

What Research Does and Does NOT Tell Us About Common Grading Practices

Grades are commonplace in schools, and we take them for granted and sometimes give them inappropriate meaning. But grades are not necessary either for students to learn or for teachers to teach. Some common uses of grades are NOT confirmed by educational research. Here are a couple.

Grading on the normal curve is a practice that assumes grades should be apportioned so that only a few are highly successful, most are mainly average, and a few fail. Some attributes are ‘normally distributed’ (like height or weight) but learning in school is not. Grading on the curve almost always punishes some who have met the expectations and occasionally rewards those who have not—inevitably creating winners and losers. Grading on a curve is sometimes offered as encouragement to students who may be doing average work, thus providing a disincentive to improvement. Grading that is passed on specific criteria and standards more appropriately attest to what students have actually learned.

Giving failing grades or zeros for uncompleted work are practices that amount to using grades as a punishment. The assumption is that students will seek to avoid this punishment and work harder, when the research demonstrates that for many students getting failing grades and zeros is demotivating, and leads to giving up rather than trying harder. Rather than giving failing grades or zeros, incomplete grades with appropriate support and additional instruction focus on helping students to acquire the knowledge and skills that are expected.

When grades are given they should provide high quality, clearly communicated information about what students have learned and are able to do, and with an overriding concern for their impact on students.

A good resource for understanding grading practices and how they effect children is Thomas Guskey’s *How’s My Kid Doing? A Parents’ Guide to Grades, Marks, and Report Cards*.

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