

# Learning From Failures: Lessons From Unsuccessful Grading Reform Initiatives

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Thomas R. Guskey<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

This article describes accounts of grading reform initiatives that while well-intentioned, met with staunch opposition and eventually were abandoned. The implementation strategies employed by the leaders of these reform initiative are explored, along with reasons these strategies failed to result in meaningful and enduring change. Alternative grading reform strategies with supporting evidence are offered, justification for their use explained, and new directions for grading reform initiatives recommended.

## Keywords

grading policies, reporting student learning, school reform, change in schools

School districts across the United States made major changes in grading policies and practices when they moved to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To make grading easier for teachers and fairer for students, many districts broadened the ways students could demonstrate their learning, reduced the number of grade categories, and limited the weight attached to nonacademic factors in determining students' grades (Sawchuk, 2020; Volante, 2020). These changes in long-held grading traditions brought to light numerous inadequacies in districts' current grading policies and practices.

As schools reopen and classroom instruction resumes, many districts are contemplating reforms in grading and reporting to address these obvious shortcomings. Before moving ahead with major changes in grading policies, however, district leaders would be wise to consider the experiences of others who took on the challenge

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<sup>1</sup>University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Thomas R. Guskey, Department of Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology, College of Education, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506, USA.

Email: guskey@uky.edu

of grading reform before the pandemic and failed miserably in their efforts (see Rado, 2016; St. George, 2017). Despite the best of intentions, the systemic changes in grading and reporting initiated in these districts had to be abandoned and traditional grading practices restored.

Whether the lessons learned from these districts are generalizable to other districts remains uncertain. However, what can be deduced from reports of these unsuccessful attempts at grading reform is that all shared several common characteristics. For example, the leaders of these failed reform initiatives were all committed educators who sought to improve grading with new policies and practices that both benefit students and enhance communication with families. All recognized that many common grading practices have long outlived their usefulness and contribute to blatant inequities. In addition, nearly all sought advice from prominent consultants who offered guidance on what specific changes to make.

Shortly after initiating the reforms, however, these dedicated leaders encountered unanticipated problems and staunch resistance from organized groups of teachers and parents that eventually forced them to abandon their efforts. The districts they led eventually gave up on the reforms and returned to traditional grading and reporting methods, leaving the reform leaders' credibility in doubt and reliance on conventional practices more firmly entrenched than ever (Field, 2019; Moody, 2018). In some instances, the attempts at grading reform so damaged the standing of these leaders that they felt compelled to leave their districts or retire from the profession (Brochu, 2013; Cregan, 2013).

What did these district leaders do or not do that led to these failures? What prompted such resistance and organized opposition to reforms intended to make grading fairer and more equitable? And most important, what could they have done differently to better their chances of success?

## Begin With Transparency

Grading reforms often fail because district leaders try to revise grading *before establishing transparency* in all preceding aspects of teaching and learning. This is especially common among those implementing standards-based grading reforms (Guskey, 2016).

The fundamental premise of all standards-based initiatives is clarity and transparency in *all* elements of the teaching and learning process: curriculum, instruction, assessment, *and* grading and reporting. Each of these elements must be articulated, aligned, and clearly understood by everyone involved. Transparency creates a foundation for trust and unity among all stakeholders (Stosich & Bae, 2018). It also allows reforms to begin from a basis of inclusion and consensus rather than division and disagreement.

Transparent curriculum means *all* teachers articulate precisely what they want students to learn and be able to do, and then share those expectations with students and their families. In other words, the learning goals are well-known and clear to everyone involved. Parents and families know exactly what students are expected to learn and

why it is important to learn. Curriculum transparency also provides the basis for rich discussions about the curriculum's appropriateness, value, and rigor.

Transparent instruction means teachers directly teach to those learning goals, engage students in activities designed to help them learn, and offer students regular feedback on their learning progress. Transparent assessments reflect those same learning goals so students know precisely what is expected of them. Students are never surprised by the content or format of assessments, or by how their performance will be judged.

Transparent grades then communicate explicitly how well students have mastered those articulated learning goals. Transparent grades are not tainted by nonachievement factors such as students' compliance with homework policies, punctuality in turning in assignments, or class engagement. If such factors are considered important to report, then teachers record them separately on the report card, but do not include them in determining students' academic achievement grades (Guskey, 2020b).

This defining characteristic of transparency in all standards-based approaches is essential to effective teaching and learning in any context. Maintaining a central focus on transparency is also vital to collaboration, trust, and success.

## Take Things in Order

Many reform leaders also make the mistake of not addressing these critical teaching and learning elements in order. They initiate changes in grading and reporting *before* ensuring those revisions coincide with established learning goals, instructional methods, and assessment practices. This is like trying to put the roof on a house before constructing the foundation and building the walls. It typically leads to frustration, inconsistent implementation, and eventual abandonment of the entire reform process. The central purpose of transparency in grading and reporting is lost if it is not clear what we are being transparent about.

Taking things in order means establishing a primary focus on the most critical aspects of curriculum before turning to instruction, of instruction before turning to assessment, and of assessment before turning to grading. It means starting with a clear, concise, and consistent vision of what is most important for students to learn and be able to do, and why it's important. In other words, before starting any journey, we first must be clear about our destination. With our destination in mind, we next consider the best means of travel for the journey (instruction), how we will know where we are along the way (assessment), and how we will know when we get there (grading).

Taking things in order also means putting off other issues until we confirm our purpose and transparency in these foundational elements. Appropriate and effective homework policies, multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery or redo assessments, the consequences for not turning in assignments on time, and so on, are all important issues. But they are *not essential aspects of grading reform*. Taking on these issues when initiating grading reforms seriously complicates implementation. It also drastically increases the magnitude of change required for most teachers. If we address and clarify curriculum, instruction, and assessment issues first, discussions of

grading and reporting will evolve naturally and can be dealt with much more directly and purposefully.

## Describe “Why” Before “What”

Another critical mistake district leaders frequently make is to describe *what* they plan to change before clarifying *why*. In successful reform initiatives, however, discussions of purpose and rationale *always* come first. Stakeholders find it much easier to consider revisions in grading policies and practices when they first engage in discussions about the basic purpose of grading and the rationale behind current practices (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2020a).

Agreement on purpose helps make obvious the problems inherent in many traditional grading practices. When teachers, parents and families, board members, and community leaders agree that report card grades should accurately represent how well students have mastered articulated learning goals, they more readily see the problems associated with percentage grades, the use of a single grade to describe multiple aspects of students’ performance, the misguided use of mathematical algorithms to calculate grades, and the calculation of class rank (Guskey, 2015).

Explanations of grading reforms that stem from consensus about purpose help clarify *why* change in these other aspects of grading is needed. In challenging percentage grades, for example, successful leaders start by explaining the difficulties teachers have in reliably and consistently distinguishing 101 distinct levels of student performance, two thirds of which denote levels of failure (Brookhart & Guskey, 2019; Guskey, 2013). In explaining the shift to multiple grades, successful leaders show how combining aspects of achievement, behavior, responsibility, and effort into a single grade makes the grade impossible to interpret, enhances the influence of social and economic inequities, and diminishes a grade’s value in efforts to help students improve (Guskey, 2020b).

To move away from using mathematical algorithms to determine students’ grades, successful leaders present examples of how these mindless calculations often falsely depict what students have learned (Guskey & Jung, 2016, Rose, 2016). Successful leaders similarly begin discussions of class rank by describing the adverse impact of this practice on students and how, in many instances, it actually hurts students’ chances of admission to highly selective colleges and universities (Boccella, 2016; Guskey, 2014; Hoover, 2012). Only after establishing these shortcomings do they present alternatives to ranking, like the *Cum Laude* system used in most colleges and universities, which recognizes *all* students who display exceptional academic achievement rather than a limited number or percentage (Heesen, 2013).

Stakeholders generally hang on to antiquated practices because they see nothing wrong with them and fail to recognize the inequities those practices perpetuate. Providing thorough explanations of the inadequacies of these practices and of *why* change is needed drastically improves stakeholders’ openness and acceptance to change.

## Anticipate and Address Opposition

Because grading policies and practices represent some of education's longest held traditions, challenging those traditions means disrupting the security they provide. It means pushing stakeholders from what is well-known and familiar to something unknown and uncertain. Because of the discomfort it brings, such change inevitably prompts resistance and opposition.

Successful leaders recognize, however, that those who initially resist grading and reporting reforms aren't antagonistic by nature and don't simply oppose change. Their resistance comes instead from genuine concern for the well-being of students, especially their own children (see Franklin et al., 2016).

Teachers sometimes fear reforms in grading will alter their students' motivation and commitment to hard work. This is especially true among teachers who see grades as the incentive most directly under their control. Parents sometimes believe the changes in grading will disadvantage their child in college admissions, earning scholarships, or getting jobs. In addition, changing grading means altering a system that not only many parents understand, but one in which they thrived. As a result, they feel well prepared to offer their children sound advice on how to succeed. Most parents are also unmoved by opinions put forth by district leaders or outside consultants without supporting evidence, and they refuse to sacrifice their child's future for the sake of untested innovation.

To succeed in grading reforms, district leaders must anticipate these concerns from teachers and parents, and address them upfront with verifiable evidence. Successful leaders offer specific research on the effects of these reforms on students' motivation (e.g., Stan, 2012). They share the results of reports on college admission officers' acceptance of new reporting forms (e.g., Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Great Schools Partnership, 2018; Hanover Research, 2011; "Postsecondary Support for Competency-based High School Transcripts," 2015; Riede, 2018). Successful leaders also provide evidence of the growing dissatisfaction among students, teachers, and parents with current grading policies and practices (e.g., Guskey et al., 2011; Guskey & Link, 2019). Most important, they make plans to gather evidence from stakeholders throughout the implementation process to guide adaptations that may be needed to ensure positive results.

Successful district leaders don't ignore opposition, nor do they try to avoid it. Instead, they anticipate and address it directly with patience, purpose, and resolve. It is far easier to disarm opponents before a conflict begins than in the midst of a battle. By anticipating concerns and addressing those as part of the introduction of change, reform leaders can guarantee more trouble-free implementation and far greater success.

## Summary

No one knows exactly what portion grading and reporting reform efforts have succeeded or failed. This is especially true of efforts to implement standards-based

approaches, either before or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only do programs differ drastically from one district or school to the next, but success is sometimes hard to define (see Guskey et al., 2020). Still much can be learned from those districts and schools that tried and, by all accounts, failed.

Because every district is different, no single approach to grading and reporting reform will always work. But current evidence indicates that district leaders who begin with transparency, take things in order, describe “why” before “what,” and anticipate and address opposition, have a far greater chance of success.

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### ORCID iD

Thomas R. Guskey  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1383-2407>

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## Author Biography

**Thomas R. Guskey**, PhD, is a professor emeritus in the College of Education, University of Kentucky. A graduate of the University of Chicago, he began his career in education as a middle school teacher and later served as an administrator in Chicago Public Schools. He is a fellow in the American Educational Research Association and was awarded the Association's prestigious *Relating Research to Practice Award*. His most recent books include *Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems* and *What We Know About Grading: What Works, What Doesn't, and What's Next*. Contact him by email at [guskey@uky.edu](mailto:guskey@uky.edu), Twitter at @tguskey, or at [www.tguskey.com](http://www.tguskey.com).