

Addressing Grades and Credit Options:

Clarifying Roles, Restating Guidance and Reinforcing Equitable Practices

Current Context

Educators, parents, and community partners have expressed growing concern with an increase in the percentage of students with failing grades, particularly at the high school level, during the fall of 2020. Information from districts in Oregon and across the country suggests that these increases are disproportionately affecting students of color and Native American students. While many factors contribute to the challenges our students and educators are facing, and changing grading practices alone is not itself a panacea, the increase in failure rates forces a reevaluation of traditional grading practices. Current research indicates that traditional grading practices can be inequitable and mathematically indefensible. Equitable grading practices offer renewed hope for educational redesign that centers equity and student learning.

Return to Local Control

In the spring of 2020, ODE created several statewide policies to protect student educational progress, to nurture connection and care, and to reinforce equitable instructional practices. This included a statewide Pass/Incomplete grading policy. **With the subsequent release of *Ready Schools Safe Learners (RSSL)* in July 2020, responsibility for equitable grading policy intentionally shifted back to the local level.** This returned local decision-making authority to districts as it related to grading practice. As was true pre-COVID19, schools and districts have utmost flexibility in setting grading policy and implementing flexible credit options. The responsibility to meet the strengths and needs of all students lives at the local level, prompting deeper examination of policy and practice.

RSSL Guidance

Ready Schools, Safe Learners clearly establishes requirements and recommendations to guide implementation of instruction and assessment (including grading and credit options).

RSSL Links

[Section 5d. Instructional Considerations](#)

[Section 5e. Safeguarding Student Opportunity Clause](#)

CDL Link

[Section 2c. Grading and Reporting Progress](#)

Flexible Credit Options

Students who have not been able to garner required credits on traditional timelines can be provided with multiple pathways to demonstrate proficiency, outlined in Oregon's [Credit Options](#). Options include evidence generated in courses, stand-alone assessments, collections of evidence, and prior mastery. Appropriate measurement practice requires a body of evidence that includes evidence of learning that has been gathered from multiple sources in multiple modes to reflect what students can do and what they are ready to learn next ([Right Assessment for the Right Purpose](#)).

Equitable Grading Practices

Researchers have identified multiple solutions for making grades more equitable. While some of these solutions are easy to implement and technical in nature, the changes are most effective when combined as a systems-level, coordinated and coherent approach across the district. Research demonstrates¹ that

¹ See references: Feldman 2019; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019

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grades should be:

- based on content that the instructor has provided
- bias-resistant (using rubrics can increase transparency, reliability, and accuracy)
- criterion-referenced (not normative, or based on a curve)
- mathematically accurate (computations and scale)
- weighted so more recent achievement is given additional weight (no averages)
- based on individual, summative performance(s)
- based on proficiency, not accumulated points, behavior, participation, nor effort
 - Extra credit undermines accuracy
 - Late work penalties undermine accuracy
 - Homework can undermine accuracy
- based on a scoring rubric
- open for retake opportunities

Educator Mindset Matters

The first step in evaluating grading practices within a district is to define what grades should mean and what purpose they should serve. In “Starting the Conversation about Grading” (Educational Leadership, November 2011), Susan M. Brookhart makes the following recommendation:

The important thing is to examine beliefs and assumptions about the meaning and purpose of grades first. Without a clear sense of what grading reform is trying to accomplish, not much will happen. (Great Schools Partnership, [Grading Principles and Guidelines](#)).

Four Actions Schools and Districts Can Take For More Equitable Grading Practices

While sustainable changes to grading practices require time and intentional engagement, there are initial moves that a district can take to address concerns related to equitable grading practices.

1. Allow For Late Work, Retakes, and Revisions

Allowing for late work, retakes, and revisions not only demonstrates flexibility and responsiveness, but it also encourages *learning*, rather than focusing only on the grade. Schools that are most successful with this action are ones that have structures in place to support this practice. For instance, a flex time or a “Check and Connect” period where students can work with their teacher on retakes and revisions. When teachers provide opportunities for students to redo, make up, or try again to complete, show progress, or attempt to complete work without penalty and retain the highest earned grade, they allow multiple opportunities to learn and support growth. The [Grading for Equity Resource Page](#) has tools that may be helpful for implementation.

2. Develop and apply scoring scales that eliminate “zeros”

Assigning a score of zero to work that is late, missed, or incomplete doesn't accurately depict learning. From a measurement perspective, it is practically impossible to have zero knowledge and skill in any academic area. This expectation applies, even in situations where work is not submitted. It is not possible to determine the student's level of performance when assignments are not submitted. For example, see Bend-LaPine's district policy: [Bend-LaPine - No Zeros](#).

3. Use “Incomplete” to reflect insufficient or incomplete evidence of student learning, not “F”

While the majority of schools in Oregon award letter grades, research does not link letter grades to

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increased motivation, stronger student engagement or improved learning outcomes. Districts and schools can consider reporting student grades in non-traditional ways, including but not limited to students who have yet not demonstrated mastery by giving Incompletes instead of a D or F. Incompletes provide students additional time during and after learning to complete the course and demonstrate proficiency. Alternative grading marks are not alone a solution, but they can provide increased flexibility and an extended time-frame for demonstrating learning.

4. Focus on Formative Assessment and Feedback

Feedback drives learning. When educators observe, listen and talk with students about their learning, it is possible to understand what conceptions students hold and what they are ready to learn next. Assessing what students can do in the context of the learning (formative assessment) also allows educators the opportunity to provide descriptive feedback and for students to reflect and assess their own progress over time. “Helping the students to be assessors of their own progress is a way to make grading real. And like I’m grading myself, am I getting better? The reason I love to focus on that kind of formative assessment and teaching those tools and that way of thinking is the brain is already primed for what they call the Progress Principle. The more we see we’re progressing the more we’re willing to do.” (Zaretta Hammond, [blog post](#) May, 2020).

Common Grading Challenges & Considerations

Common Grading Challenges	Considerations
Teachers/school leaders have different perspectives on the purpose for grading.	Learn from the varying perspectives on the purpose(s) for grading before beginning the process of refining a grading policy. Create professional learning experiences that include focal student empathy interviews. Research grading as a school/district and develop shared agreements and a belief statement.
Grading practices reflect implicit and explicit bias and disproportionately harm students.	Develop grading practices that reflect what students know and what they have learned. Ensure district grading policies do not include student behavior, attendance, or participation. Engage all staff in racial equity and anti-bias training.
There is not currently a school or system level assessment and/or grading policy, so there is considerable variance in how and what teachers are grading within the curriculum.	Working with community, families, educators, and students, co-create a grading policy for the system in an effort to provide clarity and guidance, but also to ensure that there is a common grading experience for all students. Review how the grading policy is working in tandem with student/educator/parent input, assessment strategy, student data review, and PLCs.
Some students are passing their classes but are not showing proficiency on standardized assessments.	When finalizing the purpose(s) for grading, if it is determined that grades should be a predictor for student performance on standardized assessment, ensure that common grading policy reflects that purpose. Ensuring clear procedures for what is being graded, as well as how it is being graded through student work review in PLCs or collaborative planning time will help to ensure a similar bar for student responses. This

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	challenge often arises when teachers are unclear what their criteria for success is on a specific assignment/assessment.
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Adapted from [Instruction Partners](#)

Additional Resources:

- [Resources on Grading](#) (Instruction Partners, 2020)
- [Grading for Equity Resource Page](#) - (Joe Feldman, 2018)
- [Fair Grading Practices](#) (Stand for Children, 2020)
- [Grading Principles and Guidelines](#) (Great Schools Partnership)
- [Conversations About Grading](#) (ASCD, 2011)
- [Instructional Best Practices for Comprehensive Distance Learning](#) (ODE, 2020)
- [Washington State University New Grading Policy](#) (November 2020)

References:

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Joe Feldman, *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (2019)

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Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2014)

Tammy Heflebower, Jan K. Hoegh, and Phil Warrick, *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* (2014)

Robert Marzano, *Formative Assessment and Standards-Based Grading: Classroom Strategies that Work* (2009) *Classroom Assessment and Grading that Work* (2006) *Transforming Classroom Grading* (2000)

Ken O'Connor, *The School Leader's Guide to Grading: Essentials for Principals Series* (2012) *A Repair Kit for Grading: Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades* (2010) *How to Grade for Learning* (2009)

Douglas Reeves, *Elements of Grading: A Guide to Effective Practices* (2010) *Making Standards Work: How to Implement Standards-Based Assessments in the Classroom, School, and District* (2004)

Rick Stiggins, *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well* (with Jan Chappuis, Steve Chappuis, and Judith A. Arter, 2009)

Rick Wormeli, *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom* (2006)