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Taking the Stress Out of Grading

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Now more than ever, we need to take steps to reduce students' anxiety about grading (while improving their learning). Will we?

This fall, we are bearing witness to how significantly the pandemic has affected and continues to affect our communities: financial instability, the loneliness and stress of physical distancing, sadness and grief over the illness or death of a loved one, and fear of infection. None of us are spared from these experiences, and our schools' most vulnerable students—black and brown students, students from low-income families, and students with special needs, the same students who occupy the lower end of the achievement and opportunity gaps—are the most likely to experience multiple stressors and long-term trauma.

Fortunately, unlike last spring when we were caught flat-footed, we've had the summer months to plan our response to the pandemic-related stress and trauma that students will carry with them into the school year. Yet even if we mobilize counseling services and construct proactive ways to connect and support students, our pledged concern for the psychological well-being of our students will ring hollow if our schooling, whether remote, hybrid, or in-person, causes additional stress. As the 2020–21 school year gets underway, we must identify opportunities to reduce the stress that might be woven, unnecessarily and inadvertently, into our teaching and learning. That means we have to tackle grading.

Relentless pressure to succeed, often measured by grades or a GPA, can contribute to students being sleep-deprived, anxious, and even engaging in self-harm. Particularly now, students have a shallower reservoir of resilience. How then can we ensure that our grading practices do not add to their anxiety and stress? How can we remain empathetic and responsive to the many learning gaps students have this fall and still ensure that our grades are accurate? And how, with all these considerations, can our grading strengthen our commitment to equity?

Four Outdated Grading Practices

The evidence is overwhelming that grades cause anxiety and stress for students. Between January 2019 and February 2020, Stanford University's Challenge Success program surveyed approximately 54,000 high school students in schools where the majority of graduates go on to selective colleges and universities. The results were sobering:

- 76 percent of students reported that they always or often worry about the possibility of not doing well in school.
- 75 percent of students reported that they always or often feel stressed by their schoolwork.
- 72 percent of students reported that they always or often worry about taking assessments.[1]

"Doing well in school," "schoolwork," and "assessments" all signal grades as a source of stress for students. But perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. After all, major decisions about students are based on their grades: extracurricular eligibility, college admission, financial aid, even work permits and insurance rates. At the same time, we know that stress is antithetical to deep learning: It interferes with our brain's ability to process new information, recall prior knowledge, and perform higher cognitive tasks. If we want to maximize students' learning, we need to minimize their stress.

For nearly a decade, my organization has partnered with schools and districts to improve grading systems. We find that, in nearly every situation, grading is not only stressful for students but also stressful for teachers. Even though grades are the most formalized expression of a teacher's professional judgment and expertise, teachers receive little training in how to grade either in preservice credentialing or in-service professional development. As a result, teachers often replicate how they were graded, mimic their colleagues' grading practices, or make it up as they go. No wonder grading is considered "one of the more frustrating aspects of teaching."[2]

Our current circumstances give us every reason to critically examine how some of our traditional grading practices *amplify* stress and to identify alternatives that not only decrease stress but also improve teaching and learning. Based on our work with teachers and interviews with students, here are four outdated practices, along with constructive alternatives.

1. Using a 0–100 Scale

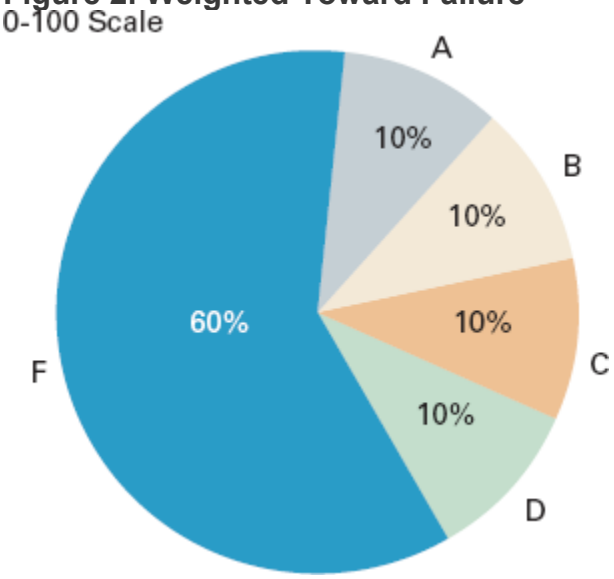
Most of us, as students and now as educators, are deeply familiar with the 0–100 percentage scale used to assign grades (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. 0–100 Percentage Scale

90–100	A
80–89	B
70–79	C
60–69	D
0–59	F

This scale seems so ubiquitous and innocuous as to be insulated from critique. But let's represent the 0–100 scale with a pie chart (see fig. 2).

Figure 2. Weighted Toward Failure



Over half of our grading scale is an *F*, and if we assume a *C* grade signifies minimum attainment of course standards, then over two-thirds of our grading scale describes insufficient performance, and only one-fifth of the scale describes academic success (*A* or *B*). At its most basic level, we're sending students an anxiety-producing message: the chances are much greater that you'll fail than you'll succeed. What's more, the 0–100 percentage scale makes success less likely, if not impossible, for students who struggle. Take the student who earned a *B* (85 percent) on three assignments but received a zero on the fourth assignment because it wasn't submitted (imagine whatever legitimate or illegitimate excuse you'd like). She now has a grade of a *D* (63 percent) averaged across the four assignments. A single missed assignment caused a 22 percent decrease and a two-grade-level drop. Even if our student tries to redeem herself and earns 85 percent on two subsequent assignments, her grade is revived only to a *C*- (71 percent).

When we use a scale that is weighted toward failure, it puts tremendous pressure on students. One zero, or even a score below 30 or 40 percent, and the student is in a hole that requires outsized success to dig out. As Stella, a high school student who spoke with my team explained, "I did not do well on a test, so it dropped my grade really badly. It stressed me out. It was infuriating. I didn't know what to do. I've been fighting these past few weeks to try to get my grade back up, but unfortunately, if it drops it becomes really difficult to climb back up the ladder." Another student described the impact of the 0–100 scale more succinctly: "It's so hard to bring your grade up, but so easy to bring it down."

There's nothing sacrosanct about the 0–100 scale. To relieve students of this unnecessary stress, we need a more mathematically sound scale with equal grade distributions, such as a 0–4 scale, or we must correct our 0–100 scale by establishing a minimum floor at 50 percent. Both of these alternatives make our scales fairer, rectify the excessive impact of the zero, and relieve pressure on students. Despite the scale's clear weaknesses, it can be hard to imagine changing this traditional grading structure. Kevin, a high school teacher, was skeptical about altering the 0–100 scale, but saw its impact: "I used to think that

50 percent as a baseline was the craziest thing that I had ever heard, but now I think it's been very useful and keeps students in 'the game.' They have hope."

2. Curving Grades

Another common grading practice is to curve students' grades—to adjust each student's score to achieve some desired distribution of scores across the entire group. For example, if a teacher wants a certain percentage of students to receive an *A*, and the highest grade earned on an exam is a *B*, applying the curve will shift all the grades upward. Conversely, if more students earn *A* grades than desired, applying the curve will shift grades downward so that same percentage of *A* grades is awarded. Teachers may use the curve to accommodate or correct for exams that are especially hard or too easy.

However, grading on a curve by its very design turns learning into a competition, undermining collaborative classrooms. Because the curve limits the number of *A*s, each student's academic success becomes dependent on other students' performance; I do better when you do worse. Plus, the grade scale changes its meaning in every class, depending on the class's composition. The curve adds more stress without offering any pedagogical benefit.

Instead of high grades being a limited resource, a score or grade should signify a level of performance against an external, fixed standard. Students experience less stress when they know that their grade isn't dependent on or compared to others' performance. In other words, the bullseye doesn't change size depending on how many students hit it.

3. Including Homework Performance in the Grade

Teachers assign homework to give students an opportunity to practice, to make mistakes, and to show us their learning gaps so we can help them succeed on summative assessments—all low-stakes purposes. In traditional grading, students are incentivized to do their homework by earning points toward their final grade; if they don't do their homework, their grade will be lower (and if they get a zero on the 0–100 scale, *much* lower)—high-stakes consequences.

Therefore, the pressure to earn (and avoid losing) homework points eclipses and undermines our intended purpose for homework. We create a constant pressure to perform, where every mistake or incomplete answer on homework lowers a student's grade. Whether students don't have enough time to do the homework, don't understand it, forgot about it, or didn't want to do it, it's no surprise that many students copy their peers' homework. Our misguided incentives lead to students' misguided behaviors. As Isaiah, a high school student, explained: "If I don't do the work then it affects me big time. That's why some of us copy, not because we want to be lazy, but because our grade depends on it."

If we genuinely want homework to be an opportunity to practice, the message should be unambiguous: "Your performance on homework will not be included in your grade, so I expect you to take risks and make mistakes, to share with me your academic confusion and weaknesses without fear that your grade will be lowered because of those mistakes." Of course, many teachers fear that without points as a carrot and stick, students won't do their homework. However, across dozens of schools and districts, hundreds of teachers, and thousands of students, we have found the opposite: When homework isn't included in

the grade but students understand its connection to mistake-making, learning, and summative assessment performance, students do just as much homework, sometimes even more. As Matt, a high school teacher who no longer includes homework performance in the grade explained, "Students are doing the homework but aren't feeling the pressure."

4. Grading Participation

In many gradebooks, teachers create a "participation" category to catalogue points that students earn for showing certain behaviors, such as contributing to the discussion, taking notes, completing classwork before the end of the period, or collaborating in a pair-share. Students can also lose points for an array of missteps, such as arriving late to class, not getting their syllabus signed, submitting assignments past the deadline, or talking out of turn. We may believe this traditional grading practice reinforces effective learning habits and smooth-running classrooms, but similar to our use of homework performance in the grade, with "participation" points we're focusing students not on learning, but on "performing." We're creating pressure-cooker classrooms where students are constantly judged, where every desired behavior is recorded, and no error goes unpenalized.

We make learning less stressful when we create a space where students can take risks without penalty, not feel constantly scrutinized, and not have the pressure to perform perfectly every class period every day. Of course, we want to clearly enforce and encourage certain behaviors and discourage others, but we have an almost infinite universe of conversations and consequences within our classroom and school to do so. Our traditional practice of grading everything students do as "participation" inadvertently fosters distrust, shame, and deceit—feelings that undermine learning in ways that awarding a thousand points cannot repair. Besides, constantly evaluating behaviors requires significant time from teachers both during class and after class for gradebook data entry, creating more stress for them as well.

Retakes: More Than a Second Chance

What all these stressful grading practices have in common is that they don't allow for mistakes. Even though we espouse belief in Carol Dweck's theory of growth mindset and preach, "We love mistakes because you need them to learn!" our grading practices hang a sword above every student's head. Every error costs points that push success farther out of reach, and any success is tenuous and can vanish at a misstep. In other words, these grading practices deprive our classrooms of two ingredients necessary for effective learning: the motivation that comes from the possibility of redemption and the safety that not everything will "count."

In addition to ending the four aforementioned practices, a proactive way to reduce stress and improve learning is to allow *retakes*. Retakes sit at the nexus of improving our calculations and reducing pressure on students to constantly be at their best.

Traditionally, the relationship between assessments and grading has two key features: a student gets a single opportunity to demonstrate their learning on an assessment, and every assessment performance is included in the calculation of a grade. If a student struggles and scores low on early assessments, her final grade will be pulled down by those scores even if she demonstrates successful learning on

subsequent, cumulative assessments. There is pressure, then, to succeed on *every* assessment. By contrast, retakes, and permitting replacement of a prior score with the retake score, allow students to learn from mistakes and have their grade reflect the most current and accurate description of their understanding, undampened by their earlier score. Students overwhelmingly recognize that retakes don't just give them a second chance at success; they improve how the classroom feels. Here are some statements from students in schools I've worked with:

Our teacher said we would get as many retakes as we needed to get a good grade. That made me feel really good because it's like she cares and actually wants us to succeed.—Yozi

I think it's really, really good to have retakes because if you didn't do well on the first try, it still encourages you to learn the material rather than just taking the grade and sucking it up. You can improve your grade and learn.—Vivian

Math can be hard and challenging for a lot of people, especially me. Knowing that I have this retake waiting for me that can potentially replace a poor grade really gives us comfort. And our math teacher, we love her. She wants us all to learn. She doesn't want us to feel like we're in an unsafe environment where grades are all that matters.—Ahmad

Teachers use many different designs and procedures for retakes, but the most successful teachers balance practical limitations with their belief in every student's success. For example, many teachers provide support before students retake an assessment, allow retakes for any student who wants to keep learning (or occasionally mandate retakes for students who need a confidence boost), and spiral content so each assessment becomes a "retake" of earlier assessments. Every retake approach has its challenges, but almost any iteration reduces stress and makes grades more current and accurate. In fact, teachers report that for students with test anxiety, knowing that a retake will be available reduces stress, which allows them to perform better on the initial exam, thereby eliminating their need for a retake.

Lowering Stress, Increasing Equity

We can see how shifting away from these traditional and stress-inducing grading practices can bolster equity. Evaluating behavior with "participation" points makes our grades more susceptible to our implicit biases. Students who have fewer supports at home may be less able to complete homework, so excluding homework performance ensures our grades reflect only students' learning, not their external supports. When we stop curving grades or using the 0–100 percentage scale, students who make early mistakes aren't mathematically prohibited from success. Retakes give students multiple chances to succeed, regardless of how long it takes them. These examples of alternative grading approaches help all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved—whose vulnerability may be amplified because of the pandemic—to have a full opportunity for academic success.

Perhaps more than ever, as stress and fatigue from the pandemic continues for the foreseeable future, we need to use less stressful grading practices this school year and replace them with practices that are

not only more accurate and equitable, but also infuse our classrooms with more care, forgiveness, and hope. Perhaps we may even discover that these less stressful grading practices have value after the pandemic is over.

Reflect & Discuss

- How have you seen grades negatively impact your students' mental health?
- Which of these four "outdated" grading practices could you commit to ending? What's the first step to do so?
- How could you make retakes a consistent part of your school or classroom's grading culture?

Endnotes

1 Challenge Success (2019). *Challenge success-Stanford University survey of school experiences: High school* (unpublished).

2 Randall, J., & Engelhard, G. (2010). Examining the grading practices of teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(7), 1372–1380.

Joe Feldman has worked in education for more than 20 years as a teacher, principal, and district administrator. He is the founder and CEO of Crescendo Education Group and the Equitable Grading Project and the author of *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (Corwin, 2018). Follow him on Twitter.