

# Preface

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**I**n May 1990, I had the good fortune to attend a train-the-trainer workshop given by Rick Stiggins in Toronto, Canada. This sparked in me a general interest in classroom assessment, but the aspect of the workshop that really “turned me on” was the part on grading. Since then, I have read everything that I could find about grading. I also watched the passage of my own children through the school system. Each of these influences convinced me that what is needed is a practical set of grading guidelines that support learning and that teachers can apply at the classroom level, that is, in their grade books and computer grading programs.

I began to think seriously about guidelines for grading when I became one of three authors of *Assess for Success* for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (Midwood, O’Connor, & Simpson, 1993). What really motivated me to develop the guidelines was a journal article that I read in April 1994, which I thought was both wrong and internally inconsistent. I wrote to the editor making these criticisms, and she wrote back suggesting I write an article. At first, I ignored this suggestion, but several months later, she sent me the author’s response to my criticism and again suggested that I write an article. Twice challenged, I had to respond, so I spent most of my 1994 Christmas vacation writing an article, which appeared in the May 1995 edition of the NASSP (National Association of Secondary Schools Principals) *Bulletin*.

Since that time, I have created staff development workshops based on the article. I have presented these workshops many times in schools and at conferences in the United States and Canada. Most of these workshops were well received, and at all of them, I received interesting comments in the session evaluations. These comments convinced me to try to reach a wider audience by turning my article and workshops into a book on grading. This I did with the first edition, which I completed in September 1998. Three years later, it was time to update and revise the book, especially to reflect the move to learning goals, or a standards-based approach to teaching and learning. This resulted in the second edition that was published in June 2002. Almost six years later, it is time for another update and revision to reflect developments in knowledge and practice in standards-based grading.

## **WHAT’S THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK?**

Much of what teachers do is because that is the way it was done to them; this is no longer good enough. It is my hope that this book will lead teachers to examine critically their grading practices. Some of the ideas in this book challenge long-held beliefs and practices and create considerable cognitive dissonance.

Glickman (as cited in Bailey & McTighe, 1996) said, “There are profound questions about current educational practices that need to be debated” (p. 119). The quotations on the first page of the introduction in this book demonstrate clearly that grades and grading need to be debated. Even though there are many journal articles and book chapters on the topic, grading is an aspect of education that practitioners have traditionally discussed very little. For example, at the four annual meetings of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) from 1996 to 1999, only 16 of more than 2,400 sessions mentioned grading in the title or description! It appears that teachers have considered grading to be a private activity, thus “guarding [their] practices with the same passion with which one might guard an unedited diary” (Kain, 1996, p. 569). Fortunately, this has started to change over the last few years, and I now see a much greater willingness on the part of teachers to reflect on their grading practices and to discuss them openly with their colleagues.

This book examines the many issues around grading and provides a set of practical guidelines that teachers can use to arrive at grades for their students. Teachers from kindergarten to college can use the ideas in this book to examine and perhaps change their own grading practices and, even more importantly, to focus their discussion of this complex, confusing, and difficult issue with colleagues.

## **HOW IS THIS BOOK ORGANIZED?**

An introduction sets the big picture for this book and gives readers an opportunity to identify and examine grading practices and the issues that arise from these practices. These practical grading issues lead to the need for guidelines, and subsequent chapters provide eight guidelines. These are practical guidelines, not just broad general principles. They are important to consider as a set, but each also needs to be considered individually. Chapters 1 through 8 do this, with each of these chapters addressing three questions: What is the purpose of the guideline? What are the key elements of the guideline? What is the bottom line?

At the end of each of these guideline chapters, a reflection activity, *What’s My Thinking Now?*, asks readers to think about the guideline and its importance and meaning to them. An example of one person’s reflections on that particular guideline concludes the chapters on guidelines.

Chapter 9 provides suggestions for determining grades by bringing the application of the guidelines together. Chapter 10 examines a number of additional grading issues, including the advantages and disadvantages of different grading approaches, grade point average calculation, the use of computer grading programs, how to grade exceptional students, and legal concerns. Chapter 11 examines the broader aspects of communicating student achievement, considering

topics such as expanded-format reporting, informal communications, and student-involved conferencing. Conclusions and recommended actions are provided in Chapter 12. In the appendixes, a glossary, guidelines for grading in standards-based systems, a testimonial to the impact of standards-based grading, and a proposed grading policy provide additional information for the reader. Also included are extensive references and a section of additional resources.

## **CHANGES IN THE THIRD EDITION**

In the “world” of grading, a lot has changed over the last few years, and I have tried to capture those changes in this edition. Standards-based grading and reporting have become very common in elementary schools across North America (and beyond) and have started to make their way into middle schools and high schools. Many teachers are trying hard to implement standards-based grading at these levels, but I am frequently disappointed by the lack of willpower of administrators at school and district levels to push for changes that they acknowledge are needed; at the first sign of resistance by teachers or parents, too many administrators give up on their principles, “fold up the tent,” and say, “Not now, maybe later.” This illustrates that a great need persists to focus on the “why” issues, but there is also increasing need to focus on “how.”

In this edition, the biggest changes are in Chapter 2, as it has become clear that the traditional approach to performance standards—a grading scale that links letters to percentages—is incompatible with a true standards-based system. I am convinced that moving to such a system requires the elimination of points and percentages; in their place, we need a limited number of clearly described levels that are used for all assessment and reporting. The rationale for this approach and many suggestions for implementation can be found in Chapter 2.

Other significant changes are the following:

- Introduction—A complete new set of quotes on page 1 of the Introduction
- Chapter 1—Much stronger advocacy for grading by standards and new examples of standards-based grading at different levels of specificity
- Chapter 3—New sections on academic dishonesty and extra credit and bonus points
- Chapter 4—Updated research evidence and additions to the sections on feedback and homework
- Chapter 5—Section on “Time” (the time students require to demonstrate achievement) moved to Chapter 7
- Chapter 6—Addition of information and emphasis on level scores rather than percentages
- Chapter 7—Section on “Time” moved from Chapter 5, as it is one of the considerations for accurate assessment, and a different structure used to identify quality assessment
- Chapter 8—Addition of a small section on metacognition

This edition also incorporates many other small changes, including minor edits, to improve readability.

## HOW CAN THIS BOOK BE USED?

The most important way to use this book is with an open mind; regardless of how many or few years of experience teachers have, they can use this book to critically examine their own practices. Throughout the book, readers will find reflection opportunities, which, it is hoped, they will use to engage themselves more thoroughly with the text. Consider creating a journal to record your thoughts in response to the questions posed in these reflection activities.

Engaging with the text can be done individually, but it is more beneficial if done in groups (e.g., the whole staff in a small school, learning teams, department or division groups, etc.). This is particularly important for the detailed analysis of each guideline at the end of Chapters 1 through 8. Remember, when changing practices, start small; adapt, do not adopt; and work together. When you have finished the book, you are encouraged to complete the overview reflection at the end of Chapter 12. For this book to be of real value, teachers must use it to examine critically and discuss the almost taboo subject of grading. It is hoped that this exploration will lead teachers to use grading practices presented in the eight guidelines. To further encourage your interest, here are my top 10 readings, which I think will be particularly helpful to you (see References and Readings for more resources):

- Brookhart, S. M. (2004). *Grading*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Canady, R. L., & Hotchkiss, P. R. (1989). It's a good score: Just a bad grade. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(4), 68–71.
- Cooper, D. (2007). *Talk about assessment*. Toronto, Canada: Thomson Nelson.
- Guskey, T. R., & Bailey, J. M. (2001). *Developing grading and reporting systems for student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Kagan, S. (1995). Group grades miss the mark. *Educational Leadership*, 52(8), 68–71.
- Kohn, A. (1994). Grading: The issue is not how but why. *Educational Leadership*, 52(2), 38–41.
- Marzano, R. J. (2006). *Classroom assessment and grading that works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Stiggins, R. J., Arter, J., Chappuis, J., & Chappuis, S. (2004). *Classroom assessment for student learning: Doing it right, using it well*. Portland, OR: Educational Testing Service.
- Wiggins, G. (1996). Honesty and fairness: Toward better grading and reporting. In T. R. Guskey (Ed.), *Communicating student learning: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development yearbook 1996* (pp. 141–176). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Wormeli, R. (2006). *Fair isn't equal: Assessing and grading in the differentiated classroom*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse and the National Middle School Association.