



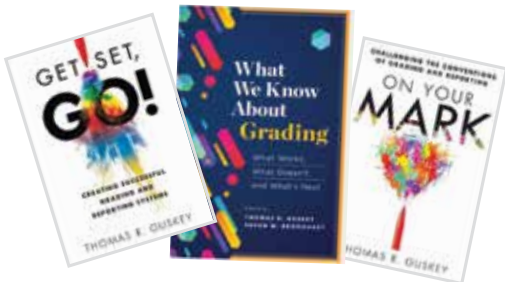
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. THOMAS GUSKEY

Making the Grade

By Pat Fontana

Giving a grade to the performance and not to the student is an important step in developing a more meaningful grading system, says Thomas R. Guskey, PhD. Separating responsibility and achievement is another important move toward a safer educational environment that truly encourages student learning.

Dr. Guskey has spent most of his career helping school leaders learn more about ways to improve the grading system. Professor Emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, author, and grading expert, he has identified a number of strategies that can lead school administrators, teachers, students, and students' families to a better understanding of student performance.



In particular, he notes, students and their parents tend to think of grades as being assigned to the student rather than to the student's performance. Changing the mindset from "I'm a C student" to "My performance is at a C level" can be a challenge but it is possible, with some shifts in the way grades are kept and reported. That change needs to occur at all levels, from school leadership to teachers to students and their families, according to Guskey.

When grades are entered in a digital grading system, he finds "that kids and parents are checking their phones three or four times a day to check on their grade." He adds that there is "nothing that we have found that is more detrimental."

BE CLEAR ABOUT THE PURPOSE

One of the first steps in shifting the grading system and the mindset that accompanies it is to be clear about the purpose of those grades. Guskey says that is "the crux of the matter. People don't agree on the purpose."

There are actually six categories of grade purpose, he explains. "We use grades to communicate information about student learning to parents and families. We communicate information to the students themselves." He adds that "we use grades to identify selective groups of students for certain programs," such as promoting from one grade to the next, getting into honors classes, or assigning to special education classes.

Additionally, Guskey says, grades can have the purpose of providing incentives. He adds that "people argue about this all the time." Grades can also act as major criteria when school leaders are evaluating instructional

programs. Finally, he explains, grades can "document effort or responsibility on the part of the students."

Acknowledging that "all of these could be considered valid," Guskey says that when he presents this information to school faculty, asking them to rank the purposes, he has "yet to find any school where the faculty agree." It is clear that "you can't serve all these purposes with one device." He emphasizes that the "number one issue for students and parents is inconsistency among faculty within the school."

The key is that "schools need to be clear about their purpose," he says, and then "develop a purpose statement that is an introduction to grading policies." Determining and sharing the purpose for the grading system is one of the prerequisites for establishing a standards-based approach or competence-based approach, which Guskey sees as being the future of grading.

Defining the grade purpose will require "sitting down and bringing your faculty together to determine what the focus is ... to have agreement on the purpose." The process involves bringing people with different perspectives together and having everyone put their perspectives on the table. Guskey says it's important to "recognize you have to come together to reach a consensus. Then turn to your policy and practices and see if they align with the purpose."

MULTIPLE GRADES, NOT ON A CURVE

In traditional grading practices, a student receives one grade at the end of a specific period. That one grade may be required of the technology used to post it. As Guskey notes, "Grading is one area in education where the technology is working against us. Most are based on antiquated systems of grading, on traditional practices." In contrast, "probably the most important factor when it comes to fairness and equity," he explains, is to assign multiple grades based on three areas of criteria: product, process, and progress.

Changing the mindset from "I'm a C student" to "My performance is at a C level" can be a challenge but it is possible, with some shifts in the way grades are kept and reported.

Product refers to the student's academic achievements. The grade for this area would reflect their exams, projects, and reports, for example, as a way of describing "what they have learned and are able to do as a result of their experiences in school."

Process is focused on criteria such as the student's behaviors, efforts, and class participation. It is within this area that the student would receive a grade for turning in homework on time or complying with classroom procedures.

Progress reflects "not where they are but how far they've come." Guskey says that progress and product may be interrelated but that it is possible for a student to show progress without meeting certain goals related to the product. In turn, a student may be able to achieve a high grade in the product criteria but not actually be making discernible progress.

Guskey notes that "problems occur when teachers combine these into a single grade." Assigning multiple grades would ensure that they are separate on a report card and on the transcript. He explains that "if you go to other places around the world and look at their report cards, they've done this for decades." He says he's been told by educational leaders in other countries, "It's easier than what you silly people do in the states."

Students are encouraged to take activities such as homework and class participation more seriously when they receive a grade for these responsibilities that is separate from test scores and other accomplishments. Parents appreciate receiving a "more active profile" of their child's performance. And colleges and universities love the multiple grade option, Guskey says.

He cites an example of a group of schools in Kentucky that had asked for help with changing their grading practices. He says, "We approached it in terms of how can we change the



experience.” To do that, they sent home two different report cards for the first two marking periods. One report card recorded a single grade for each class for the student. The second report card broke the grades out, included the teacher photograph, and had comment sections in which the teacher described what the class worked on in the grading period as well as a sentence or two about the particular student.

At the end of the second grading period, they surveyed the parents to learn which type of report card they would choose to see going forward. Guskey says that “100% of the parents chose the new report card.” He adds, “It’s just better.”

Grading according to the three criteria areas has the added benefit of eliminating the practice of “grading on a curve,” a method of grading according to the student’s standing among classmates. Guskey emphasizes that there are many “negative aspects to grading on the curve. It destroys any sense of collaboration and destroys the relationships of teachers to students.”

VALEDICTORIANS SAYING GOODBYE

Comparing students to each other when recording grades is also used to determine class rank in many schools still today. Guskey asks, “Why do we do that?” He states that most colleges and universities do not rank their students. The only postsecondary school in New York to use class rank, he points out, is the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Weighted grades have also been used by many schools across the country, to attach more weight to classes labeled advanced or honors than to those of regular classes. It’s been thought that weighted grades would entice more students into those types of classes. However, Guskey says, there is “no evidence that it encourages the student to take more challenging classes.”

The idea of weighted grades goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, he explains. In high schools at the time there were three different tracks for students: academic, vocational, and commercial. The commercial track was for “young women who were going to be secretaries or stenographers. Weighted

grades “were developed to keep those students in the vocational and commercial track from being class valedictorian.” Guskey says that this was a “discriminating policy that we have continued because nobody has asked why we do it.”

The word *valedictorian*, Guskey explains, “means to say farewell. It has nothing to do with achievement.” While noting that “our grading practices are based more on tradition than any other country in the world,” he adds that we “need to reconsider the way we select the valedictorian.”

REASSESSMENTS

Teens who were surveyed recently by the EdWeek Research Center said that being given a chance to redo an assignment on which they received a “bad grade” would be the most influential factor in helping them feel more motivated at school. Guskey notes, however, that there “must be an incentive for doing well on the first assessment. It needs to be a valuable learning experience.”

He says that “if it doesn’t count, kids won’t do it. As soon as you say to kids it won’t count, they won’t do it.” Guskey points out the many pros and cons of allowing a second chance for students to redo their work, in an article that was just published in *Educational Leadership*, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s (ASCD’s) flagship publication.

He states in the article that it is flawed thinking to argue that giving students a second chance does not prepare them for the “real world,” and he adds that successful professionals have to learn their craft by practicing and making mistakes first. He notes that they “learn from their mistakes and improve their performance.” Students may feel they are in a “do or die” situation when they have “no chance to demonstrate what they learned from previous mistakes.”

One of the practices he recommends avoiding is “failing to provide any incentive for success on initial assessments.” He explains



that the student needs to be able to identify the advantages of preparing and performing well on the initial assignment, beyond “simply avoiding the agony of having to take a reassessment.” He notes that when students understand the mastery learning process and are able to select their enrichment activities, they tend to be more motivated to do well initially, rather than depending on the opportunity for a redo.

Guskey also emphasizes that grades for reassessments should accurately reflect their level of performance. Teachers may tend to place a limit on the possible score for a redo. He argues that this practice defeats the purpose of mastery learning and “it miscommunicates students’ true level of performance.”

DEVELOPING A MODEL OF CHANGE

Traditional grading practices have been ingrained in the school system for a very long time. How do school leaders make these changes, to reflect more accurate and more equitable grading? Guskey stresses that it has to “start with your purpose.” Engagement is one of the keys to shifting successfully. When dealing with the “why issues, the purpose statement becomes so critical.”

Developing a model of change involves “getting down to a reasonable number of grade categories and multiple grades.” Guskey recommends streamlining the grading categories and eliminating percentage grades. The more grade categories there are, the more subjectivity of grading increases, he notes.



He adds that the “order of change also holds for students.” It’s important to “show kids the strategies where they can be successful and they control the conditions of the change.”

Parents, especially, “want to know why before they can consider what.” He adds that the “mistake is to tell parents what is going to change without giving a rationale for doing it.” Citing the case with the Kentucky school

Guskey says that “everybody agrees that change is important in three different areas.” Those areas are attitudes and beliefs, practice, and students and their learning. He says that “experience changes attitudes and beliefs. Teachers don’t change their attitudes until they see it working.”

system that sent out two sets of report cards for the parents to choose from, Guskey notes, “instead of trying to convince people upfront, we changed the experience and showed them.” It “helps parents understand that what they experienced with grades was maybe not the best practice.”

When developing that model of change, to move the grading system forward so that it reflects accuracy, meaningful, and equity, Guskey stresses that “multiple grading becomes even more important. We need to pull these things out and report them separately.”

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Articles *and* Books

BY DR. THOMAS GUSKEY

ON REASSESSMENTS:

“Giving Retakes Their Best Chance to Improve Learning”
Educational Leadership (ASCD) -
April 23, 2023

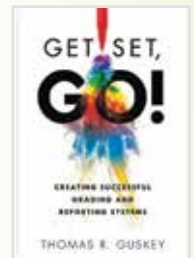
<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/giving-retakes-their-best-chance-to-improve-learning>



ON CREATING SUCCESSFUL GRADING SYSTEMS:

Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems
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“Breaking Up the Grade”
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