

Minimum Grading Learning

Theodore Carey and James Carifio

Dee was already nervous about starting her freshmen year, but she was especially anxious about taking Pre-algebra. In the first three weeks of the year, her quiz and test grades were so low that passing the course had become nearly impossible. Although Dee made some adjustments and her performance improved significantly, her first-quarter grade had already been determined.

Tony had shown he was capable of doing good work in Biology I, earning consistently decent grades on his tests and quizzes, but he refused to do his daily homework assignments and rarely took part in class discussions. Although he passed every quiz and test, when those grades were averaged with his homework and class participation grades, Tony failed.

Teresa was a motivated student who worked hard to earn her marginally passing grades in her senior English class, but after she failed one test with a grade of 42%, she gave up completely, eventually dropping the class.

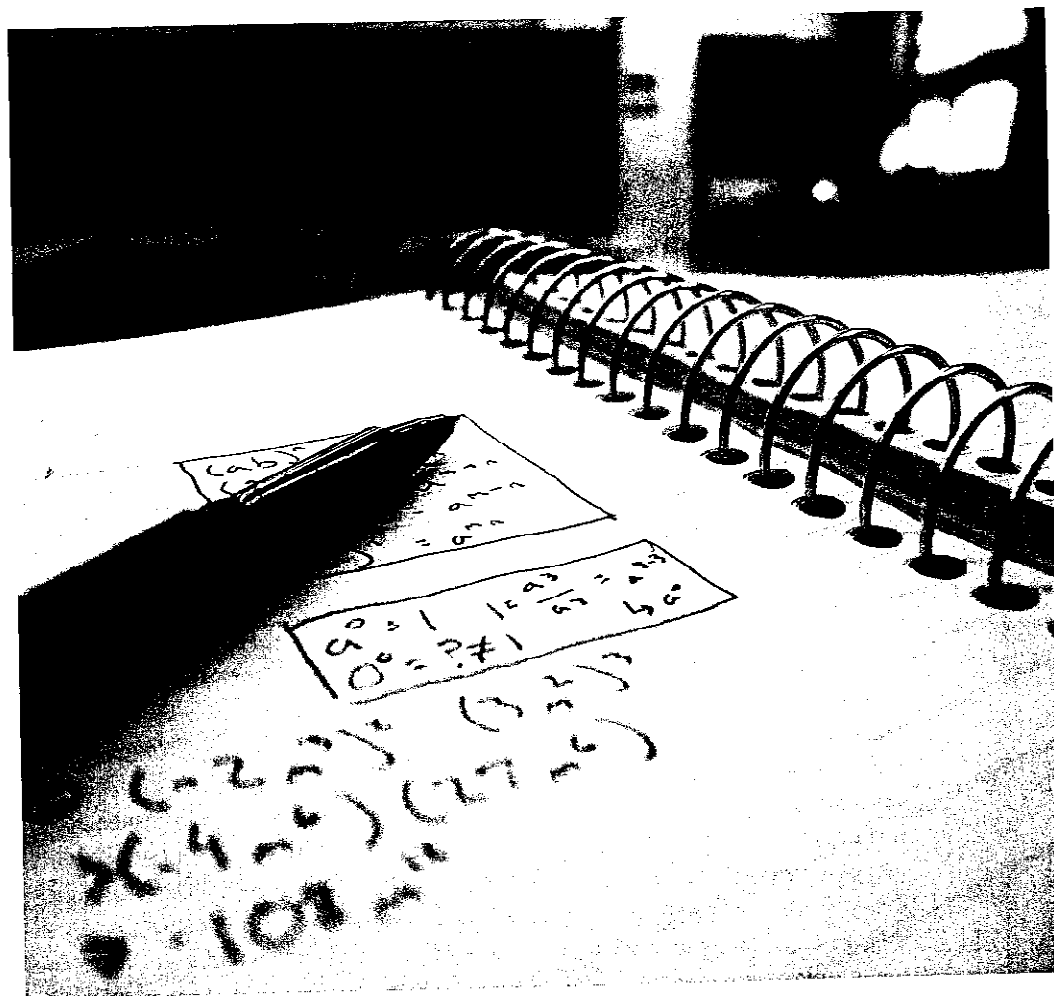
Dee, Tony, and Teresa are composites of students we have seen in different classes. Each was able to show significant progress at different points and demonstrated mastery over much of the material. Yet none of these students received credit for any of what they accomplished. The problem may not be so much with the students as with the grading system.

Fair and effective schools should assign grades

that align with clear and consistent evidence of student performance (Wormeli, 2006), but when a student's performance is inconsistent, traditional grading practices can prove inadequate. Understanding this, increasing numbers of schools have been experimenting with the practice of assigning minimum grades. Although there are many variations on this practice, implementation typically prohibits teachers from issuing grades lower than a minimum threshold, often set at 50.

Advocates of minimum grades look to address the inherent unfairness in traditional 100-point grading, where failing grades cover a disproportionate three-fifths of the scale (Reeves, 2004). When combined with the common practice of grade averaging, the results of traditional grading are, too often, grades that are unfairly skewed by one or two poor performances. If those low outliers occur early in the marking term, the significant trend of student improvement or even eventual mastery can be lost in the final failing grade.

Supporters also argue that minimum grading keeps students engaged and contributes positively to student motivation. Although official school policies rarely discuss grading in such terms, grades affect student confidence, self-efficacy, motivation, and future performance (Guskey, 1994; Brookhart, 1994; Docan, 2006). Recognizing those secondary effects leads to a greater appreciation of minimum grading and leads us to conclude there may be certain sub-



Minimum grading policies can help students who lack self-efficacy and an understanding of the relationship between effort and achievement.

populations of students who could benefit greatly from the practice, particularly in certain "high-risk" courses and subjects.

Just Trying to Avoid Failure

Most school programs are designed to provide an optimal challenge to students. Schools look to keep students engaged by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult and instead try to maximize both the probability of student success and the satisfaction that comes with completing challenging work. This common practice is based on the classic central tenets of Atkinson's achievement motivation theory (Atkinson & Feather, 1966), and for most students, it works.

But Atkinson's model also states there is a population of students who are not motivated to approach success, but are instead strongly motivated to avoid failure. Like Dee, those students experience great anxiety when forced to undertake tasks when they are uncertain of the outcome, and they will

seek any means to break the constraints schools impose upon them. Atkinson's insight should be well noted by teachers and educators who claim to be puzzled by the defiant, oppositional, and rebellious behaviors of many students toward the assessment and grading systems employed in their classes.

The opportunities for students to break these constraints are very limited, but the traditional 100-point grading procedures give students with the tendency to avoid failure an easy option. By posting just one or two hopelessly low grades, students like Dee can create a situation in which even the best students would have little chance of success. Not only has all the anxiety associated with the uncertain outcome been eliminated, but also any further effort has become meaningless. Proponents of minimum grading practices are often accused of being too easy on students, but in terms of achievement motivation, assigning minimum grades may be a simple and straightforward way to deny students like Dee an easy out.

Two Views of Effort

Effective grading practices should foster a healthy understanding of the relationship between effort and achievement, yet how students perceive the role that effort plays in achieving success changes dramatically as they grow older. Preschool and elementary school students equate effort with achievement. This view aligns with children's beliefs that ability is incremental and can be enhanced through hard work (Covington, 1984).

Effort Versus Tradition

Although many teachers see grading for effort as a way poor performers may raise their averages, think for a moment of the true nature of the message that traditional grading sends to these students: that even their best efforts give poor results. Grading that is based on effort, therefore, is more difficult and complicated than most teachers and educators think, and traditional practices often encourage and produce opposite results from those intended.

As students reach middle school, however, their perceptions about effort and ability change. Older students perceive ability as a relatively stable character trait—and as the trait that most determines success. This new perspective comes as students begin to increasingly rely on social comparisons when judging their own abilities (Bandura, 1997) and leads many students to misinterpret expended effort as a sign of incompetence because they assume that someone more capable would not have to work so hard to achieve

success (Covington & Omelich, 1979).

Thus, effort becomes the proverbial double-edged sword. Although increased effort can virtually guarantee success, it invariably works to reduce a student's self-worth. This helps to explain why success can feel like a hollow victory for many students and provides some reasoning into why marginal students who achieve good grades through exemplary effort still fail to raise their expectations for future success. Students who expend high effort and fail will often work to protect their perception of their ability by adopting avoidance strategies. If exerting high effort is seen as a threat to self-worth, exerting low effort becomes a way of preserving it. Students can then

rationalize any failure as being due to a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability.

This view of effort on the part of students is usually at odds with the views and the grading practices of teachers. A personal and often subjective evaluation of student effort is, for many teachers, a major factor in determining grades. Other subjective daily measures of effort, including grades for homework or class participation, are also heavily weighed (Brookhart, 1994). Assigning a low, failing grade for effort, combined with the use of the 100-point grading scale and the routine use of grade averaging, can result in failing a student like Tony, whose performance and mastery level warrant a passing grade.

The formulation of self-efficacy is highly dependent on the individual's internal belief system. Bandura (1997) emphasizes the importance of one such belief system: the concept of ability. A student who regards ability as an acquirable skill is likely to see failure as part of the learning process and view setbacks as cues to exert more effort or to engage in better strategies. Those students also share a tendency most people have to slightly overestimate their own capabilities. Far from giving individuals an unrealistic and falsely optimistic outlook, Bandura (1994) sees this trait as necessary if individuals are ever to aspire to goals that lie just beyond their immediate reach.

But students who believe that ability is an unalterable trait view failure as a threatening and revealing consequence of their own personal limits and, like Teresa, show little resilience in dealing with failures. Convinced that they have little capacity to achieve desired outcomes, students like Teresa become less interested in school, less active in worthy pursuits, and more susceptible to adopting "deviant routes" toward desired goals—paths that come with their own difficulties, which often heighten the feeling of helplessness (Lefcourt, Von Baeyer, Ware, & Cox, 1979).

Bandura (1997) cites research that shows those preexisting concepts of ability can be altered through social influence, but common school practices often reinforce the idea that ability is an inherent trait. Such practices include, but are

not limited to, leveling and tracking students and competitive grading practices that encourage social comparisons and doom a certain percentage of students to the ranks of failures (Bandura, 1994). Assigning punishingly low grades, in turn, works to undermine the essential, self-enhancing biases students have that motivate them to work to their abilities and beyond.

Assigning minimum grades can moderate those effects and help students see their self-worth in terms beyond an assessment of their personal ability, helping persuade them that effort, rather than being the polar opposite of ability in determining success, can in fact help them cultivate their capabilities, develop their skills, and enhance their ability. Such beliefs do more than simply assign the locus of control to students; those beliefs also work to sustain adequate levels of hope and optimism in the maximal number of all students possible. This more realistic and healthy understanding of the reciprocal relationships among effort, ability, and achievement is sadly missing in too many students, as well as in the explicit and implicit messages many teachers and schools convey to students.

What Can Be Done Now

Any school or school district thinking of implementing a minimum grading policy would do so hoping to initiate some significant change in the school's failure rate, but before such changes are undertaken, it may be wise to survey teacher practices or review assigned grades to determine whether this practice is already prevalent. Administrators may be surprised to learn that many teachers are already implementing some form of minimum grading. Our recent survey of teachers at a large suburban high school found that 61% of the teachers self-reported assigning minimum grades to failing students, even in the absence of any formal school policy.

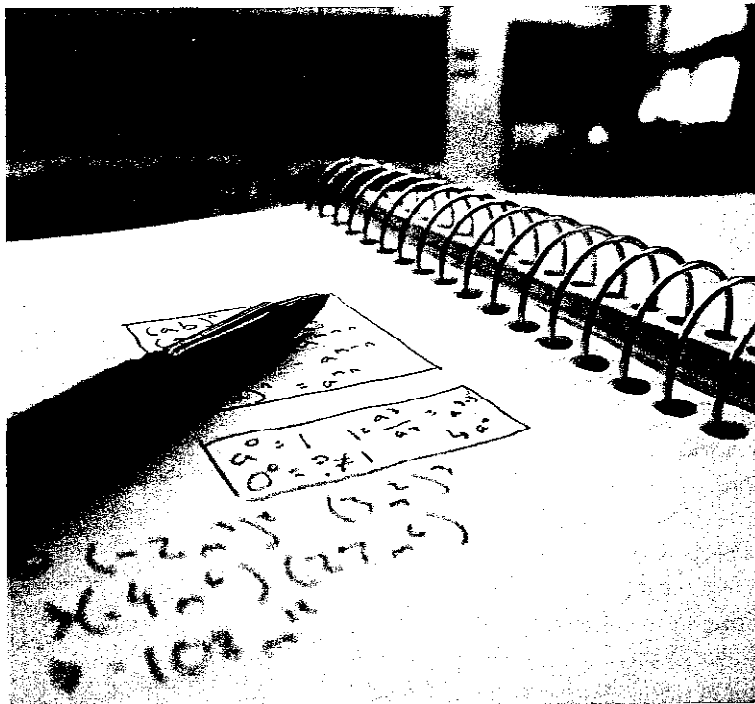
For schools that are already experimenting with minimum grades, any assessment of the practice should focus on the population of students it is best designed to assist. Although minimum grading is often administered to all failing students, the policy best serves the students whose

grades vary widely from marking period to marking period, swinging 25 points or more, and students whose grades vary widely during the course of a marking period. The number of students who show such inconsistencies between marking periods is probably very low and likely accounts for a small percentage of a school's failures, whereas the number of students who show such inconsistencies during the marking period is probably much higher but is more likely to go unnoticed because the data that would reveal these patterns is buried deep in the teacher's grade book and not readily accessible.

Further, the numbers are probably highest for students with certain profiles in high-risk courses and subjects—typically those difficult, emotion-inducing, “bad reputation” introductory courses and courses that are too great of a step-up for the student—more often than not, the math, science, and technical courses. Once this subpopulation of students is identified, common traits may become apparent that would suggest alternate remedies that could enhance the practice of assigning minimum grades. Wide and sudden variation in academic performance is recurrently noted in literature concerning students afflicted with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) along with repeated calls for the development of strategies that reduce such variations for these students (Goldstein, 1997; Guyer, 2000).

Educators faced with the task of addressing the failure rates in schools actually have precious few tools available to them that they may directly and easily alter and manipulate. The possibility that

Most teachers have seen students engage in defensive and self-destructive behaviors that are likely cued by many classroom practices. The models of achievement motivation, locus of control, motive to avoid success, self-worth theory, and self-efficacy all use notably similar language to describe the self-defeating strategies that students employ to break constraints or preserve self-image. Teachers need not be conversant in these theories or be expert in diagnosing individual psychological maladies to recognize such behaviors in their students and take action to address them. Each of the theories in the article offers guidance to anyone looking to cultivate environments that discourage such behaviors. We believe that minimum grading practices align with these efforts.



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a simple, low cost, and easy-to-implement policy could effect significant changes in student attitude and behavior, especially in key subpopulations, is certainly worth investigating—particularly if it could help to reduce attrition and increase on-time completion of and graduation from programs. PL

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