

A Repair Kit For Grading
15 Fixes for Broken Grades
by Ken O'Connor

Two essential questions that all educators should ask about their grades

“How confident am I that the grades students get in my classroom/school/district are accurate, meaningful, and consistent, and that they support learning?”

“How confident am I that the grades I assign students accurately reflect my school’s/district’s published conduct standards and desired learning outcomes?”

Effective grades need to meet four overarching criteria for success

- Grades need to be **accurate** reflections of student achievement. Inaccurate grades lead to poor decisions being made by and about any student whose grades are used as the basis of those decisions. When determining grades, many teachers continue the traditional practice of combining a large amount of evidence/data into a single summary symbol. This may involve literally hundreds of decisions; if even one is wrong the grade inaccurately reflects student achievement. Inaccurate grades most commonly result from teachers determining them by blending achievement with behaviors, poor-quality assessment, and inappropriate use of the mean in combining data.
- Grades need to be **meaningful**. They must communicate useful information to students and everyone interested in or needing to know about their learning. For grades to be meaningful, they must directly reflect specified learning goals. This requires that teachers set up and organize their grade books around goals and standards – not simply summarize multiple marks into a single grade, or organize by the date administered, type of assignment or activity, or type of assessment – by using the standards or some organizational structure arising from or related to the standards.
- Grades need to be **consistent** across teachers. The grades students receive should not be a function of whether they are in teacher X’s or teacher Y’s class. The question, “How good is good enough?” needs to be the same from classroom to classroom; performance standards need to be the same from teacher to teacher. Students achieving at the same level should get the same grade regardless of context. Teachers in every school teaching the same grade or same subject/course should determine grades in similar ways and apply similar of the same performance standards.
- Grades need to **support learning**. Students and parents need to understand that achieving in school is not only about “doing the work” or accumulating points. Grades are artifacts of learning; they should reflect student achievement – valuing the quality of learning not the quantity of points earned.
Grades also support learning when the purpose of each assessment is clear. *Formative* assessments are designed to help students improve and in almost all cases should not be used to determine grades. *Summative* assessments are designed to measure student achievement and “are used to make statements of student learning status at a point in time to those outside the classroom”. With some limited exceptions, only evidence from summative assessments should

be used when determining grades. New evidence is allowed to replace old evidence when it is clear that a student knows or can do something today that they didn't or couldn't previously. Students must be involved in the grading process for grades to support learning.

Key definitions

A *mark* or *score* is the number (or letter) given to any student test or performance that may contribute to the later determination of a grade.

A *grade* is the symbol (number of letter) reported at the end of a period of time as a summary statement of student performance.

Purpose(s) for grades

Traditionally, grades have served a number of purposes – communication, fostering student self-assessment, sorting and selecting, motivation and punishment, and teaching/program evaluation. For example, for communicating effectively in a standards-driven environment where many students are succeeding, we need to be communicating that highest possible achievement in the narrowest possible range – all students are successful. However, for sorting and selecting these same students we need to spread them along the widest possible range, thus ranking some high and some low. These two purposes can be in conflict.

A central premise of this book is that, at the district and school levels, there must be a shared vision of the primary purpose of grades. The author believes that primary purpose to be communication about achievement; with *achievement* being defined as performance measured against accepted published standards and learning outcomes.

Three issues to consider before addressing the specifics of how to determine grades

Fairness – more about equity of opportunity than it is about uniformity (all students required to do the same assessments in the same amount of time and grades are calculated in the same way from the same number of assessments).

Motivation – the primary “reward” for learning should be intrinsic – the positive feelings that result from success. It is inappropriate to use grades as extrinsic motivators either to reward desired behaviors or to punish undesired behavior. Two main results of extrinsic motivators are the students’ focus on the reward or punishment rather than the desired behavior and the need to continuously increase the amount of the reward or punishment to elicit the desired behavior.

Objectivity and Professional Judgment – Assessments themselves are designed subjectively. Teachers create assessments based on their professional judgment of what is to be assessed and how – a subjective process. Approaches to help teachers assess and grade more accurately and consistently need to be developed. Keys to accomplishing are a shared understanding of performance standards – agreement on “how good is good enough?” and unified approaches to determining grades at the school or district level.

Student involvement in teaching/learning and in assessment and communication can make significant contributions to improved achievement and positive attitudes about learning/school.

The 15 Fixes

Fixes for Practices That Distort Achievement

1. Don't include student behaviors (effort, participation, adherence to class rules, etc.) in grades; include only achievement.
2. Don't reduce marks on "work" submitted late; provide support for the learner.
3. Don't give points for extra credit or use bonus points; seek only evidence that more work has resulted in a higher level of achievement.
4. Don't punish academic dishonesty with reduced grades; apply other consequences and reassess to determine actual level of achievement.
5. Don't consider attendance in grade determination; report absences separately.
6. Don't include group scores in grades; use only individual achievement evidence.

Fixes for Low-Quality or Poorly Organized Evidence

7. Don't organize information in grading records by assessment methods or simply summarize into a single grade; organize and report evidence by standards/learning goals.
8. Don't assign grades using inappropriate or unclear performance standards; provide clear descriptions of achievement expectations.
9. Don't assign grades based on student's achievement compared to other students; compare each student's performance to preset standards.
10. Don't rely on evidence gathered using assessments that fail to meet standards of quality; rely only on quality assessments.

Fixes for Inappropriate Grade Calculation

11. Don't rely only on the mean; consider other measures of central tendency and use professional judgment.
12. Don't include zeroes in grade determination when evidence is missing or as punishment; use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine real achievement, or use "I" for Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence.

Fixes to Support Learning

13. Don't use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.
14. Don't summarize evidence accumulated over time when learning is developmental and will grow with time and repeated opportunities; in those instances, emphasize more recent achievement.
15. Don't leave students out of the grading process. Involve students; they can – and should – play key roles in assessment and grading that promote achievement.