



15

What Is the Purpose of Grading?

The first and most important decision that educators must make in their efforts to improve grading is to define its purpose. All other decisions with regard to grading policies and practices, as well as the structure of report cards, transcripts, and other student records, will be based on this basic definition of purpose. Educators who charge ahead changing policies and practices without carefully articulating the purpose of grading inevitably encounter difficulties. No other decision is more vital or more fundamental to success in grading (Brookhart, 2011).

Deciding the purpose of grading may appear to be a relatively easy task. After all, nearly every teacher has been evaluating students' work and assigning grades since the first day they walked into the classroom. But most educators find the process far more difficult than they ever imagined. Administrators, teachers, parents, others (e.g., colleges and universities, employers, etc.), and even students often want different things, and developing consensus can be difficult. For grades to have meaning, however, all groups must be able to interpret grades in the same way (Seeley, 1994). This can happen only when everyone involved is clear about the purpose of grading and what grades represent.

When researchers ask educators about the purpose of grading, they find that responses generally fall into six broad categories (see Airasian, 2001; Frisbie & Waltman, 1992; Guskey & Bailey, 2001). These categories include:

1. *To communicate information about students' achievement to parents and others.* Grades provide parents and other interested persons (e.g., guardians, families, etc.) with information about their child's achievement and learning progress in school. To some extent, grades also serve to involve parents in the educational process.
2. *To provide information to students for self-evaluation.* Grades offer students information about the level and adequacy of their academic achievement and performance in school. As a feedback device, grades can also redirect students' efforts and ideally lead to improvements in academic performance.
3. *To select, identify, or group students for certain educational paths or programs.* Grades are a primary source of evidence used to select students for special programs. Passing grades are needed to gain credit for courses and to move on to the next school level. High grades typically are required for entry into gifted education programs and honors or advanced classes, while low grades are often the first indicator of learning problems that result in students' placement in special needs programs. Grades recorded on transcripts are also used as a criterion for admission to selective colleges and universities.
4. *To provide incentives for students to learn.* Although many educators debate the idea, extensive evidence shows that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining the amount of effort students put forth and how seriously they regard any learning or assessment task (Brookhart, 1993; Cameron & Pierce, 1994, 1996; Chastain, 1990; Guskey & Anderman, 2008; Natriello & Dornbusch, 1984).

5. *To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs.* Comparisons of grades and other reporting evidence frequently are used to judge the value and effectiveness of new programs, curricula, and instructional techniques.
6. *To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility.* Grades and other reporting devices are also used to document unsuitable behaviors on the part of certain students. Some teachers use grades to encourage compliance with established classroom policies while others threaten students with poor grades in order to ensure more acceptable and appropriate behavior.

While all of these purposes may be considered legitimate, educators seldom agree on which purpose is *most* important. When asked to rank order these six purposes in terms of their importance, some portion of educators typically ranks each one of the six purposes as first—even when the group consists of teachers and school leaders from a single school (Guskey, in press).

When educators do not agree on the purpose, they often attempt to create policies for grading that address *all* of these purposes—and usually end up achieving none very well (Austin & McCann, 1992; Brookhart, 1991; Cross & Frary, 1999). The simple truth is that no approach to grading can serve *all* of these purposes well. In fact, some of these purposes are actually counter to others.

Suppose, for example, that the educators in a particular school or school district strive to have all students learn well. Suppose, too, that these educators are highly successful in their efforts and, as a result, nearly all of their students attain high levels of achievement and earn high grades. These very positive results pose no problem if the purpose of grading is to communicate information about students' achievement to parents and others or to provide information to students for the purpose of self-evaluation. The educators from this school or school district can be proud of what they have accomplished and can look forward to sharing those results with parents and students.

This same outcome poses major problems, however, if the purpose of grading is to select students for special educational paths or to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs. To use grades for selection or evaluation purposes requires variation in the grades—and the more variation the better! For this purpose it is best to have the grades dispersed across all possible categories in order to maximize the differences among students and programs. How else can appropriate selection take place or one program be judged better than another? But if all students learn well and earn the same high grades or marks, there is no variation. Determining differences under such conditions is impossible. Thus while one purpose is served well, another purpose is clearly not.

Defining the purpose of grading involves deciding: (1) What do grades mean?, (2) What evidence should be considered in determining grades?, (3) Who is the primary audience for the information?, (4) What is the intended goal of that communication?, and (5) How should that information be used? A sample purpose statement might be

PURPOSE OF GRADING

The purpose of grading is to describe how well students have achieved specific learning expectations based on evidence gathered from an assignment, assessment, or other demonstration of learning. Grades are intended to inform parents, students, and others about learning successes and to guide improvements when needed.

Defining the purpose of grading by addressing these five key questions is a vital first step in improvement efforts. After these key questions about the purpose are answered, other critical issues related to grading policies and practices become much easier to address and resolve. In addition, the grades assigned become easier to explain and defend because their meaning is clearer.

REFERENCES

- Airasian, P. W. (2001). *Classroom assessment: Concepts and applications* (4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Austin, S., & McCann, R. (1992). "Here's another arbitrary grade for your collection": A statewide study of grading policies. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Brookhart, S. M. (1991). Grading practices and validity. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 10(1), 35–36.
- Brookhart, S. M. (1993). Teachers' grading practices: Meaning and values. *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 30(2), 123–142.
- Brookhart, S. M. (2011). Starting the conversation about grading. *Educational Leadership*, 69(3), 10–14.
- Cameron, J., & Pierce, W. D. (1994). Reinforcement, reward, and intrinsic motivation: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(3), 363–423.
- Cameron, J., & Pierce, W. D. (1996). The debate about rewards and intrinsic motivation: Protests and accusations do not alter the results. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(1), 39–51.
- Chastain, K. (1990). Characteristics of graded and ungraded compositions. *Modern Language Journal*, 74(1), 10–14.
- Cross, L. H., & Frary, R. B. (1999). Hodgepodge grading: Endorsed by students and teachers alike. *Applied Measurement in Education*, 12(1), 53–72.
- Frisbie, D. A., & Waltman, K. K. (1992). Developing a personal grading plan. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices*, 11(3), 35–42.
- Guskey, T. R. (in press). Beyond tradition: Teachers' views of crucial grading and reporting issues. *Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies*.
- Guskey, T. R., & Anderman, E. M. (2008). Students at bat. *Educational Leadership*, 66(3), 8–14.
- Guskey, T. R., & Bailey, J. M. (2001). *Developing grading and reporting systems for student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Natriello, G., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1984). *Teacher evaluation standards and student effort*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Seeley, M. M. (1994). The mismatch between assessment and grading. *Educational Leadership*, 52(2), 4–6.



16

Are Grades Essential to Teaching and Learning?

Although it surprises many teachers and school leaders to learn this, strong research evidence shows that grading and reporting are *not* essential to the instructional process. Teachers do not need grades or reporting forms to teach well, and students can and do learn many things quite well without grades (Frisbie & Waltman, 1992). For this reason, the primary purpose of grades and grading must be seen as other than to enhance teaching and learning activities (Brookhart, 2011a, 2011b).

While grading may not be essential to teaching or learning, however, regularly *checking* on students' learning progress *is* essential. To facilitate learning, teachers *must* provide students with regular and specific feedback on their learning progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Equally important, that feedback *must* be paired with explicit guidance and direction to students for correcting any identified learning difficulties (Guskey, 2008). But checking is different from grading.

Checking implies finding out well how students are doing, what they have learned well, what problems or difficulties they might be experiencing, and what corrective measures are