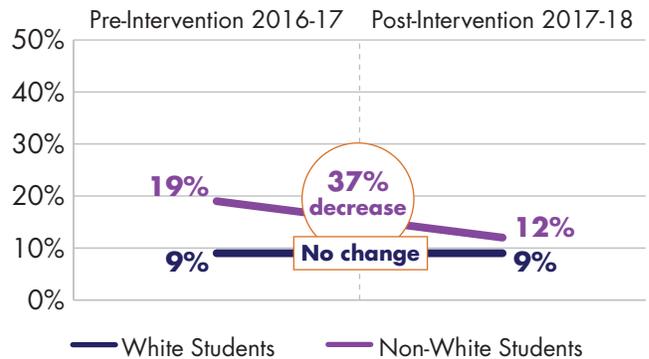


District #1: Cohort of 24 teachers across a rural/suburban district’s four high schools—over 3,700 grades assigned

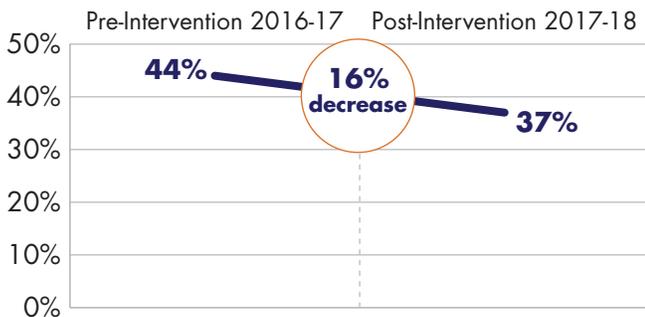
Percent of End-of-Year D/F Grades Assigned (All Students)



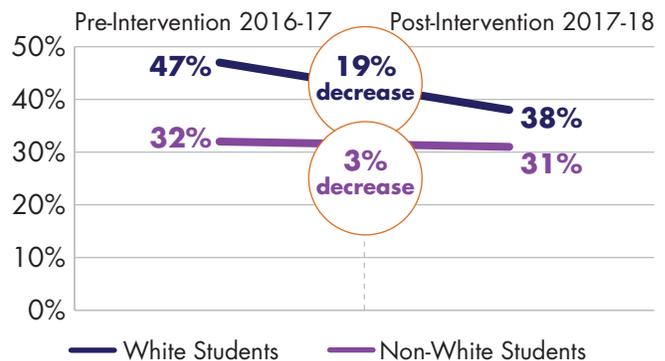
Percent of End-of-Year D/F Grades Assigned for White and Non-White Students



Percent of End-of-Year A Grades Assigned (All Students)



Percent of End-of-Year A Grades Assigned for White and Non-White Students



In the charts above, equitable grading resulted in a reduction in the rate of Ds and Fs teachers assigned, as well as a reduction in the rate of As teachers assigned.

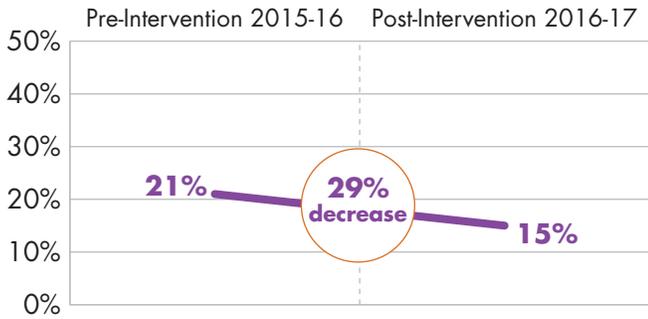
The charts above indicate that for both the percentage of students earning D/F and earning A grades, equitable grading practices significantly reduced the disparity between white and non-white students. For example, for non-white students, the percentage of D and F grades assigned dropped by more than one-third, from 19 to 12 percent, while there was no change for White students.

Similarly, the following charts reveal the same type of improvement in closing achievement gaps in an urban district’s high school and middle schools.

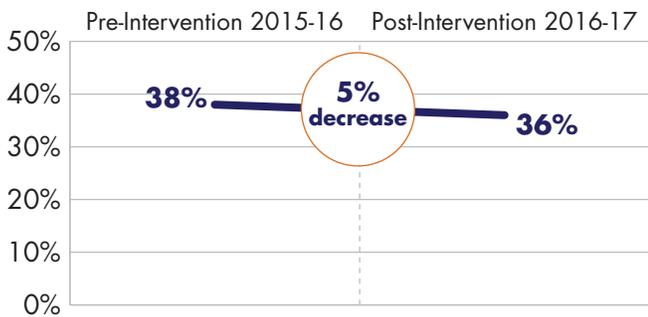


District #2: Cohort of 37 teachers across an urban district’s high school and two middle schools—over 10,000 grades assigned

Percent of End-of-Year D/F Grades Assigned (All Students)

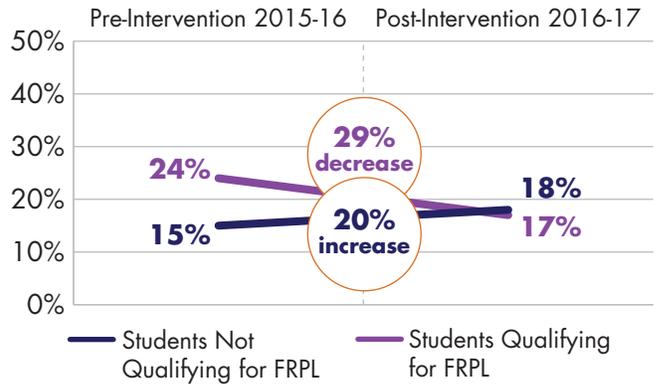


Percent of End-of-Year A Grades Assigned (All Students)

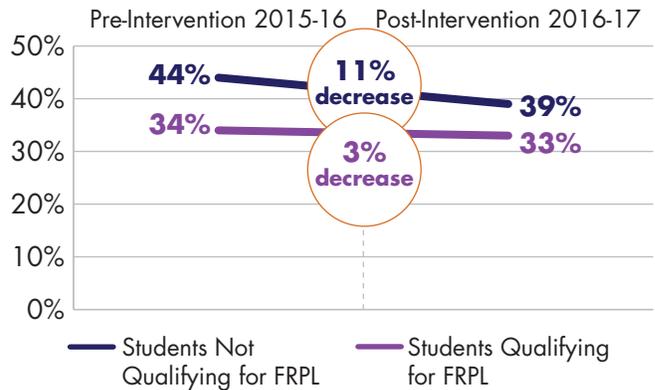


Across all middle- and high-school students in this district, the percentage of D and F grades assigned dropped by almost a third, from 21 percent prior to implementing more equitable grading to 15 percent after one year. The reduction in D/F rates equated into approximately 250 fewer failing grades, which allowed the district to reallocate what would otherwise have been 250 remedial “seat” costs.

Percent of End-of-Year Grades Assigned D/F for FRPL and Non-FRPL Students



Percent of End-of-Year Grades Assigned A for FRPL and Non-FRPL Students



For this district, the changes in both the D/F rate and A rate demonstrate how equitable grading significantly reduced the disparity between students from different income groups, comparing results from students who qualified and did not qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

For example, the district closed the gap between students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches and their more affluent peers by decreasing the D/F rate of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunch nearly 30 percent, from 24 percentage points to 17 percentage points after the first year of implementing the new approach.



What is perhaps most impressive is that **teachers using more equitable grading practices were shown to assign grades that more closely correlate with their students' scores on external, standardized exams.**

Elite Research, LLC conducted several statistical modeling analyses from 12 secondary schools in which over 60 teachers serving thousands of students participated in professional development to implement more equitable grading practices. Comparing the teacher assigned grades with the students' standardized assessments of that course content, Elite Research found that these teachers improved the accuracy of grades they assigned:

“The results indicate that the program was a statistically significant predictor of assessment consistency [between the teacher-assigned grades and the standardized test score], with post-program students having a significantly higher probability of having assessment consistency than pre-program students.”

Similarly reflecting the outsized benefit of equitable grading for historically underserved student populations, Elite Research found that students qualifying for the federal free- and reduced-price lunch program experienced a unique, statistically significant improved correlation between teacher-assigned grades and standardized test scores relative to students not qualifying for free- and reduced-price lunch.

Unsurprisingly, teachers who learn and implement these practices report more confidence in their grades. As Nick, a high school physics teacher, shared,

“I told my students that they deserve better from their education than making learning just a game of getting points. They deserve to get accurate reflections of where their understanding is so that they can see where they need to improve and be able to focus on that to improve their understanding of the content. We place more focus on actually learning, and students are more confident that their work will pay off. Students appreciate it, and I feel a lot more confident that my grades are meaningful and accurate.”

Perhaps most importantly, students recognize how the more equitable grading practices improve their learning, and even their feelings about school and their own achievement. As a high school senior from a comprehensive urban high school in Northern California explains:

“My teacher told me, ‘You know, I’m not going to be the teacher that grades you based on the little things that you do, like having a nice looking notebook or answering questions in class that you probably did the morning of. I’m going to grade you on whether or not you know the material because I want to grade you on you actually learning.’ That was a really powerful experience for me; I stopped caring so much about how high my grade was and more in terms of actually learning the information. I guess I had a new perspective on what education was meant to be as opposed to what the grades are supposed to be. I feel like high school puts a really high emphasis on grades but if I had heard what he told me years before, I feel like my outlook on school would have been so different than what it was.”

When students feel like they can grow and achieve through practice that is rewarded rather than punished, they become more engaged in learning. As Cathy, a middle school humanities teacher puts it,

“Before we started using the 0-4 scale, I feel like a lot of students would give up if they had a low grade because it was just point-based: the deficit would be so big. Now in my class there’s always an opportunity to do well. It has really helped to motivate students and has definitely changed the culture of the whole school.”



PUTTING EQUITABLE GRADING INTO PRACTICE

Educators must tackle grading as a critical lever of school reform if they want their work to make a substantive change in student outcomes. Doing so requires launching an inquiry-based approach to grading practices at the school—and classroom—level, giving teachers the time to work together to reflect upon and explore different approaches. One possible starting point for self-reflection is the online quiz—*How Equitable Is Your Grading?* available at <http://gradingforequity.org/resources/take-the-quiz>

The same kinds of action research cycles that have proven to be effective professional development tools in other areas of teaching practice (e.g., Elmore) have been used to introduce equitable grading practices in the schools reflected in these findings. Embedded in these cycles are opportunities for teachers to share and test new practices, solicit and reflect upon feedback from students, and, when needed, receive group and individual coaching sessions.

Because grading is so interwoven into how teachers develop lessons, implement curriculum, and assess student learning, the improvement of grading leverages changes in other aspects of teachers' work. Schools have found that improving grading is a catalyst for schoolwide improvement in nearly every aspect of teaching and learning.

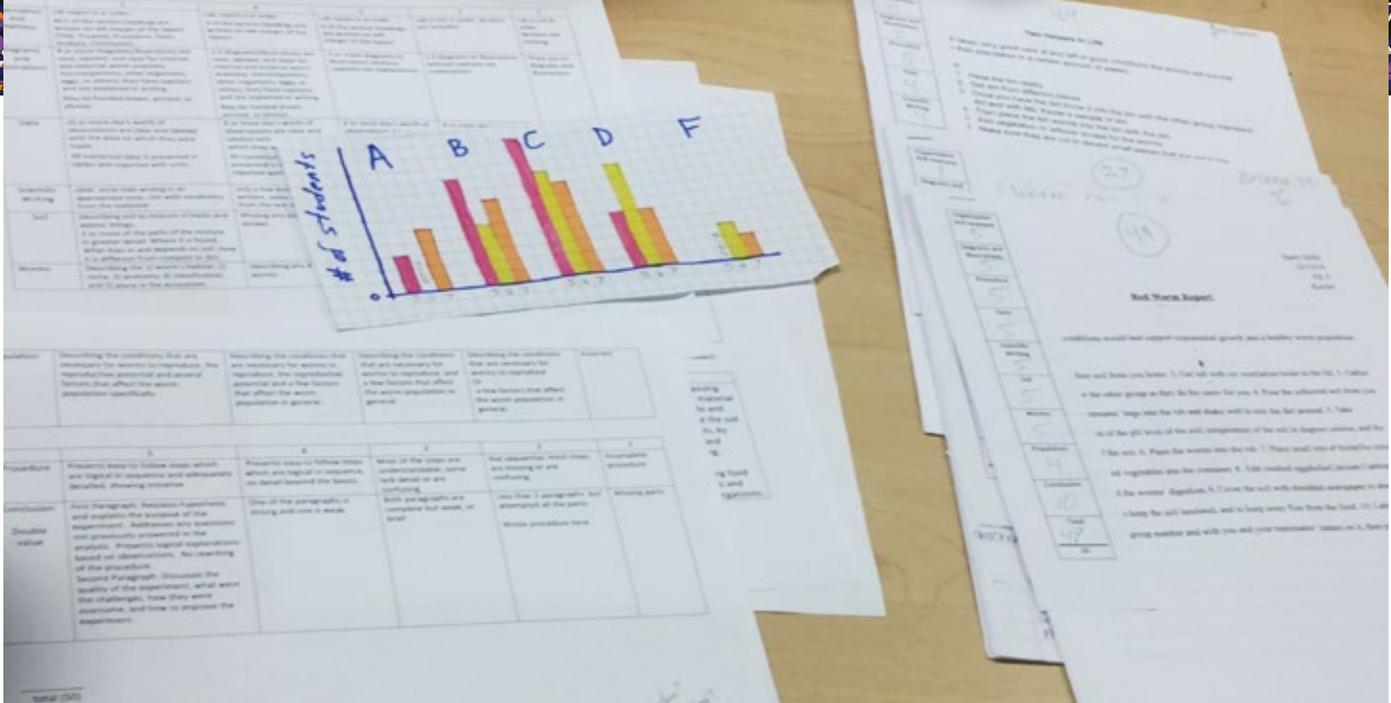
At a public charter middle school in East Los Angeles, for example, the changes in grading have led to the reevaluation of everything from curriculum development and assessment design to parent-teacher grade conferences and gradebook configurations. More accurate and equitable grading practices have made teachers more effective in introducing differentiated instruction in their classrooms. According to Jesicah, the school's principal:

“Teachers can actually use students' grades to make informed decisions about instruction. You can't differentiate when you have a lot of behavior points, extra credit, and other 'fluff' in the gradebooks, and all you're really doing is differentiating for the compliant and the non-compliant child instead of seeing which child has mastered the standard and which one hasn't.”

Not only have the school's failure rates decreased, but there is less grade inflation because of less “fluff” in the grade. California's standardized tests have validated their work; scores have increased at higher rates than the state average. As Jesicah explains, “There are a lot of pieces behind test scores going up, but a huge chunk of it is the changes to our grading.”

The implications of learning about improved grading practices also can be uncomfortable for teachers: they may have perpetuated inequities in classrooms and schools without realizing it. As Sarah put it, “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?’” Some teachers may realize that our collective use of inaccurate and inequitable grading may have barred students from getting into the college they wanted, kept them out of honors classes—or even prevented them from graduating. As Jillian, a 12-year veteran courageously shared: “As I'm learning these improved grading practices, I'm thinking about how many students I may have hurt in the past, and I don't want to go there.”

As a first step, educators need to forgive themselves. The inherited and inequitable grading system isn't the fault of teachers or administrators; they never had permission or tools to examine our century-old practices with a critical eye. Though grades are so much a part of schools, they are never included in analyses of inequity, much less included in strategies to address the inequities. The hard work of putting new grading systems into practice will require teacher inquiry and ongoing improvement cycles,



but it also will require leaders at every level—principals, district administrators, and state policymakers—to make changes in policy and practice that reinforce practices that emphasize growth and challenge implicit bias. That’s not what’s commonly emphasized in either policy deliberation or day-to-day practice and professional growth, so perhaps this work should begin by collectively asking important questions: Can something so prominent in our schools be so innocent in the promulgation of disparate achievement? Are schools, by using, supporting, and not interrogating traditional grading practices, accessories to

the inequities in our schools? Does anyone really believe that, despite initiative after initiative to improve the disparity in student achievement, our grading system isn’t somehow contributing to the intractability of the achievement and opportunity gaps over multiple generations? How can educators, as professionals, caregivers, and moral citizens, continue to avoid a critical examination of grading?

These practices are described in greater detail in the book *Grading for Equity*, written by Joe Feldman and published September 2018 by Corwin Press.

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