The Unwinnable Battle Over Minimum Grades

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The debate over minimum grade policies masks deeper flaws in grading systems that need to be addressed head-on.

School leaders at all levels of education today are engaged in grading reforms. They recognize that many current grading policies and practices have long outlived their usefulness and are not aligned with recent changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. They also realize that some common grading practices are inherently unfair and detrimental to students' learning progress. Their reform efforts aim to make grading more consistent, accurate, meaningful, and equitable.

The brave leaders engaged in these efforts quickly discover, however, that grading reform can be a lightning rod for controversy. Not only do teachers resist changes in procedures they believe to be their professional prerogative, but parents and families express deep concerns about

disrupting traditions that have been a part of schooling for well over a century (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Among the grading reforms commonly introduced, one of the most contentious is the implementation of minimum grade policies.

The Firestorm Over Minimum Grades

Minimum grade policies restrict the range of grades that teachers are permitted to assign to student assessments or other evidence of student performance (e.g., compositions, projects, reports, demonstrations) in schools that use the 100-point percentage grading scale. In some schools, this restriction applies to all grades teachers assign, while in others it applies only to the grades recorded on report cards. Most schools implementing these policies set the lowest grade permitted at 50 percent, but some use a 60 percent minimum (Carifio & Carey, 2009; Wormeli, 2018).

The primary reason schools enact minimum grade policies, also known as "Zeros Aren't Permitted" (ZAP) policies (Friess, 2008a), is to eliminate the confounding effects of zeros in percentage grading systems. When combined with the common practice of averaging scores to determine students' grades, a single zero can have a devastating effect on a student's percentage grade, with the overall grade being unfairly skewed by that one, atypical low score. A single zero can doom a student to failure and create a misrepresentation of their learning, regardless of what dedicated effort or level of performance might follow (Guskey, 2004; Reeves, 2004). This can profoundly affect students' motivation and overall academic outcomes. Advocates of minimum grade policies believe these policies hold the greatest benefit for certain marginalized subgroups of students, especially in "high-risk" courses and subject matter (Friess, 2008b).

Critics of minimum grade policies, including many teachers and parents, counter that such practices offer unfair and unearned assistance to low-performing students and serve primarily to reduce the accuracy and reliability of grades. Many teachers find it difficult to justify assigning a grade that essentially gives students half-credit for doing nothing. They argue that minimum grades erode students' work ethic and do not teach students the real-life consequences of not meeting their responsibilities. One teacher reported the unintended consequence of students gaming the system by doing nothing for the first two quarters of the year, gaining their 50s, then doing well on the next two quarters and the final exam. This allowed them to take half of the year off and still pass (Minero, 2018). Other teachers characterize such policies as "no-fail grading" (Miller, 2009) and as an attempt to reinstate social promotion (Texas Insider, 2009).

In response to such criticism and reports of unintended consequences, several school systems have revised their minimum grade policies. Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, for example, recently amended its policy to allow teachers to assign zeros to students for work that is not turned in (Gelman, 2023). The Leominster Public Schools in Massachusetts chose to rescind its minimum grade policy entirely. Middle school principal Tim Blake explained, "We really felt that after years of doing it that way, kids just weren't learning to be responsible" (Jasinski, 2016). In Texas, complaints prompted lawmakers to pass legislation that bars school districts from requiring minimum grades (Montgomery, 2009).

Addressing Symptoms While Ignoring the Cause

The irony in this debate is that minimum grade policies address only the symptoms of more deeply rooted problems in grading. Although well-intentioned, such policies are misplaced efforts to rectify grading systems that are inherently flawed, resulting in a Band-Aid approach that dresses a wound without healing it. The true problem is not the zero; it's the use of the 100-point percentage grading scale and the practice of averaging scores to obtain students' grades.

The 100-Point Percentage Grading Scale

Consistency is essential to effective grading and reporting. It occurs when teachers with comparable knowledge and experience, presented with the same evidence on a student's performance, agree on the grade to be assigned. Researchers refer to this as "inter-rater reliability." Two related factors confound efforts to achieve acceptable levels of consistency in grading: (1) the use of indirect (or subjective) measures of student achievement, and (2) the number of levels or categories of student performance teachers are required to differentiate.

Direct measures involve quantifying a characteristic by measuring it explicitly, as we would in determining students' height or weight. We simply apply our measuring device (e.g., a tape measure or scale) to the student to gain a direct measure of that characteristic. But students' achievement or learning cannot be measured as explicitly. Instead, we rely on indirect measures. We ask students to answer a series of questions or perform certain tasks. Then, based on their responses, we make *judgments* or *inferences* about their level of achievement or the quality of their performance. Since these judgments rely on personal interpretation, they are subject to individual perspectives and partialities. Bias can be introduced at various stages, including when designing assessments, evaluating responses, or interpreting the results.

Pairing indirect measures with the percentage grading scale that includes 101 discrete levels of student performance, two-thirds of which typically designate failure, further confounds matters. Yet percentage grading scales remain common practice in many school systems, especially at the secondary level. Some educators believe the large number of levels in the percentage grading scale makes it more precise than scales with fewer levels, such as the five-level letter grade scale (*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, and *F*) used in most colleges and universities. But the reality is far more complex. In the absence of a truly objective measuring device, adding more levels to the measurement scale offers only the illusion of precision. In fact, the large number of grade levels in the percentage-grading scale can lead to greater subjectivity, increased error, and diminished reliability (Guskey, 2013). Even with the implementation of a minimum grade policy, teachers must still discern 51 distinct levels of student performance! These dilemmas associated with the percentage grading scale have been recognized by educational researchers for more than a century (Starch & Elliot, 1913).

Significant research supports the idea that grading scales with four to seven levels or categories lead to optimal discrimination, validity, and reliability in grading (Lozano et al., 2008; Preston & Colman, 2000). So why not do away with the percentage grading scale and use an integer grading system of 4 to 0, or *A* to *F*, like that used in most colleges and universities? Integer grading scales align with the four levels used to classify student achievement in most state assessment programs (e.g., Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic) and to the four-point rubrics many teachers use today in judging students' performance on classroom assessments, projects, and demonstrations. If needed, integer grades allow computation of a cumulative grade point average (GPA) to the hundred-thousandth decimal point.

Teachers can keep the zero in an integer grading system and assign it to students when they believe such a grade is deserved. But improving from a zero to a passing grade for those students means moving from zero to one, not from zero to 60 or 65 percent. It makes academic recovery possible. If the purpose of grading is to communicate how well students have learned, the grading system should not punish students in ways that make recovery from setbacks impossible.

Equally important, integer grading systems make grading much more consistent and reliable. Teachers with comparable knowledge and experience find it easier to agree on distinctions between an *A* level versus a *B* level of performance than when asked to distinguish a 90 from an 89 using a percentage grading scale. Clear and well-defined scoring criteria, coupled with a limited number of grading categories, are essential in implementing grading reforms that prioritize fairness, transparency, and equity.

Averaging Scores to Obtain Students' Grades

The common practice of averaging scores to obtain students' grades also accentuates the influence of zeros and further confounds efforts to offer accurate, meaningful, and equitable grades. Averaging all scores from assessments and other evidence on student performance over the entire grading period blends unequal representations of learning and undervalues student growth. It also instills in students the notion that *everything counts*. And when everything counts, students refuse to take chances, try new endeavors, or explore new ideas that fascinate them, since such efforts mean risking failure and jeopardizing the chance of getting a good grade.

Of course, moving abruptly to a system where teachers abandon the practice of averaging scores to obtain students' grades is likely to encounter resistance, primarily because it has been the principal means of determining grades since grading was begun in schools over a century ago (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). A far more constructive strategy is to initiate grading reforms by developing a purpose statement for grades that makes clear what grades represent and what function they serve (Guskey, 2023).

The purpose statement for grading developed by the faculty and school leaders at the American School of Paris, an international school that has been highly successful in implementing grading reforms, offers an excellent example. Their purpose statement reads:

> The primary purpose of grading is to effectively communicate student achievement toward specific standards, at this point in time. A grade should reflect what a student knows and is able to do. Students will receive separate

> feedback and evaluation on their learning habits, which will not be included in the academic achievement grades. (Lippman, personal communication, 2018)

By including the phrase "at this point in time" in their purpose statement, the faculty make clear that grades won't be determined by averaging evidence gathered over time, but instead will be based on the most current evidence of what students now know and can do. In other words, grades are not based on where students *were*, but rather on evidence of where they are now in their learning—a fundamental principle of mastery- or competency-based measurement. This also frees students of the burden of having everything count. Now they can explore new activities and investigate new ideas, since trying and failing at something new does not cause irreparable harm to their grade. This purpose not only makes recovery possible but also makes the grade more meaningful.

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Grading That Supports Student Learning

Serious problems exist in our current grading systems that need to be resolved. Successful solutions must address the causes of those problems. Minimum grade policies address only symptoms of problems while leaving crucial issues related to consistency and accuracy in grading unresolved. Although well-intentioned, these policies have unintended negative effects on student motivation and, as a result, elicit significant opposition from teachers, parents and families, board members, and even state legislators.

By implementing grading scales with four to seven categories of student performance and developing purpose statements for grading that emphasize students' current level of achievement, leaders can create grading policies and practices that are consistent, accurate, meaningful, and equitable. These solutions can be implemented quickly and painlessly, especially with the support of evidence-based research and professional learning opportunities for educators. They promote a constructive approach to grading that focuses on honest and reliable communication, supports student learning, and fosters a positive learning environment for all students.

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