

## Best Practices in Grading

Grading is one of the most enduring features of schooling. No matter what other reforms occur in a school, grading remains as one of the cornerstones of educational practice. But recently this long-standing tradition has come under scrutiny with some alarming results. Many traditional grading practices actually *depress* achievement, and may, in fact, even lead to school failure and dropping out! Indeed, in his engaging video presentation on toxic grading practices (see References) Doug Reeves says that two of the most common practices – averaging and giving zeros for missing work – are “an academic death sentence.”

### Best Practices

Fortunately, there is a lot of guidance for school leaders and faculty on how to structure meaningful, helpful grading systems that actually promote student achievement. From the resources provided at the end of this brief, schools can construct a list of best practices for their own setting. These include:

*Start the Conversation.* Grading purposes, standards and practices should be a matter of discussion among the faculty with the goal of achieving agreement on major issues and approaches. Once agreement is reached, faculty can share best practices.

*Determine the Audience.* Figure out who the audience for grading really is. What must be communicated to that audience? What’s the best way (perhaps other than grades) to do so?

*Establish Standards-Based Rubrics.* Encourage faculty collaboration to develop department, grade or even school-wide rubrics for assessing student performance on key standards, such as writing, reading and speaking. If everyone uses the same rubric to assess essential standards, learning is reinforced across disciplines and achievement increases.

*Eliminate Toxic Grading Practices.* Get rid of practices that impede achievement – such as the use of the zero, averaging, and others that discourage students and suppress effort.

*Allow Re-dos and Updating of Assessments.* Distinguish between feedback and grading, and allow students to submit their best work for assessment. Also, permit “grade forgiveness” (as practiced in many colleges) where students can re-do assignments and replace a poor grade with an improved one.

*Don’t Penalize Practice.* Rather than grading everything a student does, base grade assessments on final products, not all of the practice steps leading to the product. And be sure that the assessments are linked to common standards.

*Focus on Demonstration of Learning, Not Task Completion.* If a student can demonstrate that she can balance chemistry formulas, how many times must she do it for a passing grade? Too often, “rigor” simply means more work, not more challenging or demanding work.



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This brief prepared by Howard Johnston, University of South Florida, December, 2011

## Resources

### ***Effective Grading Practices* by Doug Reeves**

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Effective-Grading-Practices.aspx>.

This outstanding article from *Educational Leadership* (ASCD) offers a succinct analysis of conventional grading practices and outlines steps for moving to more accurate, standards-based grading.

### ***Toxic Grading Practices* by Doug Reeves**

[http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video\\_id=29656](http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=29656)

This short video is an engaging professional development kick off for a faculty discussion about grades – especially the “toxic” practices in schools, like the “academic death sentence”: the zero.

### ***Effective Grading Practices***

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/current-issue.aspx>

The November 2011 issue of *Educational Leadership* (volume 69, number 3) is devoted to grading practices and is available online. See especially the articles by Wormley, Vatterrott, Guskey, Fisher, Kohn, and Marzano.

### ***Seven Practices for Effective Learning* by Jay McTighe and Ken O'Connor.**

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov05/vol63/num03/Seven-Practices-for-Effective-Learning.aspx>

Outstanding discussion of assessment/feedback practices that are linked to improved student performance.

### ***Effective Assessment***

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/assessment/index.html>

From the teaching effectiveness program at the University of Oregon, this resource showcases good assessment practices for working in a standards-based environment.

### ***Adding Rigor***

[http://www.ronwilliamson.com/RW\\_Web/Inst\\_Leadership\\_files/PrinLdshpSep09.pdf](http://www.ronwilliamson.com/RW_Web/Inst_Leadership_files/PrinLdshpSep09.pdf)

A great article by Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn on how school leaders can add rigor to the school’s curriculum by enlisting teachers and other stakeholders in discussions about challenging experiences.

### ***Assessment and Rubric Information***

<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/assess.html>

Very deep resource on all things educational from Kathy Schrock and Discovery Education. This section lists dozens of resources, but be sure to explore the entire site. It’s chock full of outstanding resources and materials.