Grading Curve

Create policies that use boundaries to prevent micromanagement of classroom procedures, maintaining your right to leadership in this important teacher-student-parent communication.

Don’t know of a more controversial topic in educational policy right now than student grading. It is front-page news in national newspapers, and articles about grading policy can attract angry and emotional responses from parents, teachers, administrators, and other interested citizens.

Most board members have received more than a few comments about grading policies that are too hard (at least for my kids), too easy (certainly for other people’s kids), and inconsistent. Some teachers accept late work while others do not. Some teachers use the average while others do not. Some teachers emphasize the final exam while other teachers do not give a final exam.

If your district is considering an overhaul of grading policies, here are practical guidelines for the board to follow.

Boundaries, not micromanagement
Every teacher may be accustomed to certain grading policies and practices, but some uniform values must guide all grading policies. It’s not necessary for the board to determine that a score of 93 is an A-minus while a score of 92 is a B-plus. However, it is essential to determine the boundaries that will govern the grading system.

Four boundaries to consider are accuracy, fairness, timeliness, and specificity. By “accurate,” the board means that the same quality of work should receive the same grade—the judgment about the quality of work should not vary wildly from one teacher to the next. Any more than the length of the football field varies from one school to the next. By “fairness,” the board means that differences in grades result from variations in the quality of work, not differences in gender, ethnicity, or social class.

By “timeliness,” the board means that students and parents should receive information about student grades in time to correct performance problems and improve them. By “specificity,” the board means that the student will receive useful feedback about how to improve performance, not only that the performance is inadequate or superior.

These four boundaries take the board out of the business of micromanaging the grading process, but allow you to assert policy leadership on this very important element of teacher-student-parent communication. Teachers retain a great deal of flexibility and independence, but they are not allowed to have grading systems that are inaccurate, unfair, untimely, or nonspecific.

Local best practices
Board members and educational leaders who wish to instigate, support, and sustain change should identify their own islands of excellence—those teachers and administrators who consistently provide superior results and whose professional practices (grading, teaching, and leadership) are clearly associated with superior results.

My published work on grading, for example, includes what I thought was a fairly persuasive case against using the zero on a 100-point scale. But the efficacy of my work paled in comparison to that of local teachers and administrators who started a “ZAP” (Zeros Aren’t Permitted) program, and documented to their colleagues how the elimination of zeros improved homework completion, reduced failures, and improved student discipline.

Other innovative practices in grading, including the use of early final exams, the elimination of the average, the substitution of a four-point scale for a 100-point scale, and others, are best sustained not by the dictates of outsiders, but by the models of your own most successful teachers and administrators.

Safety and value issues
The board always engages in a delicate balance on grading policy. If board members say too much, they are accused of micromanagement. If they say too little, they are accused of failing to respond to real-world constituent needs.

What is the right balance? Consider an analogy to school food issues. It would be silly for the board to mandate turkey sandwiches on Monday and lasagna on Thursday, but it would not be at all out of line for the board to require that school lunches must be safe and healthy. Similarly, boards do not need to micromanage grading policies, but they do need to draw the line at toxic policies that threaten student health and safety. For example, policies that are known to
magnify failure, dropouts, and discipline problems are not matters of "teacher discretion" but are safety and value issues.

Boards should not tolerate fried chicken fingers five times a week, and they should not tolerate grading policies that are the fast food of education—easy, appealing, and lethal.

Getting parents involved

Parents are involved in grading policies regardless of whether or not you invite them to participate. The only question is whether parents are involved in creating a solution or whether they are involved as opponents to the solution the district offers.

The former choice is clearly the wiser one, and effective boards and education leaders will begin the conversation about grading with a clear consideration of parent ideas and concerns. Boards can save a great deal of time by establishing what cannot change before they consider what will change.

For example, Board members can save a great deal of time and aggravation if they begin the parent and community conversation about grading policy with the following statements: "Whatever the changes made in grading policy, we guarantee that we will continue to have a high school transcript with letter grades; we will continue to have individualized education plans for all special needs students, and the IEP results will be an integral part of our comprehensive reporting to parents; we will maintain our commitments to accuracy, fairness, specificity, and timeliness in all grading policies; and we will make our final decisions based on the overall commitment to improve teaching, leadership, and learning in our system."

Grading policies always will be controversial, but they need not be the source of the anger, stress, and anxiety that now is prevalent. Board members can maintain the focus on student success rather than on interest group power when they elevate boundaries over micromanagement, limit their attention to the most essential safety and value issues, and engage parents and community members with appropriate reassurances that their core interests will be protected.

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