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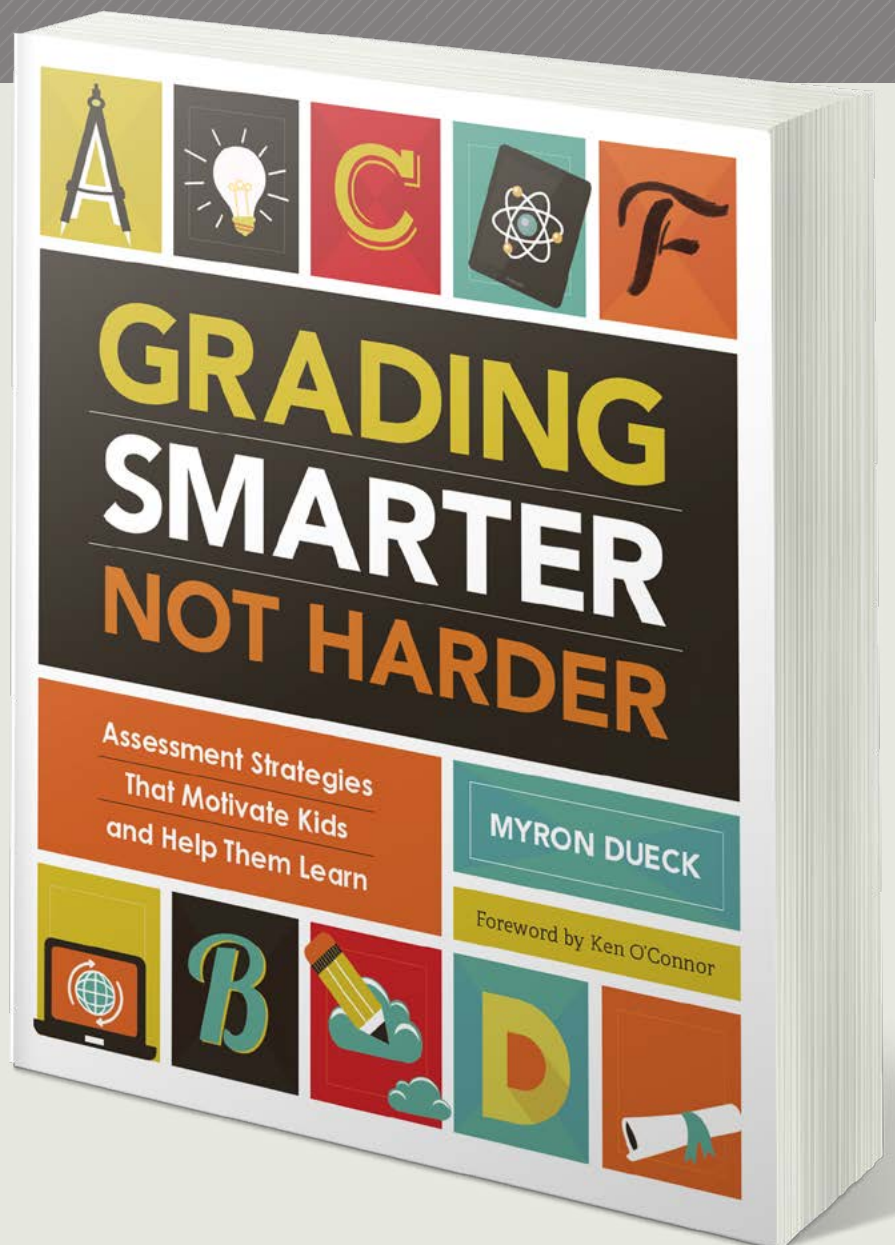
Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn

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Grading Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn

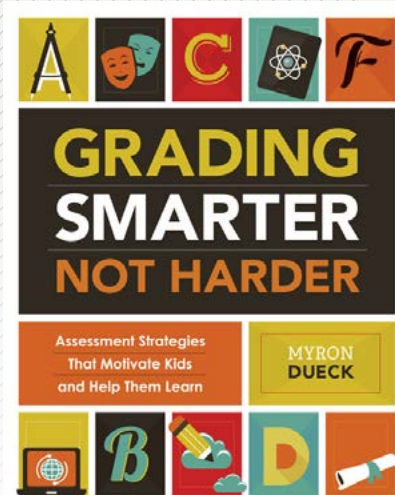
by *Myron Dueck*

ALL THE TALK OF CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN SCHOOLS OBSCURES A MORE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE: DO THE GRADES WE ASSIGN TO STUDENTS TRULY REFLECT THE EXTENT OF THEIR LEARNING?

In this lively and eye-opening book, educator Myron Dueck reveals how many of the assessment policies that teachers adopt can actually prove detrimental to student motivation and achievement and shows how we can tailor policies to address what really matters: student understanding of content. In sharing lessons, anecdotes, and cautionary tales from his own experiences revamping assessment procedures in the classroom, Dueck offers a variety of practical strategies for

- Ensuring that grades measure what students know without punishing them for factors outside their control.
- Critically examining the fairness and effectiveness of grading homework assignments.
- Designing and distributing unit plans that make assessment criteria crystal-clear to students.
- Creating a flexible and modular retesting system so that students can improve their scores on individual sections of important tests.

Grading Smarter, Not Harder is brimming with reproducible forms, templates, and real-life examples of grading solutions developed to allow students every opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Written with abundant humor and heart, this book is a must-read for all teachers who want their grades to contribute to, rather than hinder, their students' success.



Author

MYRON DUECK is a vice-principal and teacher in School District 67 in British Columbia, Canada. He has previously taught in Manitoba and on the South Island of New Zealand. Over the past 17 years of teaching, Myron has had experience in a variety of subjects ranging from grades 3 to 12.

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2014 ASCD Book, 8" x 10," 175 pgs.

List Price **\$28.95**

ASCD Member Price **\$23.16**

Stock **#114003**

ISBN **978-1-4166-1890-4**

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GRADING SMARTER NOT HARDER

**Assessment Strategies That Motivate
Kids and Help Them Learn**

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1

GRADING

Imagine you're a student on the first day of class. In reviewing the class norms and expectations, your teacher addresses the issue of bathroom breaks as follows:

Although we all know you should use the bathroom during your break so that you don't interrupt my teaching or your learning, you will each receive five tokens that you can use throughout the semester whenever "nature calls" during class. Once you have exhausted your five tokens, you will be deducted 1 percent of your grade at the end of the course for each additional time that you use the bathroom during class. Because I believe in fairness, the converse will be true as well: for every token you have left over at the end of the course, I will add 1 percent to your final grade.

I hope that very few educators would agree that bathroom visits should be tied to measures of learning outcomes! An online search for "frequent urination" should convince even the most steadfast supporter of

this token system that someone who needs to use the bathroom frequently is probably not doing so by choice. Pregnancy, bladder infection, stress, diabetes, and a host of other conditions can cause someone to have to urinate frequently.

To what extent do members of the educational community introduce nonacademic variables into the grading of student learning? How many of these variables lie outside of students' direct control? These two questions will help guide the conversation in this chapter.

Behaviors Versus Academics

Let's examine some hypothetical scenarios that involve missing student assignments. For each scenario, let's assume we know the intricate details of each student's experience and ability.

Scenario 1: Tim is walking to school with a completed science assignment safely secured in his backpack when a thief suddenly accosts him and forces him to surrender his backpack. Is the fact that Tim arrives at school without his homework a measure of his learning or ability? Clearly, the answer is no. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of his bad luck or poor choice of school route.

Scenario 2: Sally chooses not to bother even starting her science assignment, though she's a very capable student and would likely do well on it. In this instance, is the absence of an assignment a measure of learning or ability? Again, the answer would be no: because Sally did not complete it, her teacher can't measure its merit. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of her stubbornness or poor decision making.

Scenario 3: Lee is new to his school, having moved into town with his family a few months ago. He struggles with his English speaking and writing skills. He has no friends at school and remains very quiet in class, sitting by himself and seldom asking for help. Though he misses the due date for his science assignment, his teacher can't determine

whether or not he is able to complete it because he is so quiet. The fact is that Lee, uncertain of his ability to complete the assignment, never even starts it. His weak English skills make it hard for him to convey what little understanding he has on the subject. Is Lee's lack of work a measure of learning or ability? Although his choice not even to try completing the assignment is a behavioral decision, it is partly due to a lack of linguistic confidence and a fear of failure. An academic measure might be applied in this case, but determining it would be very difficult.

Scenario 4: Clark tries to complete his science assignment but gives up in frustration. He crumples it up and throws it in the garbage. When his mom demands that he take the assignment out of the trash and complete it, Clark dumps her coffee on it, slams the front door, and goes off to hang out with his buddies at the skate park. Although this scenario is the closest to allowing for a measure of academic ability, there is no evidence available of Clark's level of understanding, and it is unlikely that anyone is willing to sift through the city landfill to find it.

I decided a few years ago that I would only measure hard evidence of the extent to which students understood and could meet established learning goals. To be clear, the behaviors my students exhibit in class and throughout the school are very important to me. As educators, we must preserve and guard our role in forming and encouraging positive behaviors among young people. That said, I have chosen to make every attempt to avoid factoring student behaviors into my grading unless I am explicitly asked to do so by prescribed learning outcomes. Fairly applied, this approach must go both ways: if we decide not to penalize students for negative behaviors, then conversely we should not inflate grades on account of positive ones.

Ultimately, behaviors will factor into grading whether or not we explicitly attempt to measure them. Students who show up to class on time, arrive with the necessary materials, attempt to complete their homework, and treat others nicely will likely benefit

academically—just as students who make poor decisions will suffer academically. If teachers make every effort to collect evidence of learning and measure this alone, behaviors will result in their logical consequences. As my friend and colleague Chris Terris put it, “I care far more about my son’s behavior indicators than I do about his academic grade; if he is trying hard, paying attention, and doing what he is supposed to, his grade will fall where it belongs.”

“Lates” and Zeros

When addressing punitive grading measures in this chapter, I will be speaking mainly of *deductions for late assignments* (“lates”) and *zeros*. Any discussion of zeros must include a distinction between a 4-point scale and 100-point scale. Doug Reeves (2010) explains the difference very well:

On a four-point scale, where “A” = “4,” “B” = “3,” and so on, the zero is accurate, because the difference between the “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “F” are all equal—one point. But assigning a zero on a 100-point scale is a math error; it implies a 60-point difference between the “D” and “F,” while the other differences are typically about 10 points. It makes missing a single assignment the “academic death penalty.” It’s not just unfair—it is not mathematically accurate. (p. 78)

The majority of the zeros I see getting handed out are on a 100-point scale. Both lates and zeros are attempts to affect behavior by statistically incorporating punitive measures into the grading scheme.

Here are some examples of how lates and zeros are typically used in grading decisions:

- 10 percent of the grade is deducted per day after the assignment’s due date.
- A 50 percent deduction is applied to the assignment following an arbitrary number of days beyond the original due date.

- After the due date, the assignment is graded on a pass/fail basis; if awarded a “pass,” 50 percent of the grade is still deducted.
- If the assignment is not handed in by the due date, it receives an automatic zero.

Other grading schemes incorporate penalties in less obvious ways. Here are a few such examples I have encountered:

- A teacher gives a quiz as soon as class begins, and anyone who arrives late is not allowed to take the quiz. Any student who does not take the quiz is given a zero. As a result, students who arrive late to class receive a grade based entirely on their lack of punctuality on a quiz designed to measure learning.
- The top aggregate score a student can have on a summative unit test is reduced based on the number of missing assignments or homework tasks during that unit—so, for example, if Sally only completes 80 percent of the homework assignments, the maximum score she can receive on the unit test is 80 percent.
- Missed tests are given a zero unless students agree to attend a mandatory tutorial session. The session is offered at 6 p.m. on Friday evenings and must be booked via written application two weeks in advance. The make-up test is administered one week after the tutorial—also at 6 p.m. on Friday. Because of the rigidity and inconvenience of this “tutorial support,” very few students go through with it.

The Four Conditions for Punitive Action

Penalties should be just, reasonable, and linked as closely as possible to the offense if the threat of their enactment is to effectively change behaviors. Here’s an example. As a young car driver, I received a lot of speeding tickets. Paying over \$1,200 in fines, though inconvenient, did little to curb my speeding habit. What eventually compelled me to lay off the accelerator was a meeting I had at the government-licensing

branch. “One more ticket in the next 365 days, Mr. Dueck, and you will have your license suspended for one year,” proclaimed the humorless adjudicator. That is all it took for me to go from being pulled over four times a year to getting pulled over once every four years. The threat of losing my license for a year worked well to modify my behavior because it met the CARE guidelines mentioned in the introduction to this book:

- **Care:** The prospect of not being allowed to drive my car for a year terrified me. To say I that cared would be a massive understatement.
- **Aims:** The government wants safer roads and fewer emergency calls. Speeding drivers should pay for the costs that they incur.
- **Reduction:** Since that meeting in 1994, I have had three speeding infractions and I have never been summoned for another licensing meeting.
- **Empowerment:** I had power over my own speeding and it was up to me to slow down. Only I could improve my time management, leave earlier for important events, and turn on the cruise control feature.

Where the threat of losing my driver’s license met the CARE guidelines for punitive action, behavior-based grading does not. Here is why.

Care

Many students do not appear to care about grading consequences. Consider the following conversation I had with a frustrated educator who used late penalties:

Teacher: I use late penalties of 10 to 20 percent reductions and I will tell you why: I am tired of working harder than my students. I put in the effort, the time at lunch or after school, and they don’t.

Me: I have felt the same frustration. Do most of these students seem to care about a 10 or 20 percent deduction to their grades?

Teacher: (Pause.) No, and that is a huge frustration as well. I keep applying the same penalty to the same students.

Some students care about grading penalties and others don't. Those who are very concerned about getting into a good college might work hard to avoid grading penalties, whereas others might prefer to suffer the penalties than to actually complete their assignments. Students who ask questions like "If I don't hand in my work, what is my grade going to be?" or "If I get a zero on this assignment, am I still passing?" are probably debating whether or not to consider the assignment optional. When students opt to ignore assignments, penalties may serve to make teachers feel as though they've addressed the issue, but they do not increase student accountability or responsibility. Academic threats have lost their potency for students who are already disillusioned with their school experience and thus inclined to think, "If I'm already failing, why should I care about another zero?" Many students confront issues that loom much larger than late or missing assignments.

For many years I handed out penalties for late assignments like they were candy. It took me too long to recognize that school is like society at large: if we are building more prisons, something isn't working.

Aims

Punitive grading does not complement my overall aim to measure learning outcomes, increase student confidence, and provide an environment of fairness and equity. My job requires me to measure evidence of learning or capacity against a set of standards. If my grades reflect behavioral penalties, then they do not relate directly to learning outcomes. Furthermore, applying lates and zeros does not inspire academic confidence in my students, some of whom may be very capable academically but struggling with behavior patterns. And despite popular belief, punitive grades diminish fairness and equity in the classroom: the moment I apply grading consequences to factors outside my

classroom, some students will be penalized more than others for factors that are not in their control.

Reduction

Punitive grading may not result in a reduction of the negative behavior. Consider, for example, that an estimated 20 percent of people are chronic procrastinators (Marano, 2003). Students in this cohort who have trouble meeting deadlines and who struggle with organization will undoubtedly feel frustrated and discouraged by lates and zeros. (I can speak from experience as someone who struggles with punctuality and due dates—traits directly linked to my speeding violations.)

Many systems in our society account for the fact that humans will predictably miss deadlines. Airlines appear to set the boarding time for the flight further in advance than is actually required; the state of Iowa has a 60-day grace period for those who forget to renew their driver's licenses on or before their birthdays. Those who think teachers are all punctual and time-conscious might be disappointed at the reality that many teachers struggle with due dates. In every school in which I've worked, a certain percentage of teachers tended to arrive late for staff meetings. I do not know if they were penalized for this, and I am not suggesting that they should have been; for all I know, these teachers were late because they were helping students or giving injured athletes first aid.

Empowerment

Students being penalized must have power over the causal variables. Of the four conditions that must be satisfied in order for me to apply a penalty, this is arguably the most powerful. As Ross Greene (2009) puts it, we have to believe that “if a kid could do well, he would do well” (p. 49). Many of the factors that affect students' abilities to succeed in school lie outside of their control. Here are some examples:

Poverty. Around 22 percent of students in the United States live in poverty (Felling, 2013; National Poverty Center, 2013). Many

of them lack basic amenities such as electricity, heat, and access to computers or the Internet, and face such additional hurdles as utility disconnection, depression, overcrowded homes, and physical abuse (Jensen, 2009). Because nobody chooses to be poor, any of the effects of poverty that contribute to students' lates and zeros in school are by definition outside of their control.

Ability. Student may not have the ability to complete certain assignments, whether because of learning disabilities, gaps in learning due to school transfers, health issues, inadequate mentoring, truancy, or lack of background knowledge.

Confidence. Lack of confidence can prevent students from even attempting assignments, or cause them to surrender at the first sign of difficulty. Such students may find it easier to avoid their work entirely than to take another hit to their self-esteem, and may also lack the confidence to ask for help. Such negative patterns can extend over generations, as the inability to self-advocate is often an inherited trait (Gladwell, 2008).

Environment. Students from lower-income families are more likely to live in households where violence or neglect is present, or that are simply exceptionally loud or busy (Jensen, 2009). Many students wait until late in the evening, when the likelihood that arguments or other disturbances will erupt wanes dramatically, to complete their homework.

Substance abuse and emotional struggles. Concentration and ability can be severely inhibited by drug and alcohol issues and by emotional struggles due to conflict, isolation, or neglect. Research indicates that success in math and languages is most adversely affected by students' emotional states (Medina, 2008).

Parents. As both a teacher and an administrator, I have witnessed the positive and negative effects of parenting decisions. In many cases, parents enable negative student behaviors by excusing their children's truancy. Conversely, some parents will refuse to excuse their children

when they skip a test, thus flinging open the door to all of the grading penalties at the teacher's disposal. Such differences in parenting affect both to whom and to what extent penalties are levied.

Many educators still hold on to the assumption that parents are capable, grounded, and in control of their children. Add this to the list of traditional mind-sets in need of an overhaul. Too often, children are more capable than their parents, often attempting to balance school-work with raising younger siblings, buying groceries, and masking their parents' substance abuse and violence issues.

How Behavior-Based Grading Contributes to Statistical Sabotage

If a student makes a concerted effort to complete a quiz and does not get a single answer correct, then a zero grade is arguably an accurate measure of the student's understanding. However, if the student receives a zero simply because he or she didn't complete the quiz, then the grade is not an accurate measure of understanding (O'Connor, 2010). Once the accuracy of grading data is compromised, a number of difficulties emerge.

Imagine a scenario in which Johnny is scheduled to take two quizzes for the same class, one on Monday and the other on Thursday. He skips the Monday quiz but is present for the one on Thursday. Johnny's teacher gives him an automatic zero on Monday's quiz because he didn't take it, and a zero on Thursday's quiz because he got all the answers wrong. Anyone looking at the teacher's grade book would find it impossible to determine whether the zeros reflect lack of work or lack of understanding. If Johnny also receives lates on assignments, his grading data are even more ambiguous. The teacher in this case might be advised to use special codes or symbols to understand and possibly defend Johnny's aggregate score. I will admit to having had the following type of conversation in parent-teacher meetings:

Me: Good afternoon, Ms. Smith. Thanks for attending the parent-teacher conference.

Ms. Smith: Thanks. My daughter Jill is really struggling in social studies. I was devastated to see that she got 55 percent on her report card.

Me: Well, perhaps she's not doing that badly.

Ms. Smith: What do you mean? Is she not at 55 percent?

Me (pausing, showing some discomfort): Well, I can see that, in my grade book, some of her scores are circled in blue and others are highlighted. Those symbols indicate a reduction in value from what she would have had if she had handed the work in on time.

Ms. Smith: I'm confused.

Me: Well, um, one circle indicates that the assignment was a day late and therefore the score would have been 10 percent greater than it is. Two circles means that the assignment was two days late and therefore would have been 20 percent greater. I see here that I used a highlighter over the top of the existing circles for her poster assignment, indicating that the score was reduced more than 30 percent—most likely to a maximum of 50 percent.

Ms. Smith: Most likely?

Me (deciding to switch tactics): Listen, if Jill would get her work in on time, we wouldn't be having this confusion.

Ms. Smith: Confusion is right. I wish I had known about all of these lates. Did you phone or e-mail me about these issues?

Me: Sorry, I guess I should have called, but I can't keep up with all of these lates in each of my classes and it is Jill's responsibility to let you know.

Ms. Smith: Do you think most teenagers will come home and tell their parents about late or missing assignments?

Me: Probably not.

Ms. Smith: I guess I just want to know where she is actually at academically and to know that 55 percent means something.

I have come to agree with parents like Ms. Smith. She does have the right to know her daughter’s actual grade standing according to the learning outcomes.

Imagine the confusion and frustration that would occur if this type of punitive measurement system were used in the medical community—for example, if a patient’s overdue hospital parking fine were factored into her blood pressure reading. It’s a challenge to find any other profession that purports to offer personal, measurable data in which the numbers can be as warped as we allow them to be in education.

It is disturbing that the destructive power of a zero grade is often the reason that teachers use it. If the goal is to punish or compel, a zero is the ultimate numerical weapon. When factored into the average of an otherwise consistent set of scores, the result can be considerable. Consider the examples in Figure 1.1, showing two sets of identical scores except for a single zero. As a measure of learning, 59.6 percent

Figure 1.1
Effect of a Zero Score on the Final Average (Example 1)

Scores	Scores
78	78
71	71
74	0
68	68
81	81
Final Average	Final Average
74.4	59.6

is clearly a misrepresentation of the extent to which the student likely understands the material. A serious statistical problem exists if we assume that the rest of the scores are based on sound assessments. None of the scores making up the 59.6 percent average come close to the mean score. The whole point of determining an average is to arrive at a singular representation of a set of numbers.

Clearly, zeros can blur the extent to which students demonstrate improvement or mastery of the material. Consider the set of scores in Figure 1.2, purporting to represent tennis-serving skills measured over the course of a two-week unit. The conclusion that the student

Figure 1.2
Effect of a Zero Score on the Final Average (Example 2)

Successful Serves (Out of 10)
March 1: 0
March 2: 0
March 3: 0
March 4: 2
March 5: 3
March 8: 5
March 9: 7
March 10: 8
March 11: 8
March 12: 9
Average: 4.2/10

properly completed roughly 4 out of 10 serves is not accurate and in no way predicts future performance. If any of the non-zero scores have further been reduced for reasons not directly pertaining to her tennis-serving skills, such as for tardiness or talking out of turn, then the ambiguity of the scores is even further compounded.

Let's assume that Catherine, a high school sophomore, attends only half of her biology classes during a two-week unit on communicable diseases. On the day of the summative unit test, Catherine opts to skip class and go for coffee with her girlfriends instead. On account of her truancy, she gets a zero on the test. What are the chances that Catherine, at age 16, knows something about herpes, mononucleosis, or AIDS? If Catherine knows absolutely nothing about communicable diseases by the end of the unit, she has either been living under a rock for most of her life or her teacher is completely incompetent. Any score above zero would far more accurately represent the degree of Catherine's knowledge.

Growing up, I had a toy version of NASCAR legend Richard Petty's racecar—number 43. If we are after grades that accurately measure student understanding, adopting a policy of using the numbers of students' favorite racecars for missing work would make about as much sense as using zeros.

Strategies for Addressing Uncompleted Work

Following are some possible solutions for ensuring that student grades more accurately measure

PERSONAL STORY

Imagine that the history teachers at Colonial High School are so fed up with their students' late and missing assignments that they appropriate their department's budget to pay for a set of wooden stocks such as those used in colonial times to punish wrongdoers. Not only do the stocks serve to teach students a little history, but they also help motivate students to complete their work on time. The teachers institute a simple rule: get your assignments in by the due date or spend a day in the stocks. The students, terrified at the prospect of being constrained in a wooden device and having tomatoes pelted at them by jeering classmates, all begin delivering their assignments on time. To their delight, the teachers hardly ever need to resort to the stocks. The system is considered a resounding success: very few students are punished, and rates of homework completion skyrocket.

The history teachers throw a party at the house of the mastermind behind the idea, Mr. Bastille. Though Ms. Lamb, the head of the science department, can hear the revelry from her house down the street, she is not feeling the celebratory zeal. She is frustrated because many of her own students have suddenly stopped handing in their work on time, choosing to spend their time on history assignments instead. Though she's unaware of the history teachers' newly instituted method of punishment, she has overheard some of her students discussing stocks and is surprised at their newfound interest in economics.

If this story were to continue, the science teachers would either ask the history teachers to dismantle the stocks or institute their own draconian punishments. A less extreme version of this choice confronts teachers all the time, especially at the secondary level. I have been approached by teachers who feel caught between competing forces *(cont.)*

PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

when implementing changes to their grading methods. Many teachers would like to explore ways to motivate students without the threat of penalties, but fear that their students will then spend the bulk of their time on assignments for classes that do institute penalties. I have chosen the term *interdepartmental cold war* to describe this dilemma.

Of course, because students have a limited amount of time and energy, there will always be some form of competition among teachers. One way to mitigate this would be for all educators to avoid adopting punitive measures that reward compliance rather than evidence of learning.

competency, improvement, and understanding of material.

Strategy #1: Use Incompletes and Interventions Rather Than Zeros

STEP 1: Set due dates and time spans. Due dates for assignments are like the dates we set when inviting friends over for dinner: they serve as promises that are expected to be met. When guests arrive late for dinner, the food gets cold and the visit is often shortened. Broken promises inconvenience others, and a pattern of broken promises can compromise the integrity and credibility of the promise breaker. I let my students know that I work hard to grade them fairly and that I am prepared to invest extra time to that end—not to guilt trip them, but to remind them that I’m keeping up my end of the bargain and expect them to do so as well.

I’ve had success with setting a time span rather than a due date. Time spans such as “sometime next week” provide students with flexibility and choice. When I give students a week’s span to hand in their work, I usually consider Friday to be the true due date, but I am happy to give the impression that there is a range of acceptable dates. Students begin to feel a helpful nudge on Monday as the “early” assignments start trickling in. Whether you’ve set a due date or time span, it is imperative that students not wait too long to start working on their assignments. A tidal wave of late assignments is unbearable for the teacher, and rushing at the last minute is never in students’ best interests.

STEP 2: Use the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form. One day when I was grading papers at home, I noticed that one of my students, Jimmy, hadn't turned in his map assignment. I tried to recall if there was a reason for it to be missing. Was he in class on Friday? Did he tell me he'd hand it in on Monday? Did he misunderstand when it was due? Is he struggling with the content? Was he one of the athletes away on a basketball trip? Sitting at home on a Saturday afternoon, all I could do was speculate.

Luckily, my frustration with not knowing where Jimmy's assignment was led me to design the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form shown in Figure 1.3. Now, when students don't hand in or finish their

Figure 1.3
Late or Incomplete Assignment Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Missing assignment: _____

Reason(s) for missing the due date:

<input type="checkbox"/> school-based sports/extracurricular	<input type="checkbox"/> heavy course load
<input type="checkbox"/> job/work requirements	<input type="checkbox"/> social event(s)
<input type="checkbox"/> difficulty with material/lack of understanding	<input type="checkbox"/> club or group event out of school
<input type="checkbox"/> procrastination	<input type="checkbox"/> other

Details: _____

Revised completion date: _____

Interventions/support required:

<input type="checkbox"/> extra study/home-based effort	<input type="checkbox"/> use of planner
<input type="checkbox"/> homework club	<input type="checkbox"/> help with time management
<input type="checkbox"/> extra help from teacher	<input type="checkbox"/> counselor visit
<input type="checkbox"/> tutorial	<input type="checkbox"/> other

Details: _____

work, I ask them to fill out the form and explain what happened. The last section of the form asks student to select potential interventions that might help them complete the assignment.

The benefits of this form are twofold. First, the student can actually plan a strategy for completing the assignment. Second, students see what interventions are available in the school to help them: students who are suffering emotionally, for example, might not realize that school counselors are available to talk. This form allows a missing assignment to be the catalyst for students to obtain the support they need to be happy and effective in all classes.

Consider the following example. Greg was a quiet student in my 12th grade history class who had always done fairly well. Suddenly, over the course of a month, he began to accrue absences, he failed to hand in a few assignments, and his quiz and test scores dropped. It is not uncommon for high school seniors to experience a dip in performance, so I did not get too alarmed. Though Greg assured me that he would be able to turn things around, I asked if there were any outside factors affecting his academic life. After a pause and a few too many blinks, he responded.

“I was in a car accident a few weeks back,” he said. “That might have something to do with it. I’ve had a splitting headache ever since.”

“A few weeks back!” Further questioning revealed that the accident had occurred about six weeks prior and that he had not sought any medical attention afterward. Rather than focusing on absences, missed assignments, and poor test scores, I worked on connecting Greg with a doctor, a physiotherapist, and a chiropractor. Within about a week, Greg appeared happier and more energetic and reported that his headaches had disappeared. He was soon caught up on his work and doing better than he ever had before.

Teachers should read and sign the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form after students have filled it in. This ensures that teachers hold the students accountable for revised due dates and that they are aware of any issues needing immediate attention. If a student suggests

an unreasonably distant completion date, the teacher should feel free to say no and impose a more reasonable time frame. And if a student indicates that his or her underlying issue is particularly grave—neighborhood violence, for example—the teacher should strive to put supports in place for that student as soon as possible.

STEP 3: Implement intervention strategies. Any interventions noted on the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form need to be implemented in a timely manner. If the student suggests that he will turn in the assignment within a day or two, let him prove it; however, if the two days pass and nothing's handed in, it's time to say, "OK, we tried it your way—now it is my turn." Here are some long- and short-term intervention strategies that are worth considering:

- Homework-completion centers that students attend during lunch or after school.
- Saturday school as a requirement for those who are falling behind in their work. The threat of Saturday school is enough to scare many students into completing their assignments.
- In-school suspensions during which students can get support from teachers.
- Pair-ups of older students needing community hours with younger students needing help.

STEP 4: When necessary, assign incompletes. Listing assignments as "incomplete" is preferable than resorting to the finality of the powerful zero. Without a numerical value, an incomplete assignment will not risk dropping a student's final average precipitously for reasons unrelated to the student's understanding of content.

Once a student is afforded the opportunity to complete an assignment, the assignment should be listed as "incomplete" in the grade book until it is completed. In fact, the student's *entire course standing* should be listed as incomplete as long as the assignment isn't finished and handed in. Although some schools or districts may not allow

courses to be listed as incomplete on report cards, policies can be challenged and changed. I worked at one school that allowed incompletes on report cards but required that they be converted into numerical values after two weeks. (Often it took a lot less than two weeks to resolve the incompletes—especially after they came to parents’ attention.)

If a numerical value is required, it is up to you as the teacher to consider all variables and deliver a final grade that you believe is the best reflection of the student’s evidence of learning. Here are some variables to consider when formulating a final numerical grade:

- Conversations with the student
- Quiz scores
- Partial completion of assignments
- Test score patterns
- Attendance

Informed decisions sometimes have to be rendered without every piece of hard evidence in place. The bottom line is that you should do what professionals from oncologists to mechanics to accountants do: examine all the data available and render as accurate an opinion as possible based on your analysis.

Here are some reasons why following the above steps can reap benefits in the classroom:

1. Students have to work hard to achieve zero. When I began instituting time spans for assignments, using the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form, implementing interventions, and assigning incompletes rather than zeros, more students began completing their assignments in my classes than ever before. The change was particularly evident among students who had previously tended to opt out of assignments that they considered to be inconvenient.

I started telling my students on the first day of class, “You’ll have to work hard to achieve a zero.” I let them know that I considered responsibility, accountability, and—most of all—learning paramount in my class. I told them that if they considered opting out of assignments,

they could expect to visit homework-completion centers or Saturday school, and that their lives would be made more difficult by phone calls to their parents and, eventually, an “incomplete” on their report cards. Having sufficiently stunned my students, I ended my rant by reminding them that life would be much easier if they just completed the handful of mandatory graded assignments.

Despite my clear warnings to students, instituting my no-zeros system was not without its struggles and difficult conversations. (See the sidebar on this page for an account of one of them.)

2. The system results in accurate grades.

Once students are actually required to complete assignments so that the grades attached to them are real measures of learning, it is easy for teachers to defend the students’ grades, which typically improve when zeros and lates are taken out of the equation. This is especially true for average and struggling learners—those in the 60–70 percent range who might be tempted to factor in a few zeros when it’s convenient, for example, find that they quickly shoot up to the 80–90 percent range once they’re prohibited from opting out of assignments. In addition, students with disruptive home lives no longer face the “double jeopardy” of a dysfunctional environment outside of school added to punitive grades within it.

3. Student results improve. When educators get rid of zeros and lates at a schoolwide level, the results can be incredible. Schools that adopt meaningful consequences rather than resorting to zeros experience lower dropout rates and higher

PERSONAL STORY

One of the most popular activities in my 12th grade history class was our annual re-creation of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. After students spent a few days conducting careful and focused research on the events leading up to the conference, the school library was transformed into the Palace of Versailles and the students into diplomats attempting to reconfigure post–World War I Europe. Just as in the historical version, our conference always had plenty of arguments, secret deals, and disappointments.

When the conference was over, each student had to write an essay analyzing the conference from the point of view of the country he or she had been chosen to represent and explaining how the activity had helped him or her to better understand the complexities of international negotiations. Students who took the necessary time to research their assigned nationalities and who had invested energy and enthusiasm into the conference negotiations had no problem writing impassioned reflections.

One year, I had a student, Ellen, who failed to complete her essay. As days turned into a week, she kept putting it off, telling me she’d have it done “soon.” I reminded Ellen that as long as the assignment was not handed in, her grade for the course would be listed as incomplete. I suspected that Ellen had come to rely on her network of friends to complete her assignments for her, and the reflective nature of the essay did not conform to her “peer-completion system.”

After a few more days, I reminded Ellen that her work was still incomplete and that her report card would reflect that fact. When she still didn’t hand in her essay, I entered “incomplete” in her report card for the class. (cont.)

PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

The day after report cards had been sent home, Ellen was waiting by my door when I got to class. She was fuming.

"I got my report card and I don't have a grade," she said. "This does not make any sense! Where's my grade?"

"You don't have a numerical score right now," I replied. "Perhaps you'll recall that as long as I don't have your reflection essay, I can't issue you a numerical grade."

"That's stupid," she said. "I should have a grade. My dad saw my report card and he also thinks this is a stupid system."

Though I began to feel defensive, I tried to remain measured. "Perhaps your dad would like to give me a call," I said.

Though I was indeed offended by Ellen's language, I reminded myself that I wasn't the only one experiencing a paradigm shift. *(cont.)*

rates of school completion (Reeves, 2006b; Reeves, 2010). Data from one high school I used to work at support these findings. In 2005, we implemented lunchtime and after-school homework and assignment supports, followed shortly by a Saturday school program. As a result, teachers began to explore consequences for missing assignments that focused on completion rather than punishment. The table in Figure 1.4 shows the total number of course failures before, during, and after these interventions were put in place. (The table reflects failures in all high school courses at a high school with approximately 700 students, meaning that a single student could account for as many of 8 failures in any given year.)

4. Responsibility and accountability are increased. As educators, we do society a great disservice if we do not teach students that behaviors

Figure 1.4
Number of Course Failures Before, During, and After Implementation of "No Zeros" Policy and Additional Supports

Year	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Final
2004–2005	292	334	321	300	192
2005–2006	215	272	265	291	118
2006–2007	160	198	193	248	104
2007–2008	5	33	40	53	36

Data compiled by Terry Grady.

have consequences. As long as I have students asking me to give them zeros, I will be convinced that zeros do not encourage responsibility but rather erode it.

5. Interventions can be personalized and equitable. Because every student's needs are unique, schools should deliver personalized learning opportunities and interventions (Cooper, 2011; Rshaid, 2011). Some students will require assistance from either a teacher or an older, academically successful student; other students simply need a quiet, structured environment in which to complete assignments. In a personalized learning environment, not every solution matches every student. Once zeros and lates are off the table, educators are empowered to do what is necessary for each student to learn.

Strategy #2: Institute Two-Tiered Testing

It is common for student attendance to dip on test days. Some students simply decide to avoid the discomfort of taking the test. If they have chosen not to prepare for it, they may feel that failure is inevitable.

When I made the shift to basing student grades solely on learning outcomes, I was forced to look for alternatives to grading penalties for students who missed a test. It seemed ludicrous to go to the effort to have students complete all of their assignments in order to grade them accurately, only to turn around and reduce test scores due to truancy. My solution? *Design two different tests*—one for the scheduled test day, and a less user-friendly one for the make-up

PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

A fundamental change in the way that we do things almost always invites some criticism and hostility (Brodie, 2004).

Ellen's attack continued. "You might be interested to know, Mr. Dueck, that I told another teacher about this and she also thinks it's stupid."

For the next few seconds, I tuned Ellen out as I tried figuring out which of my coworkers would be likeliest to disagree with my grading policy. After devising a quick mental shortlist of suspects, I returned my attention to Ellen.

"What would my grade for the class be if you just gave me a zero for the essay?" she asked.

"I don't know and I really don't care," I replied. "That number is not important or relevant to me."

"Why isn't that number relevant?"

An analogy came to my mind in an instant—probably prompted by a recent sports event held in our town.

"Ellen, imagine that you're in a triathlon and you have a great swim followed by a fantastic bike ride. At the end of each stage, you're close to beating your personal record for time. As you round the final corner in the marathon, you hear the crowd cheering and see the finish line. At that very moment, my son is standing on the sidewalk and accidentally drops a gumball, which rolls onto the street. As you wave triumphantly to your supporters, you don't notice the spherical menace ahead of you and you step on it, twist your ankle, and crumple to the ground in agony. Only steps from the finish line, you realize that you will be unable to complete the third and final stage of the event. In this scenario, what is your final time on the triathlon?"

"I don't have—" she paused.

"You don't have what?" I pressed. (cont.)

PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

A flicker of clarity passed over Ellen's eyes. "I don't have a time."

"That's right," I said. "You don't have a time until you complete all three stages of the triathlon—just as you don't have a final grade until all of your assignments are in."

Ellen then asked a question that drove home to me just how much zeros diminish personal responsibility, sabotage learning, and destroy students' standings: "Can I please just have a zero?"

Her question thudded against my eardrums and reverberated through the room. A student had just *asked* for a zero, and even used the word "please"! For years I had used zeros as the ultimate weapon of persuasion; zero was the hero combating the evil powers of avoidance and apathy and upholding the values of responsibility and accountability. In one fell swoop, Ellen sapped our hero of all its power.

I declined Ellen's request, and she slammed the door as she left the room. A day or two after our heated conversation, Ellen submitted a thoughtful and complete reflection essay. I asked her why she had done such a good job on the essay given that she was so eager for a zero. Her response offered a peek into an adolescent's view of effort and accountability.

"If I'm going to put my name on something, I'm going to do a good job," she said, "even if I didn't want to do it in the first place."

Since my confrontation with Ellen, I have lost count of the number of times students have asked for zeros in place of actually completing their work. Students have offered to clean the classroom, buy me lunch, and wash my car if I would reconsider, just this once, bending my "no zeros" policy. Now, when I hear teachers preach about the need to use zeros to enforce student responsibility and accountability, behind my desire to smirk is the story of Ellen.

test. This is not about making one test that's easy and another one that's hard, but rather an attempt to grant more favorable conditions to students who take the test according to schedule. For example, the more user-friendly test given out on the scheduled test day might allow the student to choose between a number of written response topics.

Another option is to deliver the same test differently on the scheduled test day than on the day of the make-up test. For example, let's say a unit plan has eight reasoning targets that students are supposed to meet. On the scheduled test day, I might place scraps of paper with the numbers one through eight in a hat, select three scraps at random, and let the students pick one of the three selected targets to answer on the test. On the day of the make-up test, I might select only one number, so that the students aren't given a choice. This strategy has the side benefit of removing any bias I might have regarding the targets from the equation.

On the scheduled test day, it can also be fun if you involve the students by having them pick the numbers out of the hat—students enjoy the lottery aspect, and giving the students a choice of targets helps to reduce their stress. The availability of choice also contributes to student confidence: students who might otherwise skip a test on the scheduled day might end up attending if they know that they'll be granted greater leeway than on the make-up test.

If you choose to implement a two-tiered testing system, be clear to students that those taking the test on schedule will be granted more favorable

conditions, but that all students will still have a chance to prove their mastery. This two-tiered testing system has the following benefits:

- It sends a message to students that it is in their best interests to complete the test on the scheduled test day.
- Students who take the make-up test still receive grades based entirely on evidence of learning.
- The teacher doesn't have to spend time assessing the legitimacy of each student's absence.
- It is harder for students taking the make-up test to cheat by talking to classmates who took the test on schedule because the formats of the two tests will differ.
- Students who get more time to study by taking the test later receive a slightly more challenging test format, which is only fair.

Students have a keen eye for equity and fairness. Most of them welcome a system that separates behavior-based penalties from the grading process. Students know that some people miss tests for valid reasons and others have circumstances that are murky. Two-tiered testing aligns with the imperatives suggested by Damien Cooper in his book *Redefining Fair* (2011): it's informative, it blends consistency with professional judgment, and it is transparent in both purpose and communication. Perhaps this is why I have not had a single student complaint about or parental challenge to this policy. In fact, one parent specifically told me that she welcomed this system because it stopped her daughter from lobbying her to call the school with an excuse for her absences on scheduled test days.

Strategy #3: Match Consequences to Behaviors

Students, being human, make poor decisions from time to time. As Oscar Wilde once wrote, "Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes." Unfortunately, many educators have fallen into the trap of believing that punitive grading should be the chief consequence for poor decisions and negative behaviors. These teachers continue

to argue that grading as punishment works, despite over 100 years of overwhelming research that suggests it does not (Guskey, 2011; Reeves, 2010). Just because a student does her homework doesn't mean that she did so to avoid a grading penalty. As Guskey's (2011) extensive research shows, students do not perform better when they know that "it counts."

Once you decide not to let negative behaviors excessively affect your academic data, the door is wide open to explore the use of consequences that are unique, purposeful, and effective. It's impossible to design a universal rulebook that addresses every potential student infraction; in fact, overreliance on one-size-fits-all penalties reflects precisely the mentality that most limits teachers from making professional decisions for individual students. Once rules are set in stone, educators are painted into a corner. Administrators will be quick to agree that teachers are most often the ones asking that certain rules *not* be applied in particular cases. The fact is that most teachers do not want students to be expelled or to fail a course due to poor decision making or challenging circumstances. Rather, we want guidelines in place that encourage positive choices and compel students to do what's necessary for them to succeed academically.

Schools can develop guidelines for confronting negative behaviors such as truancy, defiance, tardiness, plagiarism, and a host of others that extend far beyond the realm of grading. Such guidelines can help teachers to modify their approach based on the issues affecting each individual student. The following examples from my own experience show a few ways in which negative behaviors can be curbed without reducing student grades.

Example 1: Student Plagiarizes Speech

Background: During the last two weeks of a senior leadership class, each student was asked to deliver a speech describing "what leadership means to me." An otherwise academically successful student, Gina,

delivered a speech that was found to have been heavily plagiarized. Prior to the infraction, Gina's grade in the class stood at 97 percent.

Traditional Response: The speech is given a zero, reducing Gina's grade in the class to 94 percent.

Problems with the Traditional Response:

- Gina is content with a grade of 94 percent and readily accepts the consequence.
- The teacher is frustrated by Gina's apparent apathy.
- Gina's revised grade no longer reflects her actual level of academic competency.
- Gina avoids completing an assignment that all the other students completed.

Alternative Response: Gina is required to complete a second speech under the supervision of an adult in an established homework-completion room during her free time (e.g., at lunchtime or after school). In her new speech, Gina is required to discuss her decision to plagiarize the first speech. In addition, she is required to conduct research on the consequences for plagiarism meted out at three different colleges, one of which is the school she is most likely to attend. The teacher informs her parents of Gina's plagiarism and of the resulting consequences. Her second speech is graded as normal, with no penalties applied.

Benefits of the Alternative Response:

- The behavioral infraction (plagiarizing to save time and effort) is met with a behavioral consequence (losing free time and having to expend additional effort).
- Because Gina cares about losing her free time, she takes the consequence seriously.
- A teachable moment is realized as Gina learns about the consequences she can expect if she plagiarizes in college
- Gina's grade in the class is preserved as reflective entirely of her knowledge of prescribed learning outcomes.

Example 2: Student Delivers Project Three Days Late

Background: During a unit on ancient Egypt, all 5th grade students are asked to complete a poster on four different aspects of Egyptian society. One student, Simon, wastes time in class rather than work on his poster, so the teacher asks him to complete the assignment at home. The next day, Simon still hasn't finished it. Three days later, he hands in the completed poster.

Traditional Response: The teacher applies a penalty of 10 percent off per day late. The poster would have received a score of 62 percent if handed in on time, but because it is three days late, the grade is reduced to 32 percent. The teacher hears Simon mutter, "Next time I won't even bother getting it done." Simon's overall class grade drops from 58 percent to 49 percent.

Problems with the Traditional Response:

- The score of 32 percent does not reflect the actual quality of the poster or Simon's level of academic ability.
- Simon's overall grade in the class no longer accurately reflects his academic ability.
- Simon, who would have been on the edge of academic success, now regrets having spent time and effort on the assignment.

Alternative Response: When the teacher notices Simon wasting time in class, she reminds him that he may have to complete the poster at lunchtime or after school. She also tells the class that lates and zeros are not options for those who procrastinate, and encourages students to ask her for help and to let her know if challenges outside the classroom might prevent them from completing the assignment by the next day.

When Simon fails to submit the poster assignment after a day or two, the teacher directs him to an established homework-completion room, where he completes the poster during lunchtime sessions. His final grade on the poster does not reflect any academic penalty.

Benefits of the Alternative Response:

- The response reflects a supportive classroom environment where grading is based strictly according to learning outcomes.
- The behavioral infraction (wasting time in class) is met with a behavioral consequence (missing free time at lunch). Because Simon can see the connection between wasting class time and losing free time, he is liable to be more accountable in the future.
- Simon is encouraged by his penalty-free grade and realizes the connection between effort and reward.

Example 3: Student Delivers Perfect Project Two Days Late and Parent Lobbies for No Grading Penalty

Background: During an 8th grade science unit on planets, Serena delivers an exceptional clay project displaying the size and color of the planets. Unfortunately, she hands in her project two days late, along with a note from her mother highlighting some medical concerns in the family that contributed to the tardiness and requesting that the teacher call her so she can explain the details. Serena's teacher is concerned, as he knows her to be not only a perfectionist, but also generally punctual. He recalls that a similar situation arose with one of her projects a month earlier. Despite the note from Serena's mother, the teacher feels that it would not be fair to the other students if he were to give her a high score on the project. As he sees it, Serena appears to have benefitted from extra time to complete it.

Traditional Response: The teacher applies a penalty to Serena's project of 10 percent off per day late, leading to an increasingly uncomfortable series of phone calls with Serena's irate mother and, eventually, the principal's involvement. In the end, the teacher is forced to rescind the late penalty and give Serena a perfect score. Around the time that the situation is resolved, another project is due that Serena will once again not hand in on time.

Problems with the Traditional Response:

- Serena's mother appears to be enabling her poor choices.
- Serena is learning that the system can be altered to suit her needs.
- Serena may eventually encounter a system, perhaps at the post-secondary level, that will not bend to the wishes of her mother.
- An unfair playing field has been established in which Serena can take extra time to complete an assignment as long as a parent can lobby to eliminate the penalty. Other parents and students are unhappy about this development.

Alternative Response: The teacher decides that regardless of the circumstances, each student's work will be graded solely on the basis of learning outcomes and uses the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form to track the reasons for handing in assignments after they're due. If a student's forms suggest a predictable pattern of late assignments, the teacher can thereafter assign that student to homework-completion sessions either before or after the assignment is due. If a student misses assignments for reasons that require further explanation, the teacher simply offers support, perhaps by meeting with the student at lunch or after school to fill out the form and discuss the situation.

Benefits of the Alternative Response:

- The teacher only grades the assignments according to learning outcomes.
- All students who need academic or behavioral support receive it, thus increasing their accountability.
- The effect of negative parental influences on grades is eliminated.

Example 4: Students Misuse Cell Phones in Class

Background: Cell phone use has hit epidemic levels in Mr. Sanchez's carpentry class. The students' inattentiveness to their teacher's demonstrations and to their surroundings presents both academic and

safety hazards. Mr. Sanchez argues for implementing a strict no-phones policy at staff meetings, but his fellow teachers object because some of their lessons actually incorporate the students' cell phones. Frustrated, Mr. Sanchez decides to apply a grading penalty whenever student are caught using phones in his class.

Traditional Response: Mr. Sanchez introduces a daily classroom behavior grade ranging from zero to five, and students caught texting receive automatic zeros for the day. By the end of the term, some students' overall scores are diminished considerably due to their phone use. Mr. Sanchez also decides to confiscate the cell phones of chronic offenders.

Problems with the Traditional Response:

- Students' behavioral decisions result in grades that do not reflect their learning.
- Mr. Sanchez is forced to consider a behavior grade for every student every day, resulting in much more work for him as well as pressure to watch all students closely at all times.
- Some students may gladly "pay" in daily behavior grades in order to continue texting in class.
- Students whose phones are confiscated can become angry and conflict can ensue.

Alternative Response: An administrator visits every class in the school and explains the introduction of an initiative designed to help students make wise choices about cell phone use. In addition, teachers are given the freedom to establish phone-use norms specific to their classes. Students are encouraged to ask their teachers if they may use their phones in the event that personal circumstances require them to call or text during class. Administrators inform everyone in the school community that teachers will direct students to the main office for recurring infractions. In such cases, students' phones can be confiscated for the day and held until their parents retrieve them. There is no grading penalty for classroom cell phone use.

Benefits of the Alternative Response:

- The behavioral infraction (cell phone use) is met with a suitable behavioral consequence (cell phone confiscation).
- Teachers can focus on delivering instruction rather than constantly monitoring phone use.
- Administrators are given the opportunity to examine why students are using their phones in class and seek applicable interventions.
- Parents are informed of and involved in the process.
- Individual teachers are free to incorporate student cell phone use in lesson plans.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: If I don't apply grades, students won't do the work—it's that simple. What do you suggest I do instead?

A: I think we need to question the validity of the idea that things won't get done unless they're graded. Consider the following points:

- “Getting it done” does not mean that learning occurred.
- Many factors other than grades can compel students to submit assignments.
- Faced with grading penalties, many students will still fail to do the work required.
- Grading penalties aimed at completion compel some students to cheat.
- Forcing students to complete assignments on time will inevitably come at the expense of something else.
- Educators risk sending the message that they will alter the intended purpose of grading—measuring learning outcomes—to affect student behavior.

Educators who need proof that grading penalties do not lead to increased effort or more learning are encouraged to study the work of Tom Guskey (2011). The bottom line is that when activities are

engaging, purposeful, and personal, students will be interested regardless of the grading consequences.

Q: Aren't grading penalties the logical consequences of poor student choices?

A: I once had a conversation with a teacher who was adamant that grading penalties were justifiable as the logical consequences of students' poor choices. Here is my recollection of our conversation:

Janet: I have to give Jimmy a zero. I'm sorry, but if something is not handed in and the learning outcomes were not demonstrated, then it's a zero.

Me: Regardless of what you think he may or may not have learned?

Janet: Listen, I'm not going to guess. Furthermore, I've chased Jimmy around. Sorry, but I am done.

Me: So you're making a punitive decision?

Janet: I guess so, but it's the logical consequence. Show up late to a job, and you're fired!

Me: I know a number of people who show up late for work fairly regularly and are still employed—but let's discuss grading for the moment. I hate applying zeros as a penalty because it renders the rest of my grading useless.

Janet: Zero is not a penalty if it reflects something that wasn't done at all! Jimmy did no work, so there is no grade—that isn't some arbitrary decision. I don't get why you keep saying that zero is a penalty; it's simply an accurate reflection of the fact that nothing was done.

Me: Except that you're choosing a number that is far from the likeliest outcome had the student done the work. For nearly every student, 100 percent would be more likely than zero. Wouldn't you agree?

Janet: I guess so, but I want to teach the students a lesson as well.

Me: Have you ever been on a school committee that requires you to collect money from fellow staff members?

Janet: Yeah, why?

Me: Did teachers bring in their money when asked to?

Janet: No, it is impossible to collect money from some teachers!

Me: I haven't collected money, but I've collected award-nomination sheets from teachers. The barrier wasn't high: I asked teachers to put their names on a sheet and fill it in to whatever extent they wished. They could even leave it blank if they wanted. Despite two weeks of reminders and even a few warnings, many of the teachers failed to hand in their sheets. In fact, on the day of the awards ceremony, long after the trophies were engraved, I had teachers ask if I could possibly accept their nominations. I find it interesting that many of these same teachers won't accept assignments from struggling learners a single day late without applying a penalty.

When will we accept that procrastination is a human condition? Just because certain teachers didn't hand in nomination sheets doesn't mean that they didn't have students who deserved an award—and just because a student procrastinates doesn't mean that he doesn't know, say, the causes of World War II. Evidence of understanding is not dependent on a due date.

Janet: But what about that one kid who pushes it—the one who ignores all my efforts? That 1 percent of the population?

Me: I don't write policy for all my students based on the one student in my class who falls outside the norm. I prefer to use professional discretion.

Q: You said that you post incompletes instead of student grades if essential assignments aren't completed. What do you do if a numerical course standing is required?

A: The following example provides a few potential solutions to this dilemma. Vince was a senior in high school who seemed to enjoy my history class, attending regularly and taking part in class conversations. His favorite course in school was theater, and he was a regular cast member in our school's drama productions. When he did miss history class, it was usually due to obligations related to major drama productions.

The last unit of the year in history class was on the Cold War. On the day of the last unit test, Vince was absent. I was surprised, as this was the first time he'd missed a test day. It turned out that Vince had left the community entirely: a student who knew him told me that he was attending an audition for an acting school.

With only a week left in the school year, I knew that I faced a difficult decision. I gave Vince an "incomplete" on his unit test, which in turn made his overall class grade "incomplete" as well. It had become my mission to only grade on hard evidence, and I was frustrated at the prospect that I might have to alter my system due to Vince's departure. I considered assessing his knowledge of the Cold War by phone, but I couldn't get in touch with him.

The last day of the school year arrived and I still did not have a score for Vince's unit test. When the school secretary asked what grade should be reported for Vince, I didn't know what to say. She informed me that the British Columbia Ministry of Education would not accept "incomplete" as a grade. I was given one hour to decide on a numerical grade. Here are the variables I considered:

- Vince had attended all but two classes of the three-week Cold War unit.

PERSONAL STORY

I shared the saga of how I decided on Vince's final grade with a group of teachers once. One of the teachers, an experienced educator named Bob, agreed with my position of grading only according to learning outcomes, but felt that I was bending my principles by submitting anything other than a zero for Vince's missing test score.

"You change the math to fit your needs!" he said. "When it doesn't work out, you just pick an arbitrary number. Vince may as well have received a zero—at least that would've reflected the certainty that there was no assessment evidence at all. You resorted to a hunch!"

When Bob mentioned the "hunch," I thought about how valuable hunches are in other situations. I asked Bob, "Imagine that you visit your knee surgeon, and after she looks at your x-rays, she tells you that 95 percent of the time, the condition you have results in a typical surgical procedure. However, given what she knows about your specific case, she's got a hunch that another option just might work. Would you think that her hunch was valid?"

Reluctantly, Bob responded that he probably would. Just as there is great value in a personal opinion based on professional experience, there is also great value in a professional opinion based on personal experience.

- I could recall at least two class discussions in which Vince participated during the unit, his contributions to which certainly reflected a degree of interest in and understanding of the issues.
- Vince had never failed a single test in history class. His scores were fairly consistent across all units, with nearly every test score landing somewhere between 73 and 79 percent.
- Vince had completed a few quizzes on Cold War topics, with an average score of about 70 percent.

Based on these variables, I decided that I had the following options:

1. Enter a zero for the test and report Vince's final grade as 71 percent.
2. Omit the missing test and report the final grade as 76 percent.
3. Use the average of all of Vince's unit-test scores as the final grade. Because his test scores were typically higher than his grades on assignments, the result would be a final grade of 77 percent.
4. Enter a score for the missing test equal to that of his lowest unit-test grade: 75 percent.
5. Enter score for the missing test greater than zero but lower than 73, so that it would be impossible for the score to improve his grade.

In the end, I went with the last option: I entered a score of 35 percent for the missing test, resulting in a final grade of 73 percent.



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PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-1890-4 ASCD product # 114003 8A/14
 Quantity discounts: 10–49, 10%; 50+, 15%; 1,000+, special discounts (e-mail programteam@ascd.org or call 800-933-2723, ext. 5634, or 703-575-5634). Also available in e-book formats. For desk copies, go to www.ascd.org/deskcopy.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dueck, Myron.

Grading smarter, not harder : assessment strategies that motivate kids and help them learn / Myron Dueck.
 pages cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4166-1890-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Educational tests and measurements—United States.

2. Grading and marking (Students)—United States. 3. Educational evaluation—United States. I. Title.

LB3051.D668 2014

371.26—dc23

2014009519