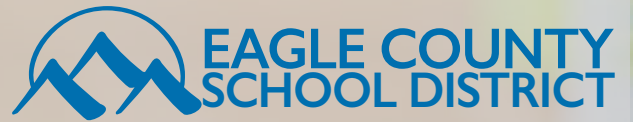


Changing the way we think about grades

Striving for consistency and accuracy



Welcome, families!

Dear families of Eagle County School District,

When I was a newly minted social studies teacher, I had a student that was really engaged in class. He had an authentic interest in history, excelled at his homework, aced the tests, and actively participated in class.

One day after class, I stopped him and encouraged him to enroll in Advanced Placement US History. And his answer rocked me back on my heels.

I'm paraphrasing, but he said something along the lines of, "Oh, Mr. Q, that kind of class isn't for people like me." I asked him what he meant. He said, "You know those are for the rich, white kids. Not me. I can't go to college."

I'll never forget that exchange. Something happened in his educational career or life that caused him to self-limit the opportunities open to him. He was closing doors before he even encountered them.

In our current system, schools across the nation (including our district) continue to struggle with gaps that exist between students of color and Anglo students. These gaps go beyond academics to include discipline referrals and graduation rates. We've made modest gains, but getting at the true cause for these differences has been elusive.

Schools must critically examine systems and beliefs in order to create environments that are more welcoming and inclusive. As educators, we know that we have to reach the hearts of our students before we can reach their minds.

Over the past two years, we have critically examined our grading practices to determine if they are consistent across the district, accurately show what students know, and motivate students to learn. We had to look back and review the history of grading and then ask ourselves some tough questions. Are our practices consistent and fair? Do they motivate or demotivate? Did they contribute to my former student's self-perception that caused him to deny himself of learning more about a subject he was clearly interested in?

The answers to those questions surprised me and many of our staff members. It has resulted in our commitment to improve the accuracy and consistency of grading practices across the district. We never want to see a student close doors of opportunity because they don't feel welcome or expected to succeed at the highest level.

Philip Qualman
Superintendent





Student motivation is essential to engagement.

The inherent excitement students have for learning is most evident in the early elementary grades. Educators support and foster their natural excitement to learn and curiosity of the world. This intrinsic motivation often subsides as students mature and develop through the ages. But what if it didn't?

The importance of the student-teacher connection.

We know that effective student-teacher relationships are paramount to positive classroom environments and learning. Students demonstrate greater motivation and have higher achievement in supportive classrooms, where they can connect to teachers as people. Students are more willing to persevere through challenges, make mistakes, and be open to new concepts if they feel that their teacher is there to support them.

If we hope to grade students on their proficiency of content, positive student-teacher relationships are an integral piece of our equitable grading and assessment practices. We have to build a relationship of trust and shared understanding to reach the hearts of students and make them feel loved, welcomed, and respected before we can expect to inspire their minds.



What's the history behind grading?

The modern education system was born out of necessity during the Industrial Revolution. In 1860, the United States was behind England, France, and Germany in industrial output. By 1900, it produced nearly as much as the three countries combined.

Leaders went to town managers with a demand: we need a smart, reliable workforce to work in our factories. Compulsory public education was created.

Not surprisingly, it was built on the same industrial principles applied in factories. Knowledge was broken down into parts, seat time was created to measure time on task, and grades were created to rank and sort students.

The next big phase centered on quasi-science that seemed to indicate that humans could be trained to do better with external rewards.

Extrinsic motivation became the rave. Grades started to serve as extrinsic rewards. We started using grades as rewards to work habits, timeliness, and forms of productivity.

But the world has changed in a hundred years. The biggest change is the diversity of the economy. The need for factory workers has been replaced with the need for critical and creative problem solvers.

In other words, the most basic goal for public schools has changed from preparing workers for factory jobs to preparing students to be able to think critically, solve problems, and innovate.

Research on grading practices and extrinsic motivation shows we need to rekindle and maintain the inherent motivation for learning throughout school. And, grading practices should be motivational, not demotivational.



It's time to update how we approach grading.

With students (and their parents) stressing over grades and the idea that everything is graded, students prioritize earning points over the attainment of knowledge. If they feel they can't earn the points, they don't try.

Failure is the first step in learning and should not be viewed as something deserving of a negative consequence. Yet the laser-like focus on grades makes struggle and risk-taking seem like a sign of weakness or low intelligence. Many students would rather not do the work than do the work and get a bad grade. In the midst of learning, mistakes and low marks are not only appropriate, but essential. **It is imperative that we change the way students and parents see mistakes.** This includes reframing our focus on grades – intrinsic motivation for the actual knowledge one gains should not be overshadowed by a grade.

A grade is merely *one* sign post to offer feedback to educators, students, and parents.



What's wrong with the grading practices we experienced as students?

Traditional grading practices are mathematically inaccurate and skewed toward failure. The 0 to 100% grading scale is perhaps the most commonly known and universally experienced scale in use. Yet it is seriously flawed. Its orientation toward failure can quickly put students in a place from which there is no chance of recovery.

A, B, C, and D are each worth about 10%, whereas an F is worth 60%. Therefore, roughly 60% of the scale is failing (0-59%). Meanwhile, only 20% is allocated to success, generally defined as an A or B. Grades of C and D comprise the remaining 20%.

Range of points	Letter Grade
90–100	A
80–89	B
70–79	C
60–69	D
0–59	F

Numerous factors impact a student's ability to complete class work outside of school, such as work, sports, extracurricular activities, and taking care of siblings. Therefore, including homework scores in final grades is not an effective practice to gauge a student's academic proficiency. This practice also generally has a greater impact on traditionally disadvantaged students. Rethinking how we grade assignments and assessments can better motivate all of our students for academic success.

Look what happens when a student misses an assignment while otherwise earning above average scores. The student quickly gets into a hole from which they can't recover.

	Percentage score	Corresponding letter grade
Assignment #1	85%	B
Assignment #2	85%	B
Assignment #3	0% (missing)	F
Overall Grade	$85 + 85 + 0 = 170$ $170 / 3 = 57\%$	F

Even when twice the number of assignments at an above average score are factored in, the total grade only climbs from an F to a D. It's little wonder that many students in this situation throw in the towel. Because the scale is oriented toward failure, they can't improve their grade in a manner that reflects their true knowledge.

	Percentage score	Corresponding letter grade
Assignment #1	85%	B
Assignment #2	85%	B
Assignment #3	0% (missing)	F
Assignment #4	85%	B
Assignment #5	85%	B
Overall Grade	$85 + 85 + 0 + 85 + 85 = 340$ $340 / 5 = 68\%$	D

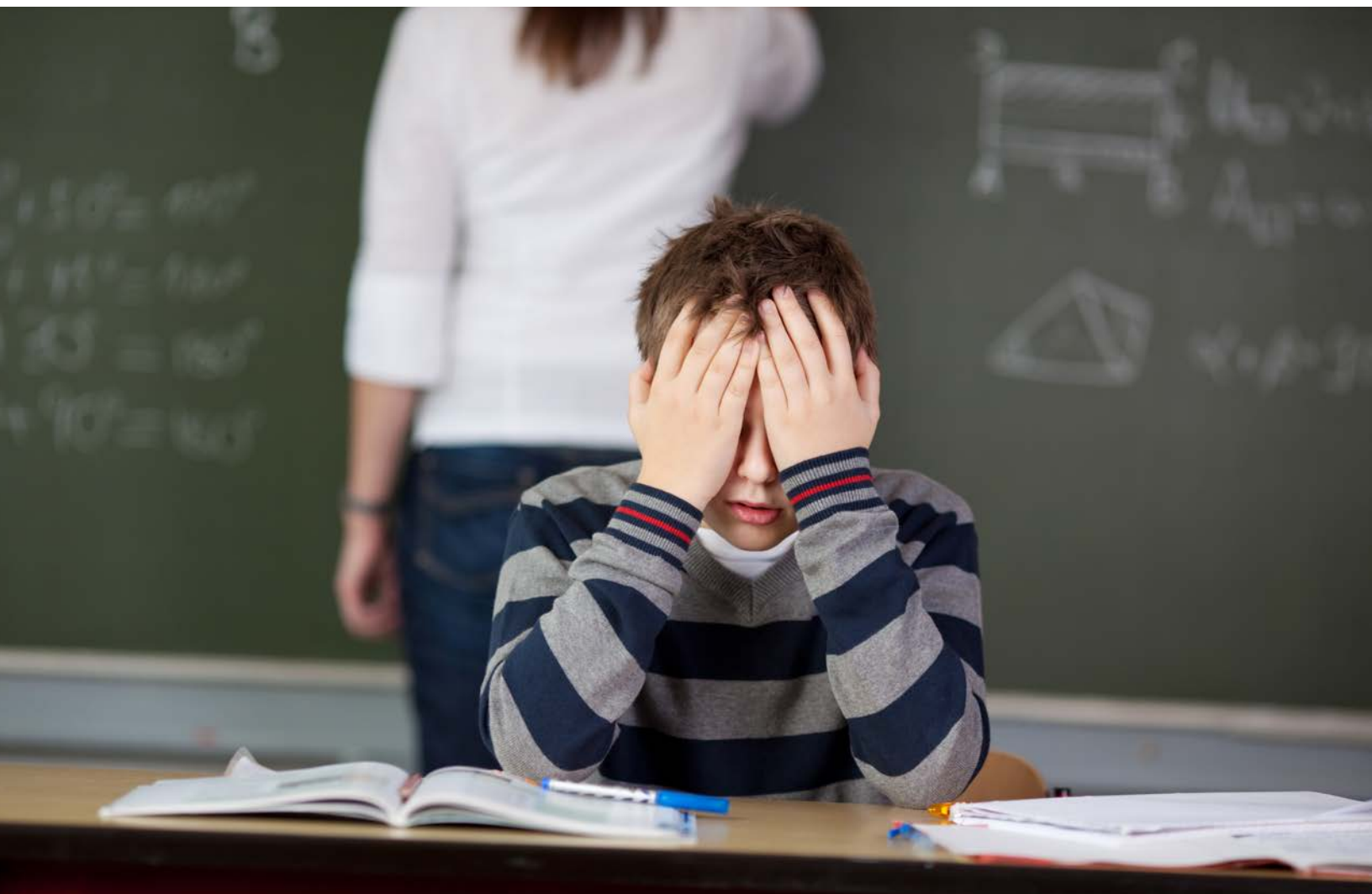
To compensate, schools started grading practically everything.

The thought was that more grades would provide more input to average out bad grades. Now, practically everything a student does in school is graded. Unfortunately, including more data doesn't fix a flawed system.

As the charts on the previous page showed, an inordinate amount of inputs would be needed to overcome one or two bad grades when the scale is not balanced.

More inputs to improve grading averages may have gotten us here, but they haven't improved the accuracy of grades.

Additionally, consider that grades are an abstract representation of real knowledge. We can't assign knowledge "points" in a way that captures every aspect of understanding. We cannot really know the difference in knowledge between a student who scores 85 compared to one who scores 81. Those four points cannot accurately conclude and define a student's knowledge.



What about grading for behavior and soft skills?



Many ideas collided over time to foster the practices of grading for soft skills, as they are also an important part of learning. Soft skills and behaviors such as timeliness, punctuality, compliance, and efficiency were prized and essential for preparing young people for an eventual job in a factory.

Of course, soft skills are still essential and continue to be part of the learning experience. The change we need to make is to separate the grading of soft skills and knowledge so that we are using grades as an indicator of knowledge attainment.

Can such a change improve intrinsic motivation for learning?

What research shows about extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Remember the children racing to get to school? They couldn't wait to see their teachers and friends and learn something new. Not because of grades, but because it's human nature to learn. It's intrinsic.

At home, they likely had someone they could tell about their day and what they learned. Someone who would celebrate their new knowledge with them.

That magic combination of curiosity and positive reinforcement when sharing their new knowledge fueled their intrinsic motivation.

As children age, it's not enough for them to have and share their knowledge. Traditional grading systems want to measure, judge, rank, and sort students by how much they know. Or rather, how well they can *show* how much they know.

Learning motivation switches to an extrinsic reward system, such as grades and gold stars. But these accolades decrease the inherent instinct of learning for the fun of learning.

Suddenly, it's a competition. It's not enough for students to learn and be excited. Now, they have to attain points and be compared against their classmates.

Think about that. If, for whatever reason, you find yourself behind your classmates, how does that make you feel? How does it start to make you think about yourself? The human brain is very protective of self-esteem. It may become "cool" to downplay the importance of grades or even the significance of trying. It may be safer to make fun

of the smart kids than to reconcile that you may learn differently or at a different pace than your peers.

It may be better to withdraw and not do the homework instead of doing it and making a bad grade. While these types of actions are the brain's way of protecting self-esteem, we hope you can see just how corrosive it can be to developing self-concept.

In high school, this can be seen when a student doesn't take a class because "it's not for them" or "for their type." In trade school or college, it can be avoiding entire career paths. Students are self-selecting out of subjects instead of accepting that learning can be a challenging risk worth taking.

They're closing doors on themselves.

We need to reignite the passion for learning and change the tone about making mistakes, struggling from the outset, and improving with time and effort.



What if this helps explain gaps and unhappiness as students mature?



Educators and researchers have been looking for the factors that account for differences in student interest and motivation toward learning for over a century. On the surface, the data points to differences in affluence and poverty, language barriers, cultural differences – all of which are shown to have detrimental impacts on learning.

The question is: does a centuries-old grading process inadvertently turn disadvantaged students off to learning at faster rates than advantaged students?

Contemporary research says yes. Students with fewer resources at home face greater challenges than students with access to a laptop, tablet, smartphone, desk, and guardian with enough time to ask about their day.

Disadvantaged students understand their circumstances at home are different from their peers. Just as they have to make mental accommodations for learning differences, they also have to make similar adjustments for their socio-economic differences.

For disadvantaged students, their physiological, safety, and other basic needs come before learning.

Mistakes lead to learning, so we need to treat errors as opportunities.

When you talk to students today, they mention being graded on everything. Being on time, putting their name on the right side of the paper, homework, quizzes, tests, projects, how they move through hallways – and that's just from teachers.



Classmates, having learned that they are being graded, ranked, and sorted, also judge one another on body type, hairstyle, clothes, vacations, electronics, and hygiene.

As educators, we still need a way to evaluate the success of our instruction and student acquisition of knowledge, so grades aren't going away. But, some processes around grading and what we grade can change.

Let's look at homework and assignments. First, consider that learning new content is a process that starts out challenging. Early in the learning process, mistakes are common and expected.

Homework is practice and provides feedback for the teacher. Schools call homework a formative assessment – **a measure of how the learning is coming along.** In a sense, it's teaching the teacher where to go next. Do they need to review material or can they move on?

With that in mind, having homework and assignments turned in is critical. So, it currently gets the extrinsic motivator – a grade. If you do the work, you will be rewarded with a good grade. Don't do the work? Suffer the consequence of a bad grade.

That works for most students, but not for those most at-risk. The ones that need the most help. They could be two bad homework grades away from giving up.

Life is about making mistakes, trying again, and having the resilience to keep moving forward.



When students give up.

We've shown how grades, especially those on the 0 to 100% scale, can quickly put students behind with a limited chance for recovery.

Teachers offer and make exceptions to avoid this now, but generally speaking, students have to ask for that help and then make the effort. If the student doesn't have a relationship of trust with their teacher, they may not risk asking for help or to try again, or even be interested in trying again.

Eagle County Schools has an 80% graduation rate. Another 9% will finish if they get an extra year or two to complete. That's a fair number given our high percentage of at-risk learners, but still means 11% don't graduate. And, many of our at-risk students are second language learners with considerable overlap with poverty.

Neither situation is the student's fault or within their control, but both factors make it more challenging for them to focus on school and school work.

Eagle County School District's journey into teaching with equity in mind and grading for equity is aimed at being more aware and responsive to cultural differences within our student body. The work is driving us to deeply consider practices and their impact on all of our students. We're learning about creating atmospheres of inclusion, acceptance, and celebration of differences. We've learned how routine practices – like grading homework – can be neutral, motivational, or demotivational.

We know the importance of trust and understanding in our student-teacher relationships, and that we cannot expect our students to be global-ready graduates without providing them with the support and encouragement they need to succeed.

Students that give up may limit themselves to low-earning jobs or reliance on governmental assistance.

Our drive to change to motivational grading practices is to help all students be successful after high school.



Our goal is to ensure students don't give up.

We believe it is imperative that we update our grading practices so that they encourage students to try. We want students to continue to work towards their future believing they can succeed.

“I am my grade.”

The most concerning information coming from contemporary research on grading is how grades have permeated student self-concept and self-identity. Again, this is most concerning among the students who are disadvantaged and may experience lower grades than they can achieve due to hardships in their lives outside of school.



But, we must not overlook the serious and negative impact this can have for even the best student.

Imagine a student who cruises through high school with all A's and sees themselves as a smart, successful student that can learn anything. They get into the college of their dreams, but then struggle in classes. This may be the first adversity they face and it strikes at their very core.

We've spent a lot of time on the idea of building resiliency because that's what adulthood requires. The ability to make mistakes, to fail, to struggle, but to continue working with hope and optimism.

For the student who struggles, the limiting and traumatic experience is front-loaded. They may decide before high school that they're just average – a C student. In their minds, they may as well adjust their dreams and expectations accordingly. They may rule out classes they would otherwise enjoy.

As educators, we want all of our students to believe in themselves. We want them to know they can do anything through education and skill acquisition. We want them to be okay with mistakes. When they are faced with challenges, we want them to have the courage and confidence to keep trying until they succeed.

Fundamentally, we don't believe a student is their grade. Research indicates that students value points more than knowledge. That's worrisome and we need help to change this phenomenon.

The core of education centers around the partnership between teachers, students, and families. To successfully change our grading practices will require parent support. We need you to understand why we're changing practices.

Making grades motivational again: our way forward.

Our goal is to transition away from the A, B, C, D, F and 0-100% scales. We're looking at a scale of 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, where each is an equal 20% range. This 0-4 grading model encourages and motivates students to remain engaged in the classroom and resembles the GPA scale used by colleges.

We're also doing away with grading processes that vary by teacher. For instance, if two teachers have the same categories of class work, but have variations in how much each category plays into the overall grade, a student can score the same in each class but end up with different final grades.

For example, imagine a student averages 60% on homework, 95% on tests & projects, 70% on class activities, and 60% for participation for classes with both Ms. Jones and Ms. López. But, because of how the class work categories are weighted differently in each class, the student ends up with a 76% in one class and a 91% in the other.

Ms. Jones			
Class Work	Ms. Jones' Category Weight	Isabel's Category Score	Isabel's Weighted Contribution
Homework	30%	60%	.18
Test & Projects	40%	95%	.38
Class Activities	20%	70%	.14
Participation	10%	60%	.06
Total Weighted Percentage			76%

Ms. López			
Class Work	Ms. López's Category Weight	Isabel's Category Score	Isabel's Weighted Contribution
Homework	5%	60%	.03
Test & Projects	85%	95%	.81
Class Activities	5%	70%	.4
Participation	5%	60%	.03
Total Weighted Percentage			91%

At some level, this undermines the credibility of grading in the minds of students. They see it as variable and an inaccurate representation of their real knowledge, which can strain the relationship of trust between student and teacher.

To have accurate measures of knowledge, and eliminate inconsistency, we must base grades on summative assessments; evaluate student learning, knowledge, proficiency, or success at the end of the instructional period. This can occur at any time during a unit, which could include using a body of evidence to demonstrate proficiency of skills rather than one large task.

We will also separate grading for behavior from grading for knowledge to provide feedback to parents on their child's behavior and habits without impacting the student's overall grade. Parents need to know this information, but it should not impact the child's grade.

Restoring hope through redemption.

Redemption is a key part of being human, and especially being an adult. It's making good on a mistake, a condition of continual learning and development. Following our research, we need to give students this opportunity. And, reinforce it as an expectation.

Drawing on research from Joe Feldman's "Grading for Equity," Eagle County School District leaders are supporting teachers in implementing a few priority practices. Staff professional development will focus in part on revising our grading practices over time. This involves new policies on revisions, using summative assessments for final grades, excluding grades for formative assessments from final grades, and separating grades for behavior and work habits so that final grades are focused squarely on knowledge.

Let's talk about revisions.

Creating a universal revision policy eliminates the possibility of students getting stuck with a series of bad grades. Missing tests or forgotten assignments, poorly executed homework, and failed quizzes can be redone to better reflect a student's true ability. It's not open-ended, but it is an opportunity to keep learning.

Think about when your child was learning to walk. How many tries did you give them? As many as it took, right? You have to keep trying until you succeed.

Now let's look at how we can get back to learning as its own intrinsic reward. We want students to have the choice to stay engaged, to keep trying, to get better, to redeem a bad performance. That provides hope. Hope that fuels motivation.

Grades early in the year may be lower – students are learning. Don't panic. Don't pressure. Don't punish. **Encourage** – remind students they'll get there, to have fun, and to keep learning. Trust that the process will work out without undue force. Stay enthusiastic and positive. A famous TedTalk by a career educator talks about the time she graded a quiz and the student scored a two. The teacher put a smiley face on the paper. The student asked, "Mrs. Jones, isn't a 2 a failing grade?" And she said, "Yes, it is." The student asked, "Why did you put a smiley face on here?" Mrs. Jones said, "You got two right, and that's a start. Keep practicing and see how many you get next time." That student continued to learn and grow and become successful.

Educators know great things happen when we believe in children, when we imbue them with hope.

Restoring intrinsic excitement for learning.



Learning is the natural process of the brain. We are learning all the time, at every age, during every day, for our entire life. We never tire of it just like we never tire of stories. These are the native ways in which our brains process the world and locate ourselves in it.

We can tire of being taught. We can be bored by subjects we have little interest in. Different subjects can be more or less exciting to us. But, we're always learning.

Our goal is to rekindle the innate passion for learning that students are born with. We want them to see the attainment of knowledge as something they do for themselves, not for a teacher, a parent, or a grade.

We want students to see learning as a fun, mistake-filled joy ride. A roller coaster of knowledge. But most importantly, we don't want our grading practices to limit their options or diminish how they see themselves.

With your support at home, this is a change that can happen over time and help us address one of our most important goals: student motivation.

Celebrate mistakes, encourage the sharing of knowledge, and refocus on the importance of loving to learn.

Moving forward together.

Because traditional grading is a centuries old practice and thus entrenched in the educational experience, making changes can be challenging. Old habits die hard. That's why we've developed this document. We need parents to understand why we want to change our practices so you can help reinforce the change. We've provided the history, tangible examples, and a brief glimpse of the latest research on how grading practices shape student identity and engagement. Now, let's talk about our plans for next year.

Vision

Grading in Eagle County School District dignifies our students by telling them exactly where they are academically and what they need to be successful. Our practices promote the most aspirational thinking of what our students are capable of as learners, regardless of their race, first language, family's income, or their previous educational experiences.

Core Beliefs

Traditional grading practices perpetuate our achievement and opportunity gaps while objective grading practices promote accurate assessment of academic mastery, transparent expectations, growth mindsets, a focus on learning instead of points, and student agency – all key ingredients to serve diverse learners and create culturally responsive classrooms.

Our Core Beliefs

1. Equitable grading and assessment practices strengthen student-teacher relationships through building trust and shared understanding. Under these conditions, all students know where they are academically and what they need to be successful.
2. Students are active collaborators in their own learning, partnering with teachers to ensure their understanding of the learning standards in a way that is transparent and responsive.
3. Grades communicate students' academic proficiency at the end of the learning period and do not penalize students for making mistakes while they are still in the learning period. Gradebooks hold important and valid information for students, families, and teachers.
4. By fostering a culture of revision, grades inspire a growth mindset, where achievement is not fixed, but rather a process of learning.

School year 2021-2022 focus:

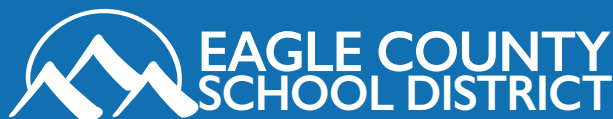
Equitable Grading Priority Practices

1. Grades Based on Summative Assessments – Grades accurately reflect proficiency of knowledge, understanding, and skills (standards) as measured by summative assessments. Formative assessment of academic skills will be recorded in the gradebook to monitor progress, but will not be included in the final score of the course.

2. A Culture of Revision – All students can succeed in achieving proficiency of the content. Building a culture of revision in our schools challenges students to continue their learning until they meet or exceed proficiency.



Grading in Eagle County School District dignifies our students by telling them exactly where they are academically and what they need to be successful. Our practices promote the most aspirational thinking of what our students are capable of as learners, regardless of their race, first language, family's income, or their previous educational experiences.



Works Cited:

Feldman, Joe. Grading for Equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform classrooms. Corwin, 2019.