

DOUGLAS REEVES

FAST

Grading

A Guide to Implementing
Best Practices

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Introduction

FAST GRADING: FAIR, ACCURATE, SPECIFIC, AND TIMELY

In the second edition of *Elements of Grading*, I advance four criteria for effective grading policies and practices (Reeves, 2016). Specifically, teachers, administrators, and educational systems must ensure that grading is fair, accurate, specific, and timely. *FAST Grading* provides practical steps for teachers to implement more effective grading policies in their classrooms. In conjunction with *Elements of Grading*, Second Edition, this book also provides educators with the basis for a constructive dialogue with parents and community members and the skills to develop effective grading practices.

It is essential to note at the outset that while FAST grading will save teachers time, it is not necessarily quick. Indeed, the provision of feedback that is fair, accurate, specific, and timely is a professionally mindful process that requires teachers and administrators to slow down in order to apply the FAST principles and, eventually, pick up the pace at which they deliver effective feedback. Moreover, I do not presume that readers of this volume are starting from scratch. In almost every school I have observed, there are teachers who are already experimenting with pilot projects or who have well-established grading reform policies, but they are operating independently, without much fanfare. Their effective practices are not yet expanded to schoolwide or districtwide policies. Therefore, one of the most important starting points for every

discussion of grading practices is an inventory of great practices that are already in place. The best advocates for improved grading policies will be your colleagues who are already using them.

Why Grading Reform Is Worth the Effort

If I could offer a solution to readers that would, in less than a single year, reduce failure rates, improve discipline, and increase faculty morale, would it be worthy of consideration? Evidence overwhelmingly concludes that improved grading practices accomplish precisely those results. Thomas R. Guskey (2015), Douglas Reeves (2012), Jan Chappuis, Rick Stiggins, Steve Chappuis, and Judith Arter (2012), Ken O'Connor (2007), Robert J. Marzano (2006), and Thomas R. Guskey and Jane M. Bailey (2001) are just a few of the voices that use a variety of research techniques to demonstrate a common conclusion. When schools embrace effective grading practices and terminate toxic grading policies, student performance, motivation, and discipline improve. Not only do these solutions offer enormous advantages for students, schools, and teachers, but they also offer the promise of enduring impacts over time.

To examine the benefits of effective grading practices, let us consider the impact of the changes Cardinal Community School District in Iowa made to its grading policy in 2011. Superintendent Joel Pedersen's success is profiled in the *American School Board Journal* (Reeves, 2012). As the faculty at Cardinal Middle-Senior High School investigated the causes for student failures, it was clear that the most important cause was not a lack of student proficiency nor low scores on final examinations. It wasn't even class absences or disruptive behavior. The number one cause of student failure was missing homework. This is a refrain I have heard in schools around the world, where otherwise proficient students are failing classes because they have not completed homework assignments.

Pedersen and his colleagues decided that academic practice—just like athletic practice—had an important place in student proficiency. But they also observed that some students went home every night to an environment in which homework was emphasized and other

students did not. Rather than continue to punish students through failures, the faculty decided to create a different opportunity for homework completion. They called it “The Ketchup Solution.” The procedure was simple: from Monday through Thursday, the completion of homework was a matter strictly between the student and teacher. But students who had not completed homework by Thursday afternoon were assigned to the “Ketchup” room on Friday morning where they were expected to catch up on their homework. The time in the room might be only fifteen or twenty minutes, or it might be a couple of hours. The goal was to have every student in the school enter the weekend with homework completed and, most important, to avoid the end-of-semester disaster when passing the class became impossible for students who missed too many homework assignments.

What made Cardinal Community School District’s policy particularly compelling is that there was no turnover in teachers and administrators and only a tiny amount of turnover among students, with intrayear mobility rates less than 10 percent. Thus, the changes in results that this system experienced had to be due almost entirely to the policy changes that the district made, including improved grading practices and alternative consequences for missing or poor student work. The results were astounding—more than a 95 percent reduction in student failures, a 55 percent reduction in suspensions, and a 2 percent increase in student attendance. Four years later, the district continued to make gains (J. Pedersen, personal communication, August 14, 2015). Because of Iowa’s open enrollment laws, students and parents vote with their feet, sending students away from schools that are perceived as failing and toward schools that are perceived as successful. Before Pedersen and his colleagues began their improvements in grading practices, there was a net outflow of more than \$300,000 each year as a result of the dollars following students to other districts. After four years of grading reform, there was more than an \$880,000 inflow, a swing of more than \$1 million (that is, from lost revenue of \$300,000 to gained revenue of almost \$900,000), and a major impact on the budget of this school system. Moreover, these data indicate that parents appreciate and endorse improved grading practices. The problem facing teachers and educational leaders is this: if the case

for grading reform is so obviously beneficial, why is it so difficult to implement?

Why Grading Reform Frequently Fails

I don't know of a single teacher, parent, board member, or community leader who actively seeks lower performance from schools and students. But I know many of them who defend toxic grading practices. Newspapers critical of schools join in the fray, chastising the advocates of grading reform for policies that, they declare, will undermine student work ethic and fail to recognize the work of the best students. Let us consider some of the specific issues that cause grading reform to go off the rails before it even begins.

Mistake 1: How Before Why

It's easy to see why school administrators are enthusiastic about implementing grading reforms. Who could possibly argue with increased achievement, better morale, and improved discipline? It turns out that lots of people do, not because grading reforms are ineffective, but because many skeptics have good reason to doubt the latest breathless claim from educational researchers. They have seen too many apparently good ideas implemented without results and, more often, purchased at great expense and then implemented poorly. For example, districts in the United States have invested billions of dollars in one-to-one computer initiatives, Smart Boards, and computerized testing programs. But the best evidence suggests that the most effective investment schools can make is in effective teaching (Hattie, 2012; Marzano, 2007). While I am not an educational Luddite suggesting that we destroy the machines lest they replace human workers, I am suggesting that ill-advised technology initiatives provide an important example of why teachers and parents are skeptical of new technological initiatives. I have personally observed computer screens freeze, causing students to wait as long as two hours to log on, and then spend as much as three and a half hours (at the elementary level!) taking tests. I've seen technology classrooms in which the Smart Boards and available technology sit idle as students, bored to tears, sit in row after row of desks while teachers present content

in ways that are little different from half a century ago. These personal observations are consistent with large-scale quantitative studies I have conducted in which I found that the degree of implementation of educational initiatives was extremely low (Reeves, 2012). This leads skeptics of educational reform to rightly question, What did taxpayers and students actually get for all the money that was invested in these initiatives? Many educators can recall the various “reading wars” and “mathematics wars” in which ideology trumped a rational consideration of the evidence. No matter how obvious the evidence for improved grading may be, we must explain in clear and unmistakable terms why grading reform is good for students now and in the future.

Distinguishing between alternative educational reforms requires systematic comparison of schools with similar student demographic characteristics, teaching staff, and administrative policies, but only a few different instructional variables. In the best of circumstances, districts or other entities conducting research randomly assign schools and classrooms to a control group (without the intervention) or an experimental group (with the intervention). Then, with a sufficiently large sample size, researchers measure the differences between the two groups. This rarely occurs in educational research, in part because researchers are loath to randomly assign students to a group that deliberately omits a promising practice. It’s the same ethical dilemma that medical researchers face when they randomly assign some cancer patients to receive the placebo, a drug that has no medicinal properties. Although this sort of randomized experiment is not available to most schools, it is certainly possible to replicate the Cardinal Community School District’s practice of comparing the yearly results for students with nearly identical demographic characteristics in the same school with the same teachers and same curriculum and same financial constraints. One year, homework was a sink-or-swim-affair and the next year they had the Ketchup Solution. These sorts of solid results allow teachers and other stakeholders to evaluate a proposed policy based upon the evidence, not based upon the promises of an enthusiastic salesperson. Schools can do similar experiments with a backward look at the data. For example, educators and