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in We Fix Grading?

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Toolkit

Engaged!

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e Schools We Want

pics & Trends

nat Do Teachers Do?

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Solon Schools Take on Grade Inflation

Posted by Shawn Cornally on September 21, 2012

Here's the quick and dirty:

- Teachers have to put concepts in their grade books instead of assessment items.
- Running grades cannot be reported until a lot of evidence is collected.
- Responsibility of the students must increase as retention is demanded over longer periods of time.
- GPA's may need to be amended when they're sent to a very few colleges schools. (e.g.: Hi, we don't inflate our grades. You should add 0.43 to our students' GPA's if you want to compare them to schools from our area.)
- Teachers alter the scores of a small number of ideas in their grade books in order to communicate growth or regression rather than including everything in a running total of averaged points.
- Semesters often begin with low marks for students. This is the natural process of learning, if everyone started off perfect (like we expect now for some crazy reason) then we wouldn't need schools in the first place.



The Solon Spartans of Solon, IA.

Grades are touchy, to put it lightly. They mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. In my district—Solon, just north of Iowa City—we've decided that grades exist to communicate to parents, students, and colleges what students know. We call this Standards-Based Grading.

This might not seem very revolutionary until you dredge up some memories from high school. Remember getting extra credit for Kleenex? How about for raising your hand? And we can't forget points for just showing up. All of these things pollute the final mark a student receives in a course that is ostensibly about Biology or Civics.

At Solon, we'd really like to cut away any of the fat that goes into a student's grade. We want students and their parents to know exactly where they stand with their knowledge of "Civil War Causes" or "Projectile Motion."

Making this change creates some issues that require wide ranging systemic changes that are not initially obvious. What follows is a list of things that are changed, some drastic, some minor.

Grades and College Admittance:

Rightly so, the parents in my district have concerns about changes in grading policy and how that will affect college admission. It's true, when you don't allow students credit for often copied homework or doing extra worksheets (over material they already know), their grades have to rest solely on what the student knows. This can raise some uncomfortable conversations when it's discovered that a student was relying on fluff to raise their grades for years.

What we see is a majority of students starting college and then not receiving degrees. How can we be happy with a system that gets kids into college, but doesn't prepare them to finish? On top of that, a single semester can put a student in debt to the tune of thousands of dollars.

This is shocking to most parents, and it should be. I think we have to ask the question: do we really want our students to be so used to getting easy A's that when they get to college, they're scalded by the sudden importance of real studying? I hope not.

Grade Inflation:

This leads us to a very trick topic. [Grade inflation](#) is a documented issue in academia, and represents an arms race to make our students appear better than their neighbors.

The Solon Community District has decided to take grade inflation on and stand up against it as unethical.

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Timeline:

- [Solon Schools Take on Grade Inflation](#)
- [Assumption Challenge: Teaching & Learning by Subject](#)
- [In Search of Deeper Conversations on Education](#)
- [Godin #7: Mass production produces mass](#)
- [Policy Position Statements for Both Parties](#)
- [Continuous Improvement vs. Discontinuous Improvement](#)
- ["Back to School" on This American Life Interview](#)
- [Co-Creator Camp 2! Sign up here](#)
- [Godin #5 & 6: What we need has changed](#)
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- [6th Annual Student Diversity Leadership Conference 10/19/12](#)
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We've begun discussion about how to let colleges know that we don't stand for grade inflation. The response from colleges has been predominantly along the lines of "we know grade inflation is a problem, so we really only take a cursory look at GPA anyway."

IowaTransformEd has documents dating back to the 1970's indicated this attitude from college admissions boards.

Grades and Sports Eligibility:

My school has a really healthy sports culture. A large part my students' identities are centered on their performance in athletics. So, having lower grades is of a definite concern.

To date, our switch to a leaner grading focus has not resulted in a rise in students becoming ineligible for sports.

Pencil vs. Pen:

The misconception that standards-based grading lowers student grades across the board is based in a mindset that thinks of grades as static. When most of us went to school, grades were something that were written in pen. The teacher graded your quiz, and you got what you got. You were supposed to learn from your mistakes, but your grade would never let you forget your past performances. For many students, this is demoralizing to the point of quitting; on the other end, this can be stressing to the point of ulceration.

If we want to create students that enjoy learning we have to allow them to edit past performances. If we want students to take school more seriously, we need to honor failure as a part of the learning process.

This looks very simple. When students assess poorly, you make them engage with that mistake. At some later date, that material will be assessed again, and that student will hopefully assess better (if school actually works).

We then erase the old mark and replace it with the new one. If the students does worse, the mark is erased and replaced with a lower one. In this way, we say that we grade in pencil. The students are sent the tacit message that the goal of school is to learn more.

There are many objections to this line of reasoning, which I've dealt with in greater detail [here](#).

S1 In Progress				Constant Velocity 08/21/2012 pts: 10	Data Analysis 08/21/2012 pts: 10	Constant Accel... 08/23/2012 pts: 10	Projectiles 09/12/2012 pts: 10	Kinematics Gra... 09/20/2012 pts: 10
Stu...	(S1) Fi...	A	T					
...	B+	..	-	9	10	9		7
B...	B	..	-	10	7	8		9
B...	D+	..	1	6	7.5	6		8
B...	B+	..	-	10	10	7		8
...	C+	..	1	7	9.5	7		8
...	B	..	-	10	10	8		6
...	B	..	3	7	10	9		8
...	B+	..	-	10	8	8		9
...	B+	..	-	10	9	8		8
...	D+	..	-	9	8	5		5
...	A	..	-	10	10	9		9
K...	A-	..	-	9	10	9		8
K...	C+	..	-	10	5	7		9
...	B	..	-	10	10	6		8
...	A	..	-	10	9	8		10
...	A	..	-	10	10	10		9
...	B	..	-	10	10	6		7
P...	A	..	-	10	9	10		9
P...	C	..	1	5	9	8		8
P...	A	..	1	10		10		9
S...	A	..	-	10	10	10		9
S...	A	..	-	10	9	10		9
S...	C-	..	-	6	9.5	8		5
S...	C	..	-	5	10	8		7
...	C	..	7	6	8	8		
mean		B		8.8	9.1	8.1		8
median		B		10	9.5	8		8
mode				10	10	8		9

This is a standards-based grade book for Physics, 3 weeks in. These scores have been updated several times, and you can see the assignments are ideas, not assessment tools.

Running Grades:

Running grades are the micro-managed reporting that has only come about since the advent of the Internet. Parents and students can now check on a student's grade 24 hours a day. This was originally seen as fantastic tool, but has since become a detriment to the psychology of our students.

Imagine if every misstep you took was visible by every authority figure in your life. Imagine if every missed key played on a piano was recorded, made available, and then averaged into a total number of missed versus hit keys? This would be a stifling way to learn piano, and is in fact how we teach kids other content in most high schools.

The concept of the running grade is harmful and doesn't really make any sense. A student can be "failing" a class 3 days into a semester because they might have forgotten something as simple as to put a cover on their text book. This has nothing to do with what they know, and even worse, puts them in a hole which teenage psychology doesn't deal with very well.

Finally, reporting a running grade assumes a constant and continuous stream of learning. It assumes that all students learn in equal quanta each day, which is demonstrably false. People learn in punctuated fits and starts. They often stick for weeks on one idea, and then flood through the rest of a curriculum. What's even more difficult for traditional grading is trying to manage that each student has different intervals of fits or starts.

At Solon, we're honoring this by reassessing students and allowing their overall performance on the learning targets to make up their final grade. We are on the road to abolishing grades until they make sense—the end of a semester.

Homework Exists, Doesn't Count:

The stickiest point of all. Homework is worth nothing.

The rabble rouses: but then they won't do it!

This is not true, students do a lot more than they used to, now that copying homework is a non-issue.

How can you run a school without homework?

We don't. We assign a lot of homework, actually, but the kids choose how much and when to do it.

Rethinking homework is the ultimate in teaching kids how to handle college. We need students to take on the personal responsibility associated with choosing practice, and for some students this can take a while. Their grades may indeed be awful to start, but we're in the business of teaching students to learn, and sometimes that involves hearing a teenager admit that they need to do some unassigned homework to master a topic.

Resources:

I've written extensively about our schools journey at [ThinkThinkThunk](#).

Here's a link to our districts [grading guidelines](#) via our curriculum director, Matt Townsley.

Hers's a [book](#) my Marzano you should read.

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