



# LEARNING POINT

## What do we mean by “Equitable Grading”?

Since the Industrial Revolution, teachers in the nation’s schools have assigned letter grades—the A to F scale—to describe student achievement. Grades are an essential currency of our schools. Grades are used to determine many important and, in some cases, life-altering decisions—college admission, financial aid and scholarships, athletic eligibility, promotion, retention, awards, and supports.

But the grades that teachers assign to students—ostensibly an objective, fair, and accurate reflection of a student’s academic performance—are anything but. In the vast majority of schools around the country, educators are using practices that are outdated and inaccurate, and that undermine student success. In fact, grading policies actually help fuel achievement gaps, reinforcing the differences in family resources and support based on students’ race, first language, and income.

### What’s at stake?

Because grading is seldom addressed either in teacher preparation or within professional development during a teacher’s career, teachers choose their own way to grade, guided by their best sense but uninformed by either research or best practices. The consequences are predictable and disturbing:

- Grading practices vary from teacher to teacher, so that a grade a student receives can be more reflective of a teacher’s unique approach to grading than the student’s performance.

“More equitable grading practices are accurate, bias-resistant, and motivate students in ways traditional grading does not, as borne out by independent research. Equitable grading practices have been found to yield lower failure rates, most dramatically for historically underserved students. Equitable grading practices also reduce grade inflation, particularly for more privileged and resourced students.”

- Grades provide unclear and often misleading information to parents, students, and postsecondary institutions. A student’s grade is often used to capture many diverse aspects of a student’s performance—academic proficiency, “soft skills” behaviors, attendance, participation, effort, etc.
- Traditional grading practices are often corrupted by implicit racial, class, and gender biases. Plus, students with greater resources are more likely to complete homework, earn extra credit, and get points for behavior and deportment. Conversely, students who have weaker education backgrounds and fewer supports are likely to be penalized even when they show growth and learning.
- Most teachers use grading practices that use mathematically unsound calculations that depress student achievement and progress. An F and an A average as a C, for example, regardless of the progress and final achievement—a mathematically unsound way of measuring progress over time and one that punishes students for early struggles.

The result is that the grades students get are often inaccurately calculated, inflated or deflated by longstanding biases, and idiosyncratic from teacher to teacher, thereby rendering grades unreliable and even invalid descriptions of student academic performance, ultimately threatening to erode trust in schools and their decisions about students. What’s more, because schools, colleges, and many other institutions make decisions about students based on grades/class assignments, the consequences for students can be monumental, keeping some students from achieving success or from even getting into the pathways that lead to success.

### Framework for and examples of equitable grading

Equitable grading has three pillars:

1. Grades are **ACCURATE** reflections of a student’s academic performance.
2. Grades are **BIAS-RESISTANT**, counteracting institutional biases and preventing our implicit biases from “infecting” our grades.
3. Grades are **MOTIVATIONAL**, building on students’ intrinsic

motivation, self-regulation skills, and sense of efficacy.

Equitable grading integrates decades of research on culturally-responsive pedagogy, assessment, and motivation, and has been implemented successfully across K-16 levels and varying contexts and communities.

### More equitable grading practices:

Are mathematically accurate to reflect growth and learning as well as describe a student's level of mastery. Examples:

- using a more proportionately structured 0-4 scale instead of a 0-100 point scale that is mathematically oriented toward failure
- not assigning a zero for missing work
- weighing recent performance and growth instead of averaging performance over time.

Value knowledge, not environment or behavior. Examples:

- not including in the grade categories such as "effort" and "participation," which are subjectively interpreted and culturally-restrictive evaluations of student behaviors
- focusing grades on required content or standards, not extra credit or homework completion
- not using grades to reward compliance
- providing alternative consequences for cheating or missed assignments

Support hope and a growth mindset.

Examples:

- allowing test/project retakes to emphasize and reward learning rather than penalize it
- replacing previous scores with current scores

"Lift the veil" on how to succeed.

Examples:

- creating explicit, standards-aligned rubrics and proficiency scales alongside simplified and transparent gradebooks
- democratizing grading in the classroom with peer and self-evaluation

Build soft skills without including them in the grade. Examples:

- helping students to recognize and internalize a means-ends connection between formative, practice work and the summative performance
- using student-driven tracking and reflection that build self-regulation
- employing a more expansive range of feedback strategies

## Benefits of equitable grading practices

More equitable grading practices are accurate and bias-resistant, and they motivate students in ways traditional grading does not, as borne out by independent research.<sup>1</sup> Equitable grading practices have been found to yield lower failure rates, most dramatically for historically under-



served students. Equitable grading practices also reduce grade inflation, particularly for more privileged and resourced students.

Secondly, with more equitable grading, teacher-assigned grades correlate more strongly with standardized assessment scores. Put simply, these practices significantly decrease the difference between students' grades and their scores on standardized assessments of that content, and the effect is stronger and more likely for students who qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch.

Finally, teachers and students report that with equitable grading, classrooms are less stressful and allow for more authentic teacher-student relationships.

## Conclusion

Grading is rarely mentioned in discussions of equity, but by overlooking it we unwittingly perpetuate the very disparities educators aim to correct. It is incumbent upon educators at every level—teachers, principals, district administrators, school boards, and state policymakers—to improve grading policies to ensure that they reinforce, not work against, our commitment to equity. Hopefully, disruptions such as the 2020-21 pandemic make us more conscious of how our common, century-old grading practices perpetuate achievement disparities, and compel us out of moral conscience and professional obligation to use more equitable grading practices.

<sup>1</sup>See "School Grading Policies Are Failing Children: A Call to Action for Equitable Grading" Equitable Grading Project, 2018

## To learn more

**Grading for Equity website (Joe Feldman)**

[www.gradingforequity.org](http://www.gradingforequity.org)

**"To Grade or Not to Grade," by Joe Feldman, *Educational Leadership*, 77, 43-6 (Summer 2020)**

<http://bit.ly/37pxstp>

**"Beyond Standards-Based Grading," by Joe Feldman. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 29, April 2019.**

<http://bit.ly/3pzQaou>

**On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting, by Thomas R. Guskey, (Solution Tree, 2015)**

<https://amzn.to/2Nn7gIT>

**Grading Smarter, Not Harder, by Myron Duek. (ASCD, 2014)**

<https://bit.ly/37KIDwM>

**A Repair Kit for Grading, by Ken O'Connor. (Pearson, 2011)**

<http://bit.ly/37t7pBF>

The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.