

Are Zeros Your Ultimate Weapon?

By Thomas R. Guskey From *Principal Leadership*

GRADING is one of a teacher's greatest challenges and most important professional responsibilities. However, few teachers have any formal training in grading methods, and most teachers have limited knowledge about the effectiveness of various grading practices.

As a consequence, when teachers develop their grading policies, they typically reflect back on what they experienced as students and use strategies that they perceived to be fair, reasonable, and equitable. In other words, most teachers do what was done to them.

When teachers are asked why they grade or what purpose grading serves, their responses generally fall into these broad categories:

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- To communicate the achievement status of students to parents and others. Grading and reporting provide parents and guardians with information about students' progress and allow them to be involved in the educational process.

- To provide information students can use for self-evaluation. Grading and reporting give students information about the adequacy of their academic performance.

- To select, identify, or group students for specific educational paths or programs. High grades are typically required for entry into advanced classes or honors programs; low grades are often the first indicator of learning problems that can result in a student's placement into a special needs program. In addition, grades are used as a criterion for admission to colleges and universities.

- To provide incentives for students to learn. Although some may debate the idea, there is extensive evidence that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining the amount of effort that students put forth and how seriously students regard a learning task.

- To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs. Grade distributions are often compared to judge the effectiveness of new programs or instructional techniques.

- To provide evidence of a student's lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior. Grades and other reporting devices are frequently used to document unsuitable behavior by students, and some teachers threaten students with poor grades to encourage more acceptable behaviors.

Trying All, Achieving None

Although all of these may be legitimate, teachers seldom agree on which one is most important. As a result, teachers often attempt to address *all* these purposes with a single grading procedure or policy and usually end up achieving none very well.

Nearly all teachers do agree, however, that the least important is the sixth: *To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inability to accept responsibility for inappropriate behavior.* But few teachers recognize that many of their grading practices serve precisely this purpose, most obviously when they assign zeros to students' work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late.

Many teachers see zeros as their ultimate grading weapon, using them to punish students for not making adequate effort or failing to show appropriate responsibility. Students get zeros for not meeting set deadlines, misbehaving in class, or refusing to heed the teacher's warnings. Some teachers recognize that assigning zeros punishes

students academically for behavioral infractions, but most believe such punishment is justified and deserved.

Teachers also use zeros as instruments of control. In most instances, teachers have little direct influence over students' most valued privileges or most feared punishments, unable to restrict their access to automobiles, computer games, television, or social activities. But they do control grades, which can indirectly influence these things. A low grade often prompts parents to enforce punishments more persuasive and compelling to students than those a teacher can enforce. The threat of a zero—and the resulting low grade—allows teachers to impose their will on students who otherwise might be indifferent to a teacher's demands.

Inaccurate and Unmotivating

The problems with assigning zeros, however, are numerous and significant. First, a zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student has learned or is able to do. Obviously, if the grade is to represent how well students have learned, mastered established learning standards, or achieved specified learning goals, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark.

Second, the effect of assigning zeros is greatly magnified if combined with the common practice of averaging scores to attain students' overall course grades. Students readily see that receiving a single zero leaves them little chance for success or a high grade because such an extreme score drastically skews the average.

That is why, in scoring such Olympic events as gymnastics or diving, the highest and lowest scores from judges are always eliminated. If they were not, one judge could control the entire competition simply by giving extreme scores. A single zero has more influence on an average than any other score in the group.

Third, and perhaps most important, no studies support the use of zeros or low grades as effective punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, zeros and the low grades they yield more often cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many regard their low mark or grade as irrelevant and meaningless. Other students may blame themselves for the low grade but often feel helpless to make improvements.

Frequently, teachers defend assigning zeros by arguing that they cannot give students credit for work that is incomplete or not turned in—and that is certainly true. But, considering these overwhelmingly negative effects, there are far better ways to motivate and encourage students to complete assignments in a timely manner than with zeros.

Several schools have implemented the following alternatives and experienced great success as a result.

Assign "I" or "Incomplete" grades. One alternative to zeros is to assign an "I" or "Incomplete" grade with explicit requirements for completing the work. The consequence of receiving an "I" is usually required attendance at a special study session after school or a special Saturday class where students work to complete neglected assignments to a satisfactory level.

In other words, students are not let off the hook with a zero. Instead, they learn that they have specific responsibilities in school and that their actions have definite consequences. Not completing assigned work on time means that students must attend special after-school or Saturday sessions to complete the work, and no excuses are accepted. The consequence is direct, immediate, and academically sound.

Of course, such a policy requires additional funding for necessary support mechanisms. Teachers, volunteer parents, or older students must staff these after-school or Saturday sessions, which also require classroom space and possibly supplementary transportation. But schools with these policies generally save money in the long run.

When students realize their teachers are serious about school responsibilities, they also get serious about them. Because the policy's consequences and accompanying assistance are immediate, it helps students remedy learning or behavioral difficulties before they become major problems. As a result, less time and fewer resources will be needed for major remediation efforts in the future. Further, this policy is far more beneficial and fairer to students than simply assigning zeros because it makes a grade more accurately reflect what students have learned.

Report behavioral aspects separately. Another alternative to assigning zeros is to report behavioral aspects of students' performance separately. In many Canadian secondary schools, students receive multiple grades for each of their classes—both on the report card and on grade transcripts.

A main "achievement" grade is based on evidence of students' academic performance. This achievement grade might include results from major examinations, scores from compositions or reports, or portfolio or project assessments.

But on the basis of specific criteria, these teachers offer separate grades or marks for homework, punctuality of assignments, class participation, effort, and so on. These aspects of students' performance are typically labeled *learning skills*, *work habits*, or *academic behaviors*.

Reporting multiple grades on different aspects of student perfor-

Why Zeros Don't Work

mance may appear to create additional work for teachers. However, Canadian teachers who use this approach claim that it is easier and requires less work than assigning a single grade. These teachers gather the same evidence on student performance as other teachers. But by reporting multiple grades, they avoid the problems associated with combining many diverse sources of information into a single amalgamated grade. They are also spared from arguments about what "weight" to assign to each category or source of evidence.

Most important, the grades they assign are more meaningful. Calculations of Grade Point Average (GPA) and class rank, for example, more accurately reflect students' academic performance because they are based solely on "achievement" grades that are untainted by nonacademic, behavioral factors.

Change grading scales. One of the easiest and least objectionable ways to lessen the negative effects of zeros is to change grading scales. Schools using this approach shift from percentage grading scales where, for example, A = 90-100%, B = 80%-89%, etc., to whole number scales where A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and so on.

In other words, although teachers can still assign zeros to student work that is missed, neglected, or turned in late, the effect of a zero is lessened because it is not so extreme. Although this approach ignores the problem of the grade not representing an accurate reflection of student learning, it does reduce the damage imposed by the extreme value of zero in a percentage grading system.

Teachers at all levels would undoubtedly prefer that students' motivation for learning be entirely intrinsic. Most recognize, however, that grades and other reporting methods are important factors in determining how much effort students put forth. Unfortunately, this recognition leads some teachers to use grades as weapons to punish students, even though the practice has no educational value and, in the long run, adversely affects students, teachers, and the relationship they share.

Developing honest and fair grading policies should begin with candid discussions about the purpose of grading and reporting. Teachers must consider what message they want to communicate through grading, who the primary audience for the message is, and what the intended goal of the communication is.

Once issues about purpose are resolved, decisions about the appropriateness of various grading policies—and the use of zeros—are much easier to address and resolve. If guided by reflections on the true purpose of grading, it is likely that teachers at all levels will abandon the use of zeros completely. en



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