

# Grading in Standards-Based Schools

(A Repair Kit for Grading by Ken O'Connor)

Effective grades need to meet four criteria; they must: be consistent, accurate, and meaningful, and they must support learning.

**Consistent:** grades should not be a function of which teacher the student has for a class. Students achieving at the same level should get the same grade regardless of context.

**Accurate:** inaccurate grades most commonly occur because:

- teachers determine them by blending achievement with behaviors (effort, participation, following rules);
- the assessments are of poor quality; or
- the mean (average) is used inappropriately.

**Meaningful:** grades must directly reflect specified learning goals. Teachers should set up and organize gradebooks around those goals – not organize grades by the date administered, type of assignment or activity, or type of test.

**Support learning:** achieving in school is not about only accumulating points. “When teachers assign a point value to simply turning in work, or put a mark or number on everything students do and use every number when calculating the grade, the message sent to students is clear: success lies in the quantity of points earned,” rather than the quality of learning.

**Key Definitions:**

A *mark* or *score* is the number (or letter) given to any student test or performance that may contribute to the later determination of a grade.

A *grade* is the symbol (number or letter) reported at the end of a period of time as a summary statement of student performance.

## 15 Fixes for Broken Grades

1. *Don't include student behaviors (effort, participation, adherence to class rules, etc.) in grades; include only achievement.*

Report variables such as behaviors separately from achievement, thereby ensuring that the grades reflect student achievement as accurately as possible. Every student receives two grades *for each subject* – an academic grade, and a nonacademic grade (including at the high school level).

2. *Don't reduce marks on work submitted late; provide support for the learner.*  
Four problems with reducing the grade due to late work: (1) they distort the grade's representation of the student's true achievement; (2) they can motivate exactly the opposite behavior from that intended (students conclude it no longer makes sense to do the work); (3) penalties don't work because they don't change behavior; and (4) having absolute deadlines (and penalties) for everything does not prepare students for the world beyond school. (In the real world, some deadlines must be met, but frequently timelines are negotiated or adjusted to circumstances.) This item is similar to #1 – if a student is consistently late, give a poor nonacademic grade instead of reducing the academic grade and/or have students lose privileges such as free time or study hall time until they've completed the assignment.
3. *Don't give points for extra credit or use bonus points; seek only evidence that more work has resulted in a higher level of achievement.*  
If students want to get higher grades, teachers can require them to provide extra evidence that demonstrates a higher level of achievement. Extra points should not reflect something unrelated to the original expected learning. Otherwise, students can get a satisfactory (or high) academic grade even though they still have never met expectations for a particular learning goal.
4. *Don't punish academic dishonesty with reduced grades; apply other consequences and reassess to determine actual level of achievement.*  
**No** studies support the use of low grades or marks as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades more often cause students to withdraw from learning. Giving a zero to a student who cheated uses the assessment/grading policy as a tool to discipline students for inappropriate behavior. Instead, articulate an academic honesty policy with clear behavioral consequences for breaches and require students to redo the test or assignment without cheating or plagiarizing, to establish an accurate achievement record for grading.
5. *Don't consider attendance in grade determination; report absences separately.*  
Standards-based learning is not about seat time. It is common for districts to distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, with the difference significantly impacting grades. While the distinction may be very important for behavioral and legal reasons, it is irrelevant to learning and assessment perspectives. If students can demonstrate achievement despite absences, their grades should reflect that achievement. If absences prevent students from learning/demonstrating achievement, they should receive an Incomplete until the learning *is* demonstrated.
6. *Don't include group scores in grades; use only individual achievement evidence.*  
Cooperative learning is a very powerful teaching/learning strategy, but it is a learning activity, *not* an assessment tool. A group score may not accurately reflect the achievement of each student and therefore would be unfair for some members of the group.

7. *Don't organize information in grading records by assessment methods or simply summarize into a single grade; organize and report evidence by standards/learning goals (outcomes).*

Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and grading and reporting should all be organized around the standards/outcomes. Many districts have successfully done so with curriculum and instruction, and increasingly assessment as well. However, while many schools/districts have embraced standards-based grading and reporting at the elementary level, there remains much work to be done in the middle and high schools. Schools focused on standards for only curriculum, instruction and assessment are standards *referenced*, not standards *based*. To be standards based in grading, teachers plan each assessment to provide direct evidence of student proficiency on specific learning outcomes and then record this evidence by outcome, dedicating columns in their gradebook to each. Traditionally, teachers have organized evidence of achievement simply in the order collected over time or in categories based on the type of data, such as tests, projects, and homework assignments. (See sample gradebook page from CLI's Implementation notebook.)

8. *Don't assign grades using inappropriate or unclear performance standards; provide clear descriptions of achievement expectations.*

Letter-number relationships alone (A = 90-100, B = 80-89, etc.) are inadequate. Develop a rubric using clear criterion-referenced descriptions. Also, it is important to recognize that performance standards/outcomes are about *achievement*, not about growth or progress. Achievement is an absolute and is the grading variable (the basic ingredient of grades); growth and progress are both relative and can be reporting variables (aspects of student performance that should be communicated about but not included directly in grades). Growth is measured against where a child *was*. Progress is measured against a goal not yet reached. Achievement is measured against an absolute – this is where the child is now.

9. *Don't assign grades based on a student's achievement compared to other students; compare each student's performance to preset standards.*

Grading students by comparing their performance to one another distorts individual achievement. We need clear, criterion-referenced achievement standards.

10. *Don't rely on evidence gathered using assessments that fail to meet standards of quality; rely only on quality assessments.*

Avoid the “garbage in, garbage out” syndrome. Consider the following features of design quality in creating assessments: 1) Use a proper assessment method for the context. 2) Build assessments out of high-quality ingredients (selection of test items, performance exercises, rubrics). 3) Gather enough evidence to make valid and reliable judgments. We know we have enough when we can confidently say that, if we gathered one more item, it would simply confirm what we know now. 4) Avoid bias.

11. *Don't rely only on the mean; consider other measures of central tendency and use professional judgment.*

“Whenever I hear statistics being quoted I am reminded of the statistician who drowned while wading across a river with an *average* depth of three feet.” (McMann, 2003)

We should not always rely on the mean because it overemphasizes outlier scores, which most often are low. Consider this example:

91, 91, 91, 91, 91, 91, 91, 91, 70, 91, 91 Total = 889 Mean = 88.9 Grade = B

The student performed at an A level 9 times out of 10 and the 70 is clearly an anomaly.

Three measures of central tendency: mean, median, and mode. If students are very consistent, each measure will get the same result and the mean will suffice. The more inconsistent a student's performance, the less effective any measure of central tendency. The median or the mode is generally more appropriate than the mean when confronted with extreme scores. Teachers must use – and be ready to defend – professional judgment. “Based on all the evidence of achievement a student has produced, which summary symbol most accurately represents that achievement?” (*Determining*, not *calculating* grades.)

12. *Don't include zeros in grade determination when evidence is missing or as punishment; use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine reach achievement, or use “I” for Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence.*

When combining zero with other evidence, the resulting grade does not accurately reflect student achievement. The best fix is the use of I as a final grade, indicating Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence. Zeros give a numerical value to something that has never been assessed and that therefore has no basis in reality. They can have counterproductive effects on student motivation. (As soon as students have more than one zero they have little chance of recovery, increasing the likelihood that they will give up.) Also, lazy students are willing to “take a zero” and thus not be held accountable for their learning. Zeros involve inappropriate mathematics. They represent very extreme scores, thus their effect on the grade is exaggerated. The “I” has the same impact as an F (no credit) but it accurately communicates what the problem is.

13. *Don't use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.*

Students rarely perform at high levels on their first attempt of challenging learning tasks. It is important and worthwhile for them to try, and not always “get it” the first time. This process is not recognized with teachers include in grades evidence generated during practice. If we did in basketball what we frequently do in the classroom, the game would not start 0-0 but each team would start with a scored based on an assessment of the quality of their practices in the days leading up to the game. Students should be assessed regularly; everything they do can be assessed and/or checked, but everything does not need a score and every score need not be included in the grade. Eventually, when the routine of including everything has been

abandoned, then teachers could begin to include formative assessments as grades (if they wish) but they still should not include practice activities.

14. *Don't summarize evidence accumulated over time when learning is developmental and will grow with time and repeated opportunities; in those instances, emphasize more recent achievement.*

Often students improve over time with practice but the final grade does not reflect the final level of proficiency. One of the most consistent practices of successful teachers is the provision of multiple opportunities to learn...The consequence for a student who fails to meet a standard is not a low grade but rather the opportunity, indeed the requirement – to resubmit the work. (Dr. Douglas Reeves – effective schools research) By emphasizing the more recent evidence we acknowledge the impact of good teaching on student success.

15. *Don't leave students out of the grading process. Involve students; they can – and should – play key roles in assessment and grading that promote achievement.*

Students can learn how to monitor their own progress, and how to communicate that progress to others. Students as active participants in ongoing assessment and grading see the entire process as something done with them, not to them. Schools/districts need to set up their communication system to include student-involved or student-led conferences from kindergarten through high school. This type of conference has been found to have a significant impact on students taking responsibility for their own learning and to result in better parent attendance.