



CONVERSATIONS

**About**

Grading

**Grading practices are often learned and followed in isolation.**

**Working together, teachers can uncover the differences and areas of consensus in their grading practices.**

**Teachers can use research to safely examine what works—and what doesn't—and apply it to their own practices.**

grades often are determined by the unspoken values and beliefs of an autonomous teacher, but technology is making grading practices more transparent to parents, students, and educators. The ability to view the grade books of teachers who are teaching the same course in the same district is increasingly raising questions and challenges to what were once unquestioned grading practices. To address those questions, we often facilitate conversations with groups of educators about their grading practices and beliefs.

### **Assessing Current Practices**

Talking with educators about how to combine academic and nonacademic factors into grades has given us insight to how teachers define a grade. Even when teachers use common assessments, the differences in how they calculate a grade can be dramatic.

Our dialogue begins by asking teachers to deduce the values and beliefs about grading that teachers have by looking at different grade books. (See figure 1.) We give teachers examples of grade books and ask them what values and beliefs are evident in each one. As the conversation unfolds we ask, If someone looked at your grade book, what does it say about what you value?

After uncovering the range differences in grading practices of teachers, we then echo an exercise used by Reeves (2008). We hand out a worksheet containing grades from two students (see figure 2) and ask the group what final grades those two students should receive.

Group members signal if Student 1 should have an A, B, C, D, or E with a quick hand raise. The process is then repeated for Student 2. Most groups don't agree on what grade each student should receive, but present a range of answers from A to E. Colleagues look at one another in disbelief. Within the same building, using the same grade book, can one teacher think that a student deserves an A but another think that the same student deserves an E?

Given such inconsistency, it's no wonder that there is confusion whether teachers *give* grades or students *earn* them.

As we continue to point out the need to come to consensus on grading practices, we inquire, "In all the classes that you have taken in preparation to become an educator, and all other courses since, how many classes have you had in grading? Five? Four? Three? Two?" When the chuckles subside, one or two people may indicate that they had a single course on grading. Tradition—replicating what they experienced as students or what was demonstrated by a cooperating teacher or mentor—is most often the way that teachers developed their grading practices.

**Discussion guide available at [www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0412](http://www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0412)**

Figure 1

Grade book 1		Grade book 2		Grade book 3		Grade book 4	
Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50	Ch 1 Test	30/50
Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50	Ch 2 Test	35/50
Homework 1	10/10	Project	50/50	Homework 1	+	Pop quiz 1	0/10
Homework 2	10/10	Report	20/20	Homework 2	+	Pop quiz 2	0/10
Homework 3	10/10	Journal 1	10/10	Homework 3	+	Pop quiz 3	0/10
Homework 4	10/10	Journal 2	10/10	Homework 4	+	Pop quiz 4	0/10
Homework 5	10/10	Journal 3	10/10	Homework 5	+	Pop quiz 5	0/10
Homework 6	10/10	<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>B</b>	Homework 6	+	Pop quiz 6	0/10
Homework 7	10/10			<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>E</b>
Homework 8	10/10						
Homework 9	10/10						
Homework 10	10/10						
P/T Conference	25/25						
Syllabus	25/25						
<b>Final Grade</b>	<b>A</b>						

### A Framework

Our process of creating a consistent grading policy has evolved over the years. To uncover current practices and develop consensus, we have found success using the following five steps:

1. Develop the need for the conversation by uncovering grading differences among teachers
2. Learn from others—read articles and books about grading practices and look for areas of disagreement between what you believe and what you read
3. Research a specific aspect of grading by looking at what is currently done in your school and comparing it to research from the field
4. Replicate the results of colleagues to build a body of data
5. Reflect on the data and research results, looking for the actualization of your values and beliefs in supporting student learning.

The following is an example of this five-step process in a district.

### Telling Stories

After discussing the differences in their grading practices and participating in some group reading (steps one and two), teachers are encouraged to research or pilot an aspect of grading they find curious, uncomfortable, or contentious (step three). By discovering the actual impact a practice has on their kids, in their building, teachers obtain firsthand evidence of why they should or should not consider implementing it. Most educators are willing to do research, especially when their current practices are being challenged. We have found that the topics of separating academic and nonacademic factors, grading and weighting homework, and changing grading scales are often the most explored areas. Researching such areas can change an educator's perspective.

For example, a secondary math teacher took up the charge to bring back evidence about why teachers should continue to average academic and nonacademic factors into a single grade. He separated the academic and nonacademic factors in each of his five classes and then recalculated the final grade for each student. At the next meeting, he shared the results:

- 83% of the students earned roughly the same grade using just academic criteria (differences

mostly changing from B to B+ or C to C-)

- 10% of the students who earned passing grades would fail if nonacademic factors were removed (moving from as high as a B- to an E)
- 7% of his students who had been failing would earn passing final grades using just academic factors (some moving from an E to as high as a B+).

The teacher told the group that he was often frustrated by “those” teachers—his students’ former teachers who had given Bs or Cs when it was clear that the students did not know the content. His research showed him that the nonacademic factors he used to compute his students’ final grades were masking the lack of learning of 10% of his students. He was, in actuality, one of “them.”

As a result, he adjusted the list of students he was recommending for support and after-school tutoring sessions. He also decided that he needed to give his students’ future teachers more accurate information about the proficiency levels of their new students.

The teacher also decided to address the 7% of students whose grades were negatively affected by nonacademic factors. He met with a student who was able to demonstrate academic proficiency, but her missed assignments,

Figure 2

Student 1		Student 2	
Test 1	98/100	Test 1	63/100
Test 2	95/100	Test 2	67/100
Project	50/50	Project	25/50
Presentation	45/50	Presentation	30/50
Journals	45/50	Journals	30/50
Homework 1	0/10	Homework 1	10/10
Homework 2	0/10	Homework 2	10/10
Homework 3	0/10	Homework 3	10/10
Homework 4	0/10	Homework 4	10/10
Homework 5	0/10	Homework 5	10/10
Homework 6	0/10	Homework 6	10/10
Homework 7	0/10	Homework 7	10/10
Homework 8	0/10	Homework 8	10/10
Homework 9	0/10	Homework 9	10/10
Homework 10	0/10	Homework 10	10/10
Syllabus	0/10	Syllabus	10/10
P/T Conference	0/10	P/T Conference	10/10
Extra Credit	0/30	Extra Credit	30/30
<b>Final Grade:</b>		<b>Final Grade:</b>	



discovered, and in so doing, they uncovered new questions to research and talk to the group about (step five).

### Conclusion

Examining professional practice in terms of grading begins with finding consensus on what educators believe is important for students to know and be able to do. Exploring whether they provide common, consistent communication about their students' abilities can be challenging.

In many cases, grades embody educators' core beliefs about educational theory, philosophy, and what they value in educational outcomes. But it is possible to have common, consistently implemented grading practices that support student learning if teachers can uncover their shared values and beliefs and adjust their practices to reflect them. PL

### REFERENCE

- Reeves, D. B. (2008). Leading to change: Effective grading practices. *Educational Leadership*, 65(3), 85–87.

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A list of additional resources is available at [www.nassp.org/pl0412gullen](http://www.nassp.org/pl0412gullen)

poor attendance, and other nonacademic factors had prevented her from receiving a passing grade. The teacher decided to talk with the student about the importance of arriving to her first-hour class on time, ready to learn, and to complete her homework—the student would need similar skills to succeed in the “real world.”

The teacher learned that the student was living with an aunt because her father had lost his job and her family had lost their home. Her father recently found work, but it was out of state. Getting to school—after helping her younger siblings in the morning—and having all her homework completed was difficult. The student said that she was trying her best, yet she was still failing. And she wondered whether she should still try to come to school at all.

After hearing this story, the group

members had a powerful conversation about what they value and believe: What was the message that grades were sending kids? Were teachers getting the results they were expecting? Were their grading practices helping or hindering student learning?

Other teachers were challenged to replicate the results of separating academic and nonacademic factors and recalculating grades to see whether the first teacher's results were an anomaly or whether their own results would confirm his experience (step four). The new data would inform the professional conversation on grading and how it was affecting student learning in the district.

As the teachers reflected on their own practices in light of the first teacher's research, the conversation came full circle. They explored adjusting their practices because of what he