

How Grading Reform Helps High Achieving Students

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A frequent objection to grading reform is that it is designed only to help low-achieving students. That is because the most publicized results of grading reform have to do with reducing failures. Consider three examples: First, when teachers use the latest and best evidence (rather than the average) to determine final grades, students are no longer punished for the mistakes they made early in the semester to determine their success or failure at the end of the semester. Second, when teachers use the traditional A, B, C, D, F system, with A=4; B=3; C=2; D=1; and F=0 (rather than the 100-point scale), they avoid the devastating impact of the zero on the 100 point scale, a mathematical distortion that makes recovery from a zero nearly impossible for most students. Third, when teachers focus on real proficiency – in-class performance – rather than homework or sullen compliance, then students are not penalized for a chaotic home environment but rather are rewarded for what really matters – demonstration of learning.

But what about high-achieving students? These are the ones who do their homework, are quiet and respectful in class, work throughout the semester, and never cause the teacher any trouble. How does grading reform help them? My experience is that the most persistent opposition of grading reform comes from the parents of high-achieving students who believe, understandably, that no change is necessary because the current grading system clearly works. These students and parents deserve our respect, and part of that respect is a clear explanation about the four reasons grading reform is in the best interest of all students, including those who are traditional high achievers.

First, effective grading reform increases electives, including advanced courses. Because the three grading reforms – latest and best evidence; traditional 4-point A, B, C, D, F scales; and a focus on learning – dramatically reduce student failures, they also dramatically reduce the number of course repetitions. For every 30 students who are not repeating a course, schools can use that time to create a new elective that offers high-challenge, college-level work, and greater engagement for all students.

Second, my research has demonstrated that reduced failures are consistently associated with significant reductions in suspensions and misbehavior and improvements in school safety, climate, and culture. Every student benefits from a safer environment in which learning is the top priority.

Third, when grading systems emphasize real learning over compliance and extra credit, then an “A” assumes much more value. Teachers have explained to me that once they gained greater clarity about the learning that was required to earn an “A,” their conversations with students shifted from a discussion of points to a focus on learning.

Fourth, success in college, graduate school, professional school, and the challenging world of work is about real learning, not about the accumulation of points. Traditional grading systems emphasize getting it right the first time, because if a student fails to do so, the use of the average will depress their final grade. Reformed grading systems, by contrast, emphasize the value of honest mistakes, feedback, respect for feedback, continuous improvement, and real learning. These are the values and practices successful students need after high school, and the failure of traditional grading systems to uphold these values and practices explains why so many honor-roll students fail in college and on the job. They knew how to accumulate points, but they didn't know how to take and use feedback.

So, let's stop the unnecessary war of words on grading reform that pits the interests of high-achieving and low-achieving students against one another. The three simple reforms in this article help every student.