

BEYOND

the Grade

Refining Practices That
BOOST Student
Achievement

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Introduction

Beyond the Grade: Refining Practices That Boost Student Achievement is not just another book about grading. It builds on the urgent need for increased student achievement that promotes college and career readiness, highlighting the need for a major paradigm shift from traditional to innovative thinking. Within this fundamental shift, implementing procedures for constantly assessing student growth, crafting schedules that include daily time for student support, and changing traditional grading practices are critical first steps for making the necessary and significant changes.

The timing is right for examining traditional or long-standing grading practices. Although not all states have adopted the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many, like Indiana and South Carolina, have similar versions. In the 21st century, more schools than ever have standards in common. Schools across states can base their grades on similar criteria (Haycock, 2001; NGA & CCSSO, 2009). Now is the time for schools to adopt standards-based grading, which focuses on content mastery instead of hierarchical grades. Common standards facilitate making this change. While moving to standards-based grading, faculty can educate themselves about and advocate for other structural changes that provide the needed support, including alternate schedules and dethroning seat time requirements. In addition, staff can craft schedules that include student support during the school day. We offer scheduling examples to do just that in this book.

Changing schools to the degree we suggest is not easy. Deep-seated cultural beliefs have to be challenged; debates with all stakeholders must be conducted; and practices related to student failure and support need to be re-examined. The journey is not

work (Hill & Nave, 2009). Low-achieving students must learn that when they come to school and work while in school, they will receive payoff for their work.

Before we can successfully implement significant changes in grading practices, it is critical for all stakeholders to study the issues associated with grading practices and to develop a deep understanding of *why* changes are needed.

This Book's Organization and Audience

Beyond the Grade deconstructs traditional teaching and grading practices and presents a better way. We re-examine the very foundations of school—schedules, homework, grading—and present viable alternatives.

This book is presented in two parts. Part I presents the problems; part II presents possible solutions. In part I, chapter 1 lays out the *why now*. Chapter 2 examines grading practices. Chapter 3 discusses how grading issues and student issues abut directly with student achievement.

Once we address the fundamental shift in thought, part II offers strategies for implementing forward-thinking approaches to assessment and grading within real school contexts. Chapter 4 explains the benefits of standards-based grading. Chapter 5 reveals how homework can help instead of hinder achievement. Chapter 6 presents a plethora of schedules, from elementary to high school, including alternative schools, that enable teachers to provide the support students need. Each chapter ends with reflection questions.

This book is for educators—administrators and teachers—who are serious about going beyond grades to increasing educational achievement for more students.

Where to Go From Here

Of course, variations in curriculum standards implementation, widespread differences in teachers' experiences, and local community expectations generate differing interpretations and lively discussions of grading practices. In this book, you'll encounter several in-depth examinations of grading practices and principles, discussions and examples of grading policies with varied effects on academic achievement and student success, and descriptions of many factors associated with student achievement and grading practices.

Throughout this book we suggest and describe specific actions that school personnel, with support from multiple stakeholders, can implement to increase the chances

that more students will not only graduate from high school but also will be fully prepared to lead financially independent lives. The following lists the major actions educators should do to support such efforts and to attain those goals.

- Implement student grading practices that fairly and honestly indicate what a student has learned and what remains for the student to master.
- Reassess the major purpose of grades. This change, at a minimum, will require schools to separate reporting instruments into nonacademic and academic reports, and the academic reports must focus on mastery of content and skills.
- Increase structural support for students throughout the school day. In the United States, more than 50 percent of our students come from low-income families. Different elementary, middle, and high school schedules can provide student support during the school day as illustrated in chapter 6 (page 71).
- Apply resources to accelerate literacy achievement in the early grades. In the United States, fewer than 40 percent of students leave grade 3 proficient in literacy (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015a).

You can see that we have a lot to think about. We will address these issues and many more in the remainder of this book.

CHAPTER 1

Why It's Time to Reassess

Ranking students based on their grades became a prominent function in public schools not long after compulsory education became mandatory in 1918 (WiseGeek, n.d.). Ranking students by *sorting and selecting* them made sense when jobs were available even for those with very little schooling. As long as the U.S. economy was built on low-skilled labor, sorting and selecting those students who should continue on to the next level, be it grades 6, 9, 12, or college, was an important and expected role of teachers and schools.

But the world is different now. Graduating from high school has become a basic step in finding employment. Our own economic survival may well depend on our performing this function at a higher level than we have in the past. There is ample research that it makes financial sense to significantly improve literacy in grades preK–3 (Allington, 2011; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005); and that improvement is critically important if we expect to reduce the number of students struggling with deficits in literacy and mathematics. Increasing the *achievement* of students living in poverty could be the most cost-effective way to reduce poverty, which in turn could reduce government social services and crime (Gould, Weinberg, & Mustard, 2002). It is cyclical.

Now is the right time to re-examine teaching and grading policies. The job market is different. Education, employment, and poverty are proven to be linked. The grade inflation occurring in many high schools contributes to increased college drop-outs (Goodwin, 2011). Standardized assessments make it easier to transition to this change. But first, take a look at how school's purpose has changed over time.

Education, Employment, and Poverty

U.S. schools began using standardized grading systems during the early 20th century. During this time, attendance became legally mandatory, and the number of public high schools grew from five hundred to ten thousand (Lassahn, n.d.). Personalized descriptive student reports became less feasible. Schools began using percentages and letter grades, which introduced many grading debates around criteria variations and grading-scale variations.

With more students entering public schools and the shifting focus on efficiency, grading in essence became a selection tool to determine who would fail and who would progress to the next educational level. The sort-and-select practice was advantageous for a society that required a relatively low- or semi-skilled labor force. Sorting between the labor force and higher education levels became a public school function.

But now it's time to reassess our grading practices. By contrast, public schools of the 21st century do not have the luxury of high failure rates. Because of the outcomes—high failure rates and a glut of uneducated employees in a high-skill market—traditional grading practices are no longer acceptable. Now schools are tasked with making more students college and career ready. Why? Because across all age, sex, and ethnicity categories, students who do not complete high school have a poorer chance of securing employment than those who complete high school or receive a college degree; students, along with the families they create, who never receive a high school diploma that prepares them for a career or college are almost guaranteed a life of poverty (NCES, 2008). Undereducated members of our society often suffer from poverty and many require social and health supports; and if they spend time in the justice system, the personal and societal costs are even greater (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007; NCES, 2008). That's why it's not an exaggeration to say that success in school is perhaps the most important factor enabling citizens to lead financially secure lives, unlike in the past. Educators are living and teaching in a time that demands adjustment. See table 1.1.

You can see in table 1.1 that there is a 26 percent difference in the employment rates for ages twenty to twenty-four between students who do not finish high school (51.5 percent) and those who earn a bachelor's degree or higher (77.5 percent). Even completing high school significantly improves students' chances of securing employment, giving them a 16.6 percent advantage over students who do not complete high school.