

# VIEWPOINT

## Effective Grading Practices: Creating a Culture of Achievement

BY LAURA J. LINK

Stress happens. However, students in schools where a culture of achievement is the defining element are experiencing chronic stress that is threatening their well-being and ability to achieve academic success. Competing for scholarships and class rank are common attributes of achievement-oriented cultures, where students prioritize their futures above all else.

### Cultures of Achievement

As a former school and district leader, I know that grades are currency. The higher the grades, the greater a student's academic net worth. Students and their parents bank on good grades and high GPAs to gain acceptance into first-choice colleges and universities. Because grades have strong communicative value, they play an important role in school culture.

In schools, information is expressed through many avenues—including grades—which impart messages of success and failure and can affect school culture. For individual students, these messages shape how they are perceived and classified. Collectively, these messages, delivered through grades, also influence how entire schools are perceived and classified. Schools with many students attaining high grades send the message that, overall, they have high cultures of achievement. Conversely, schools with limited students attaining high grades send the message that, overall, they have low cultures of achievement. If grades influence school culture, then school leaders should ensure that grading policies and accompanying practices are meaningful, effective, and promote students' well-being.

### Common Barriers

We know that there's variation in the evidence teachers use to assign grades, but do we really know the extent of that variation and how it's affecting students? A math teacher may rely on exams and quizzes, and an English teacher may rely on essays and journals to assign grades. Yet, especially in high schools with larger faculties, we rarely closely examine teachers' individual grading policies to determine what particular measures of student performance are being used to calculate grades.

For example, a student's math teacher may use a straight averaging system to calculate all evidence of student performance. The same student's English teacher may also use an averaging system, but weighs homework less or chooses not to grade it at all. Additionally, the English teacher's grading policy may not include behavioral factors, such as effort or participation, that was counted in the student's math class. This wide variation across multiple teachers in a given school year lacks coherency, which causes confusion for students. Confusion surrounding grades adds to students' levels of stress and can negatively impact their academic performance.

### Effective Grading Practices

Certainly, some scholars support divergent views, yet prominent educational researchers, such as Susan Brookhart and Thomas Guskey, share empirical evidence that standards-based grading is an effective approach. For school leaders desiring to implement effective grading practices in their schools, understanding the critical elements of

standards-based grading is an important first step. In fact, in order to properly guide teachers through all phases of grading reform, school leaders should have a deep understanding of standard-based grading for themselves. While not all-inclusive, here's an overview to get started:

In standards-based grading, teachers identify what they want their students to learn, what evidence best reflects that learning, and what criteria they will use to judge that evidence. Grades are not used as a way to assure students' compliance with classroom rules and procedures. Instead of punishing students with a failing grade for not turning in work on time or not following directions, teachers assign a score of "incomplete" and then require additional effort.

Teachers who use standards-based grading ensure that grades reflect how well students have achieved specific learning goals and describe student outcomes based on clearly articulated criteria. Guskey identifies three broad types of criteria teachers typically use to assign grades: product, process, and progress criteria. *Product* criteria focus on what students know and are able

to do at particular point in time; *process* criteria emphasize behaviors that enable learning, such as homework completion or class participation; and *progress* criteria identify how much students have gained or improved from their learning experiences.

To make grades more meaningful, teachers report outcomes of these three groups separately, so grades for reporting behavior—such as effort, work habits, or learning growth—are kept distinct from assessments of achievement and performance. The intent is to ensure that grades communicate more accurate and fair descriptions of what students are accomplishing in school.

## Steps to Grading Reform

How, then, can school leaders effectively implement grading reform to improve school culture? Drawing from 21 data studies on school leaders and grading, I've identified four enablers frequently used to implement successful grading reform.

### 1. Communication

School leaders must regularly and purposefully communicate with teachers and parents about

**Celebrating  
100 Years of NHS**

It only took nine years, from 1921–1930, for the National Honor Society to reach 1,000 chapters nationwide. Today, there are more than 17,000 chapters across America and overseas.

We hope you'll join us as we commemorate the NHS Centennial!

**Learn More** [nhs.us/100](https://nhs.us/100)

Creating a shared purpose for grading is a great way for principals to start the collaborative process.

changes in grading, even when it feels like overcommunication. In the beginning, teachers and parents are going to question why changes in practice are necessary. School leaders must be equipped to not only respond, but to teach. Parent Academy classes have helped school leaders communicate grading efforts. These classes are specifically designed for parents—free of educational jargon—and geared to highlight the particular benefits for their child. Parent Academy curricula provide general information initially, and as grading shifts are implemented, results from classroom practice are shared with parents as evidence of success—such as the increasing number of students reaching course concept mastery. This type of evidence helps principals steer parent conversations toward student learning rather than grades.

## 2. Collaboration

Collaboration in the grading reform process at the school level brings about coherency and greater alignment. Studies suggest that while district leader-driven systems of collaboration can be useful for resourcing and initiating training, principal-driven systems of collaboration are essential when delivering ongoing training to teachers. Yet, simply placing teachers in teams or providing them shared planning time to solve the problems found in traditional grading practices is not enough.

Creating a shared purpose for grading is a great way for principals to start the collaborative process. In grade-level, subject-specific, or even whole-school groups, principals can simply ask teachers to create purpose statements that draw from their experiences and beliefs about grading. Because this activity taps into personal and cultural values and norms, tensions among teachers may arise. As a result, principals should stay actively involved in helping teachers by removing obstacles to their decision-making, monitoring and communicating progress, and supporting teachers in creating purpose statements that focus on the message to be communicated through grading.

## 3. Training

Direct training brings about greater levels of grading consistency and helps resolve disagreements between principals and teachers on what constitutes the proper criteria for determining student achievement. Yet it's imperative that school leaders

look to sound research before taking action. We have all experienced initiative fatigue that often yields limited or short-lived results and depletes faculty morale. Ensuring best practice dictates a more informed approach, and school leaders must investigate credibility of the training before making an investment. Training must be ongoing and will require tailoring depending on who's involved.

## 4. Time

When it comes to achieving a successful transition to more effective grading practices, a slow and steady approach is best. School leaders will need ample time to vet and deliver training as well as guide and collaborate with teachers throughout the process. Teachers will need ample time to transfer their learning into practice to achieve results. Parents will need ample time to fully understand grading shifts and realize benefits for their children. Knowing this, studies suggest that school leaders should aim for a one- to three-year implementation process that includes a minimum of 30 hours of training on research-based practices to see successful applications in the classroom.

## A Culture of Success and Well-Being

How do we create the right kind of school environment for our students—one in which the kids are successfully achieving academically but aren't so stressed that their well-being is compromised? School leaders must make cultural changes that include effective grading practices.

Students will have multiple opportunities to show evidence of mastery, focusing less on the teachers' timeline and more on when they reach understanding. Less threat and more clarity alter students' psychological response to grades, which can have important short and long-term consequences for students. In the short-term, students gain immediate relief from punishing grading practices. In the long-term, students will have clear information concerning their academic capabilities and a greater sense of fairness. Over time, these collective experiences can positively influence attitudes, behaviors, and the beliefs of an entire student population—reducing students' levels of stress associated with school. 📌

---

**Laura J. Link, EdD**, is the associate dean of the College of Public Service at the University of Houston-Downtown.