



Let's Give Up the Search for 'Best Practices' in Grading

Thomas R. Guskey, Senior Research Scholar, University of Louisville



Available at:

https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2019/02/lets_give_up_the_search_for_best_practices_in_grading.html

It's time that educators recognize a basic truth about reforming the way we grade and report student learning. That truth is this: There are *no "best practices" in grading and reporting*, and there is *no perfect grading and reporting system*.

I know that may be shocking to some and probably unsettling to all. It is surely different from what you might have been told in books, blogs, or chats by writers and consultants who claim to know what is truly "best." And, quite honestly, I wish their claims were true. If they were true, it would make it so much easier for all of us who are struggling to improve grading and reporting systems and trying hard to ensure those systems consistently work in the best interest of students. But, regrettably, it's not true.

Susan Brookhart and I recently assembled a group of exceptionally talented scholars to analyze and interpret the vast body of research evidence we have on grading and reporting. Their brilliant work is described in a new book published by ASCD and titled, *[What We Know About Grading](#)*.

The conclusion these scholars reached after considering the 100-plus years of research on this important topic confirms that some practices are clearly *better* than others and provide the basis for making substantial improvements.

We know, for example, that it would be better to replace the appallingly unreliable percentage grading scale that includes 101 distinct levels of performance and offers only the illusion of precision with grading scales that include fewer but more reliably discernable categories of performance. We know it is better to base grades on clearly articulated learning criteria rather than on students' relative ranking among classmates. We know it is better to offer multiple grades that reflect specific product, progress, and process criteria, rather than combining these into a single hodgepodge grade that confounds interpretation. Making these changes will greatly improve the communicative value of any grading and reporting system.

What this extensive body of research evidence does not offer, however, are prescriptions for specific policies and practices that we know will work best for *all* students under *all* conditions, which is precisely what "best" implies.

If we implement grading scales with fewer and more reliably discernable categories of performance, for example, we don't yet know the "best" number of categories to include or the "best" way to label those categories. If we provide multiple grades reflecting different types of learning criteria, we don't yet know the "best" criteria to use or the "best" types of product, progress, and process criteria to consider. Although we can take many important steps to make grading and reporting much better, we still have a long way to go in determining what is truly "best."

The major reason we are unable to identify truly "best practices" and describe a perfect grading and reporting system is the powerful influence of context. What the research reveals is that context matters greatly in grading and reporting, just as it does in almost all aspects of teaching and learning.

What works best varies depending on the purpose, the characteristics of the students (i.e., their age, developmental level, learning background, etc.), the culture and other features of the school, and the nature of what is being communicated. These intervening factors snarl effects and complicate implementation.

Nevertheless, not knowing what is truly "best," shouldn't deter us from using the extensive research evidence we have to take positive steps in the right direction in order to make grading and reporting much better. As Mark Manson reminds us:

"Growth is an endlessly iterative process. When we learn something new, we don't go from "wrong" to "right." Rather, we go from wrong to slightly less wrong. And when we learn something additional, we go from slightly less wrong to slightly less wrong than that, and then even to less wrong than that, and so on. We are always in the process of approaching truth and perfection without actually ever reaching truth or perfection."

Our goal, therefore, should not be to employ only "best practices" or to implement a perfect grading and reporting system. We don't have the knowledge or understanding to do that. The nuances of the process and influence of context make it impossible.

Instead, our goal should be to use the knowledge base we have to do things better than we are doing now. We need to see grading and reporting more as a challenge in effective communication rather than simply one of quantifying student achievement. We need to stop using grades to sort and rank students and instead use them to guide students in making improvements in their learning.

Most importantly, we need to help students understand that grades do not define who you are as a learner but where you are in your learning journey—and where is *always* temporary. These changes won't yield grading and reporting systems that are perfect. But they will make those systems much better than they are today – and that alone is important and valuable.