

The Challenges of Report Card Grading

Unfortunately, the teacher in Activity 10.1 did not have the opportunity to learn what we call *sound grading practices* in her preservice education. Therefore, she had no standards of quality or fairness to guide her. As is the case with many teachers, she was left to develop her own system for arriving at report card grades.

And yet, of all the things we do as teachers, few have the potential for creating more problems and miscommunication than grading. All it takes to realize this is to be the teacher on the explaining end in a conference with a parent who is challenging her child's grade. We can experience friction at report card preparation time as we struggle to assign the grade of a student who worked hard during the semester, but who achieved at a low level, resulting in what is sure to be a disappointing grade. At times like this we can be emotionally torn, valuing our relationship with the student and drawn to a solution that considers the student's individual circumstances while forsaking objectivity and accuracy.

We confront even more challenges inherent in grading, especially the amount of time it takes, when we set about trying to manage the wealth of information we collect through assessments *of* learning. We sort through it, prioritize it, and assign weights to certain evidence, all in an attempt to get a clear picture of student performance. And yet in the end, like the teacher in Activity 10.1, many of us funnel the information through a process of our own making, from which emerges a single letter or number grade.

And finally, there is the challenge of changing report card grading practices to reflect standards-based instruction. In a standards-driven environment, the goal is to provide students and their parents with specific information that communicates about student progress toward the standards. Yet many grading systems in today's schools continue to communicate about student learning using a traditional letter/number grading system that fails to provide specific information about (or in some cases, is not even based on) student mastery of content-area academic standards.

Why Do We Grade? The Purpose of Grades

Most would agree that we grade to communicate about student achievement. But in many classrooms, grades have been used as a tool to communicate about factors other than student achievement. Often attendance, effort, participation, and behavior have been folded into a report card grade, as teachers reward behavior likely to result in learning or punish behavior that is unlikely to help. In so doing, these teachers use grades as motiva-

tors. In that same sense, it's not uncommon to see grades used at the school level to sort and order students from highest to lowest for purposes of determining each student's rank in class. Instill a sense of competition, some believe, even with an artificial creation of winners and losers, and students will work harder and learn more. In this case, grades are assigned on a curve to spread students out on a long continuum of achievement. If some or all of these purposes factor into the determination of a single report card grade, who can possibly interpret the true meaning of that grade in terms of student achievement?

And as we saw with the young teacher in Activity 10.1, often we lack a consistent set of guidelines for calculating grades. Many of us calculate grades by adhering to our own unique procedures and formulae. Some of us have no articulated process other than to record, average, and convert to a grade, while others use elaborate mathematical systems to "crunch" the grade. Electronic gradebook programs offer little or no guidance in how to use their features to ensure fairness and accuracy. Even with school and district policies in place, there can be as many different grading systems in a school as there are teachers.

REFLECT ON YOUR LEARNING

Activity 10.2 What Are Your Purposes for Grades?

Think about the purposes behind the grades you assign. What are you trying to communicate through the use of report card grades? To what extent are your learning goals the basis for the grades you assign? What in your grading practices are aligned with the ideas presented in this chapter so far? What, if anything, seems to be in opposition? In framing your responses, take into account your notes from Activity 10.1. If you are working with a learning team, consider discussing these questions as a group.

So, what can be done to meet the challenges? First, it is helpful to remember that there is a difference between the *purpose* we have for giving the grades, and the subsequent *uses* of the grades given. At the outset, our purpose is to communicate, but after we give grades, others use them for a variety of their own purposes.

School administrators, guidance counselors, college admissions offices, prospective employers, and others use those grades to make decisions such as planning academic and career pathways, placing students in classes, selecting students for special programs, deter-

mining eligibility for a team, school, or college admissions, evaluating school programs, and for instructional planning and improvement. How parents use grades is based in part on their perceptions of what their purpose is. Some believe they are provided so they know how their student is performing relative to others in the class. Some believe grades are a tool to gauge improvement over time, although the focus of improvement varies based on what the parent sees as most important: mastery of the learning targets, effort, preparing for the future, and so forth. Other parents believe grades are primarily a motivational tool, and use them as the basis for rewards or punishments (Munk & Bursuck, 2003). Students use grades to decide whether they are capable in a subject, whether they will continue to put forth effort, and what will or won't be part of their future education and career, among many other things.

Three Grading Principles

Each decision maker counts on grades to be accurate; major decisions that affect students' well-being are made on their basis. We teachers are in charge of ensuring their accuracy. *Our responsibility is to provide as accurate a picture of learning as possible.* This requires that we carefully answer three questions—one we've already seen, and two others that follow it: "What is our purpose for grading?"; "What factors should we include in the grade?"; and "How do we combine those factors to give the truest picture possible of student achievement?"

We offer answers to those questions in the form of three *grading principles*—three statements that serve as the foundation for an accurate and defensible grading system: "The purpose of grades is to communicate"; "Grades communicate about achievement"; and "Grades reflect current level of achievement."