

# Harvard EdCast: Grading for Equity

Encouraging teachers to reassess their grading practices and make the adjustments that can guide their students toward academic success.

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When Joe Feldman, Ed.M.'93, author of *Grading for Equity*, looked closer at grading practices in schools across the country, he realized many practices are outdated, inconsistent, and inequitable. Today he helps educators develop strategies that tackle inconsistent grading practices. In this episode of the Harvard EdCast, Feldman discussed how shifting grading practices can change the landscape of schools and potentially the future for students.



## TRANSCRIPT

**Jill Anderson:** I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast. Joe Feldman believes how teachers grade students today is often outdated, inconsistent and inequitable. He's a former educator who's been examining grading practices, and believes there's better ways to do it. He's been working with schools to develop strategies that reimagine how we grade students. Some of these strategies go beyond common practices like using extra credit, to really assessing how well a student is mastering the content. When I spoke with Joe, I asked him why grading hasn't changed very much?



**Joe Feldman:** Most teachers have never really had an opportunity to think very critically about grading. It's not part of our credentialing work, it's not part of our professional development often. Even when we're given some new curriculum or new instructional strategies, grading is really pushed outside the conversation. Most people think it exists almost outside teaching, and that it's just this sort of calculation, this sort of bean counting, but it's actually interwoven into every pedagogical decision that teachers make, because whenever they make a choice about an activity, or some work, or some assessment, they have to decide whether or not to grade it. And if so, with what weight? With what consequences? All kinds of things like that.

We really are using an inherited grading structures and practices that date back to the industrial revolution, when we had different ideas about what schools were for, and what learning should look like, and what we believed about kids, and which kids we believe those things, and which kids we sort of dismissed.

Because there hasn't been a lot of good research and attention to grading, we've just been replicating how we were taught. You know, we'd say, well, it seems like a good idea to drop the lowest grade if kids have done all their homework. That seems like a reasonable thing to do. And we just are all kind of winging it, or doing it based on what our mentor teacher did, or our department may have shared an idea, but we just haven't had the

opportunity to critically examine it. I hope that the work that I'm doing gives teachers and schools a license, and vocabulary, and a space to start to really interrogate the grading practices that we use.

**Jill Anderson:** I mean, I was struck by how inconsistent grading can be across the same school. Why do you think that inconsistency is so problematic?

**Joe Feldman:** If you look at it from the viewpoint of the student, so in a typical day in middle school or high school, students are seeing five, six, even more teachers each day. Every teacher is usually doing their own approaches to grading, and many of them become idiosyncratic. Although every teacher has deep beliefs that they're trying to imbue in their grading, and send certain messages and values to students, and trying to build a certain kind of learning community, every teacher is doing it differently. From the student, it adds to my cognitive load. I not only have to understand the content and try and perform at high levels of the content, but now I also have to navigate a grading structure that may not be totally transparent, and may be different for every teacher, and particularly for students who are historically underserved and have less education background, and fewer resources and sort of understanding of how to navigate those really foreign systems to a lot of our students, it places those additional burdens on them, which we shouldn't do.

**Jill Anderson:** Talk to me a little bit about this idea of inequity and grading.

**Joe Feldman:** When I first started doing this work, I had been a teacher for years, and a principal of a couple of different high schools, and worked as a district administrator in New York city, and in Northern California as a director of curriculum and instruction, supervised principals and coach teachers. Through all of that work, grading had always nagged at me because there was no way to address these inconsistencies. I began interviewing more teachers and principals, and everyone was frustrated with grading. As I did more research, I found that the traditional practices that we use actually perpetuate disparities that have been going on for years by race, income, education, background, language. The frustrating part I think, is that so many of us go into education to try and disrupt and counteract these cycles of disparities over generations, and do great work and thinking about culturally responsive pedagogy and diverse curriculum, and really trying to listen to our students, and yet we are using practices that undermine those things and actually work against all of the great equity work that we've been doing.

**Jill Anderson:** Can you tell me some of the strategies that you propose for changing grading in schools?

**Joe Feldman:** I'll start with talking about a common practice that perpetuates inequities and what to do instead. One example is the traditional idea that we average a student's performance over time. And actually grade book software does this by default. If you imagine students do some homework, and then they do a quiz or two, and then there's some summit of assessment or test at the end of some unit.

The way that we traditionally grade those things is that we assign point values for all those things, and students score a certain number of them out of a certain number of possible. Then we add up all those numbers and divide the number earned by the number possible. What that is doing is it's averaging all of the performances together into a single grade.

The problem with that, is that for the student who does well from the very beginning and gets A's on everything, their performance is fine, their average is an A, but for the student who struggles at the beginning and gets very low grades, D's and C's and even F's as they are in the process of learning, and even on early quizzes when they demonstrate mastery on the test and let's say they get an A on the test, because they have those earlier grades that ostensibly were for assignments and assessments that were on the path to learning, that they were supposed to learn from, and that they weren't even supposed to have learned everything yet, when we include those early scores, it pulls down the final grades, so it actually misrepresents the level of mastery that a student has ultimately demonstrated.

The reason why that's so inequitable, is that for the student who, before coming to class, attended summer workshops or had parents who gave them a much richer educational environment because they had the time, and the education, and the money, or the students who had a great teacher the year before, they're going to come in at the beginning of that unit and do much better, and the student who hasn't had those resources and privileges is going to start lower. When you average a student's performance over time, you are actually perpetuating those disparities that occurred before that student came into your class. The alternative then, is that you wouldn't include earlier performances. You would only include in the grade how a student did at the end of their learning, not to include the mistakes they made in the process.

**Jill Anderson:** Do you see that as the biggest change a school or teachers could make in the process of grading?

**Joe Feldman:** It's only one of, like a dozen. That's just one example, and that really is just about how you calculate the grade. What's hard about that for teachers to get their head around, is that that's all they've ever known is, I put the numbers into my software, and the software does the calculation, and then poof, out comes a number. What I try and get teachers to recognize and own, is that if they allow the software to do that, that is an affirmative decision that they're making, that averaging a student's performance is the most accurate and equitable way to describe that student, and it's not. Just helping them recognize that they have a choice in how grades are calculated, is a huge step toward really empowering teachers and giving them a greater sense of ownership and responsibility over how they grade. But there are many other practices.

**Jill Anderson:** Right. Some of the things I was reading about, doing away with extra credit, making homework not something that counts toward the final grade, and really reevaluating how teachers look at class participation, all these sort of extras that usually play into a student's grade. Can you talk a little bit more about some of those items, because that's big, to do away with some of that stuff, or look at it completely differently?

**Joe Feldman:** Yeah, and I think what you sense, is that this can be very disorienting to teachers and cause a lot of disequilibrium, because it is helping them see that the practices that they believed were right may actually be hurting students and giving inaccurate information. This is often very difficult and exciting work for teachers.

One category is to not include a student's behavior in their grade. In many classrooms, teachers use grades as a classroom management strategy, and as a way to incentivize students to do behaviors that the teachers believe will support learning. An example is, in middle school we want to teach students that they need to bring their materials every day. What we will do is we will give them five points, up to five points each day if they bring their notebook, their pen, their calculator, et cetera. Teachers do this, because they believe that those kinds of skills are really important for students to be academically successful. The teachers are absolutely right that those skills are critical.

The problem is that when you include student behaviors in the grade, you start to misrepresent and warp the accuracy. An example is a student every day brings their notebook and pen and they get five points every day, but they do poorly on the quiz or the test. What happens is, is even though they may have gotten a C or a D on the test, because they brought the materials every day, or because they've raised their hand and asked a question every day, or because they are respectful, or turn things in on time, they're getting all these points that are then lifting that C test grade to a B or even an A minus.

The big problem with that, well, there are several, one of which is that you're miscommunicating to the student where they are. You're telling the student that they're at a B level in your content, and they're actually at a C. So they don't think there's a problem, the counselors don't think there's a problem, the parents don't think it's a problem, and the student goes to the next grade level and gets crushed by the content, because they have no idea that they weren't prepared for the rigor of that class because they kept getting the message that they were getting B's.

A second big problem with including behavior in the grade for things like participation, is that often the way that teachers interpret student behaviors are through a culturally specific lens. Like whose norms are the teachers applying when they are grading students on their participation? We have to recognize that students learn in a variety of ways, many of which are not the ways that we learn. Just because a student isn't taking notes doesn't mean that they're not learning. And conversely, just because a student is taking notes doesn't mean they're learning. What we are doing is that we are grading a student on acting as if they are learning. They are going through the motions of learning, whether or not they actually learned or not, and we're rewarding or punishing them. The only way to know whether a student has actually learned is to assess them, not to examine and try and subjectively evaluate a behavior. That's sort of one category.

The other is around homework. First of all, I want to clarify, it's not that homework is optional. Homework should still be required and expected, but it's just we wouldn't include the student's performance in their grade. The way I like to think about equitable grading is that we want it to have three pillars. The first is that the grades are accurately describing a student's academic performance. The second is that the grade is bias resistance, so it counteracts institutional biases and protects grades from being infected by our implicit biases, so institutional and implicit biases. Thirdly, we want it to be motivational, to build student's intrinsic motivation, not extrinsic.

All right, so I'm going to walk through homework, and talk about why our traditional use of incorporating a student's performance on homework and their grade violate each of these. The first is around accuracy, so we don't know who did the student's homework, frankly. Many students particularly, well actually across all spectrums, they copy, as part of the partnerships I have with schools when we do this work is I interview students, and I have never had a student tell me that they have not copied homework. It happens and when I ask them why, they say, well, if I don't know how to do something, I need help, or I forget and I need help. The bottom line is if I don't do this, I won't get the points. Students are copying other people's homework. When we include a student's performance on homework in the grade, we may be including other students, or tutors, or parents performance in a grade. We just never know. So it challenges the accuracy.

It also does what I mentioned before. Many teachers will say, well, I don't want to grade the homework for accuracy. I'll grade it for completion. Just if the kid tried, I don't care if they got answers wrong. Then what you're doing is the same thing I mentioned earlier, which is if a student doesn't know the answers on the homework but they try every day and they don't know it on the test, then all those completed homework assignments that gave them five points for each one is going to inflate the test grade. So you're going to again, warp the accuracy.

Okay, so bias resistance. Well, we know that homework is often a filter for privilege, that students who have resources at home, whether they be internet access, or caregivers who have a college education or who have time to help them, settings that have a quiet space to do work, students who don't have other responsibilities like taking care of siblings or having jobs, those students are more likely to complete homework compared to the students who don't have those resources. When we include a student's performance on homework in the grade, we are rewarding students who have those resources and punishing those who don't.

The third part is around motivation, the third pillar is motivation. The reason we assign homework in the first place is because students need practice. If they do this practice, they will then be able to perform on the test, and we actually want them to make mistakes on homework, because if there's any place that you should make mistakes in your learning, you should do it when you're practicing like on homework. If we say to students, you should make mistakes on homework, that's where you should make them, and we include their performance on that homework in the grade we're telling them make a lot of mistakes and we're going to punish you for it, which is totally confusing and undermines our messaging.

We also have to recognize that students understand the relationship between practice for no points or no reward, and then being able to perform later for the reward. If I go out and shoot free throws for two hours because I'm practicing, I know that I'm not getting any points for that, it's that I do those practices so that when I get to the

game I can make the points. Students understand it on video games, I go to these sandbox areas and I'm just playing and practicing and making a lot of mistakes and I'm not getting any points, but I do it so that when I go and fight the boss monster, I can beat the boss monster, right? They understand means and ends of practice perform. Every student in performing arts get to too.

But we in our traditional thinking about grading have detached the purpose of homework from its outcome. So we say don't do homework for you, do it for me, because I'm the teacher, I'm going to give you points for doing it, and then later you'll be able to do well on the test. Instead we can reconnect the relationship and say, the reason you do homework is not for me, you do it for you, because when you do the practice, you do better on the performance.

Teachers initially are very worried about this and say, oh, I don't give students points for homework, they won't do it. Sometimes that happens, and there's an initial dip, but then teachers start spending time helping students see the relationship between the homework and the tests. They will give them a quiz, and if students don't do well on it, they will say, well, let's look at which homework you did and, oh, I'm going to put up a little chart on the board that shows that of the students who did the three homework preceding the quiz, their average grade was a B plus or A minus, and the students who didn't do it, their average grade was a D. What do you think is going on students? Then they can even say to students, let's look at the quiz and look for where there were examples in the homework that showed up on the quiz, right. Helping students recognize the connection between the two.

What teachers find is that students then do their homework for no points, because students have internalized the relationship between the homework and the test, and teachers are shocked that students do homework and they cannot believe that they had for years and years been essentially managing students' behaviors and rewarding them little chits for doing what they asked. And frankly, it's a much more empowering and 21st century skill to recognize when I need to practice something, and only do the amount of homework that I need so that I'm ready for when the test comes, because after all in post secondary education and in the professional world, nobody is giving you any value for the work you do outside of class. It's all up to you to decide how much you need.

**Jill Anderson:** I mean, you hit on something about teachers struggle with these changes a lot. Why do you think grading is such a sensitive topic for teachers?

**Joe Feldman:** It's funny. When I was a principal, grading was the most difficult conversation to have with a teacher. Administrators I talked to all over, whether they be at the elementary, middle, or high school, or district level, they're all frustrated with how grading is addressed, and the inconsistency and the problems that that generates. But it's so difficult for them to broach the subject. I think what it's about is that especially today, there are so many demands placed on teachers, and expectations and mandates from multiple layers, right? The school districts, state, federal and all kinds of roles they have to serve. I think grading is really the last island of autonomy that teachers have. That it is the one place where they can bring their full professional judgment and expertise in a formalized way, and in a way that perseveres and stays with students. I mean, it is the sort of the kind of core of their power, for many teachers their identity.

When people start to push against that, it can be very hard for teachers to hear it, and teachers justifiably get very defensive oftentimes. You know, when a principal comes up and says to a teacher, I'd like to talk to you about grading, the teacher's reaction is not, oh, let's have a good intellectual discussion. It's what teacher called you? Or what parent called you? Or what grade do you want me to change? Or that kind of thing. The way that I encourage principals, school leaders, and district leaders to do this work, is to create areas for teachers to explore the practices on their own. Not to come in and say to teachers, hey, you know what? Starting next year we're not going to include homework in the grade anymore. It's too jarring, too much of a power play for the school leader. Instead, there have to be ways that teachers can explore and better understand these practices themselves because when they start trying them, they find great results.

**Jill Anderson:** This isn't a case of, go in as a principal and say, we're going to do it differently next year. This is ease into type of change.

**Joe Feldman:** Well, and I think it really should be teacher driven. Some teachers will start to look at these ideas and examine their practices and run a hundred miles an hour, and other teachers will be much slower to it, for all kinds of reasons. I think that the job of a school leader is to create those spaces, and that energy, and that tailwind, to say that this is a big enough issue for us. If we are committed to equity as we are in our school, this is perhaps one of the last frontiers that we have to tackle if we're really serious about this.

When that happens, I think teachers start to get some energy, and buy in, and start to see the relationship, and are motivated to push for changes in their practice. What we've seen when we partner with schools, and usually we go through a series of workshops over the course of the year, and teachers get a lot of chances to try lots of things, but at the end there is this body of evidence that is in a school context or a district context, where teachers have found that with our students, when we use these practices, we get better results. The idea is that there starts to be this groundswell and consensus around, yes, we have enough evidence now, that we need to not average performance over time or other practices.

**Jill Anderson:** Is one of the results of this, the evidence that you see about students beginning to not be obsessed with the grade?

**Joe Feldman:** You're right. Many students, most are very concerned with their grade. Parents and caregivers put a lot of pressure on a lot of students around the grade, and it holds a lot of currency and social status for some groups. Grades are one of the primary elements in some of the major decisions that we make about students, including college admissions, scholarships, financial aid, whether they get certain opportunities in school, whether they're athletically eligible, even in some States the insurance rates are based on the grades that students get, and work permit eligibility, and so even family income can be implicated by grades that students get. There is a lot of pressure to get grades.

What this work does is it helps students understand and get more ownership over their own grade. And it's not about amassing as many points as possible. It's not just trying to just do whatever you're asked to do, and if you jump through all the right hoops, by whatever means possible to get as many points as possible, you'll get the higher grade. The grade is really based on what you know, not all the stuff you do.

When teachers start using these practices, the ones we've talked about, and some others, students start to A, relax more in class. They don't have to perform perfectly every day and do every activity, because every activity is counted and do every homework perfectly. And teachers talk about how the rooms feel less stressful.

It also helps students, one of the things we haven't talked to them, which is how teachers can then be more transparent with their expectations. Instead of saying if you want an A, you have to get 80 points out of the 94 on the test. They say in order to show an A on this particular standard or this skill, it looks like this, and a B looks like this in a C level looks like this. Which then makes it very clear to students and explicit, of what do I have to know and be able to do to earn a particular B or A? What level of mastery must I demonstrate?

Students will then start to use, instead of the language of points, which is what we've taught them since fourth grade and fifth grade, is that school is about amassing points. Instead of saying, I'm two points away from an A, they will say, if I can just apply negative exponents to the quadratic formula, I'll be able to get the A, which is music to teacher's ears, right. They want students to talk about their learning in the language of the subject. When we stop using a lot of these traditional practices, we make it so that students feel like the grade is something that's so clear to them, and the path to getting the grade they want is right in front of them. There's a great quote that is, "a student could hit any target that it's clear to them and doesn't move." What equitable grading is, is setting these targets so that they're clear and don't move.

**Jill Anderson:** What has the response been from parents, and some of the schools where you've been working to help implement these strategies?

**Joe Feldman:** Teachers are nervous that parents won't like these ideas, because after all, parents have grown up in the traditional system too and they know the rules of the game. When you suggest, particularly for higher income and higher educated, and more active parents, when you say you're going to start changing the rules of the game for their children, teachers are nervous that the parents will get very upset. Initially parents are skeptical, like I figured out the rules there's a lot at stake here and so don't change the rules.

Teachers have found when they start to have these conversations, and part of the work I do with schools also, is to have parent presentations or caregiver presentations, is that they love these ideas, because they know that their kids are overly stressed, and they know that kids who struggle get demotivated very early because their grade becomes un-salvageable, because all the early grades count because we're averaging performance over time or we're collecting the performance over time. They love that homework now is not included in the grade, because it gives the student more responsibility. I mean they think these ideas are wonderful.

When I first started this work, I actually wasn't sure it would work. I hired an external evaluator very early to look at the grades that teachers were assigning before and after using these practices. What we've found consistently across schools, whether they be middle schools, or high schools, or schools that serve lots of low income kids, and kids of color, or suburban predominantly white students and high income, is that the percent of A's that teachers give decreases because there's not so much inflation going on around doing all the homework and everything. Interestingly, the decrease in A's occurs most dramatically for white children and higher income children. The A rate of kids of color and low income actually increases a little bit. And conversely, the DNF rate goes down, and it goes down most dramatically for kids of color and low income kids and kids with special needs.

What that illuminates is that the traditional system is weighted against historically underserved and more vulnerable populations. When parents first get lower grades, they get really nervous because, oh my child has been an A forever, and now they got a B in your class, and the teacher's response is, well I'm being honest with you, your child may have actually been at the B level before, but because they were doing all the stuff, and all the extra credit, it was miscommunicating to you what their level of mastery is, and I believe that they still can get an A, but now it's much clear to them of what they have to know and do.

**Jill Anderson:** What do you say to people who are just against this and say, my kid needs to learn to be adaptable, needs that life skill of figuring out what's going to make one teacher happy over another one, that this will help them as an adult with bosses, all people are different. What do you say to that?

**Joe Feldman:** I think when parents, and even some teachers say that kids need to be able to shift gears for lots of different people, and the differences among teachers is really important, and we don't want teachers to be all in lockstep. I think that sort of pushes the argument way past where I'm going, and I don't think that every teacher needs to be in lockstep, and in fact teachers doing all kinds of different things, and students are having to shift gears all the time because every teacher has different ways that they have learning in their class, and different ways that they are assessing, and different codes of conduct about how we behave in our class. I'm just saying we don't need to add the additional cognitive load of students having to figure out grading systems as well, particularly when the import of grades is so high on student outcomes and students self image. I mean that's how I would respond to that.

I also think, that when I work with teachers, they tell me, ones that have taught for five or 10 years, or 15 or 20, that learning these things and trying them out and seeing the positive results, creates a whole wave of very powerful emotions for them, from excitement and optimism, to sadness, and shame, and guilt because they think about all the students who they've served before that where they've used practices that may have not been

to their benefit and may have actually harmed them and prevented them from being as successful or misleading them. My response to that is that that is totally normal to feel that way, and that's okay.

We as teachers I think, have to forgive ourselves and give ourselves the license, to when we learn new information, to now be okay with being smarter than we were yesterday and trying these new practices, because we will actually see that adolescents aren't what we thought they were. We thought that they were lazy and couldn't be motivated unless we gave them points. Now we find that actually they're not like that. They can see the relationship between doing homework and doing well on assessments, and they then do their homework without points. Teachers talk about how it sort of reconnects them to why they went into teaching in the first place. They didn't go into teaching so that they could be bean counters and manage every student behavior with assigning or subtracting points. They went into teaching because they want to empower students over their learning, and help students see the path to success that each one of them can have.

**Jill Anderson:** Joe Feldman is the author of *Grading for Equity*, what it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms. He is also the CEO of Crescendo Education Group, which helps schools improve grading and assessment practices. I'm Jill Anderson. This is the Harvard EdCast produced by the Harvard graduate school of education. Thanks for listening and please subscribe.