

## **A Minnesota High School Reforms Its Grading Policies**

(Originally titled “How Grading Reform Changed Our School”)

In this helpful *Educational Leadership* article, Jeffrey Erickson, assistant principal of a suburban 2,900-student high school, describes the journey he and his colleagues undertook to address problems they had identified with their grading system: inconsistency from class to class; blending attendance, behavior, effort, extra credit, class participation, returning permission slips, contributing canned food to the food drive, and achievement; grading on the curve; and parent pressure for more transparency.

The school’s first move was to articulate a guiding principle: *Grades should reflect only what a student knows and is able to do*. As the faculty studied the issue and engaged in professional sharing and explanations to parents, resistance faded away and policies were changed:

- Grades were split into two categories: formative (which would count for no more than 15 percent) and summative (not less than 85 percent).
- Summative grades were based on at least four common assessments for each course, one of which had to be a performance task.
- Teachers articulated clear learning targets that students could understand and attain.
- Formative assessments informed students of their progress in mastering material that was eventually contained in summative assessments.
- After each summative assessment, teachers did an item analysis, and if a significant number of students missed an item, the teacher omitted it from students’ grades, retaught the concept, and gave another assessment.
- Instead of grading homework on completion, which sometimes produced disparities between homework grades and summative mastery, teachers started giving in-class quizzes on homework content.
- The previous policy on re-takes – *Teach, test, and move on* – was replaced by *Teach, test, and now what?* “The essential question that each teacher should ask after every assessment is, *Now what do I do for the students who didn’t get it?*” says Erickson. “When the answer is to provide a retake, the most important step is what happens between the first and second test. The purpose of retakes is never for the student to simply show up and hope for the best. Corrective instruction must occur between the test and retest.”
- Behavior, attendance, effort, and attitude were reported to parents in regular report-card conferences. Unexcused absences were dealt with by intervention and consequences within 36 hours, not lowering grades. These changes have produced a 55 percent reduction in unexcused absences, a 66 percent reduction in disciplinary referrals, and a 37 percent reduction in suspensions.
- “We decided that the consequence for not doing the work should be – doing the work,” says Erickson. This takes place during lunch or before school. Teachers phone the parents of

struggling students every three weeks. The result has been a 63 percent reduction in *F*s and a 32 percent drop in *D*s. “When an entire faculty implements this consequence and moves away from practices that deflate grades – and hope – an entire culture can be transformed,” he says.

How did this affect student achievement? Erickson reports that ACT composite scores rose from 24.1 to 25.7, the number of students taking AP exams rose from 505 to 661, the number of students participating in the AP Scholars program rose from 160 to 258, and the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade Minnesota Comprehensive Reading Exam passing rate increased from 85.5 percent to 92.3 percent. In addition, there’s much less stress and uncertainty about grades. The new policies are clear and transparent, and everyone is more relaxed.

“How Grading Reform Changed Our School” by Jeffrey Erickson in *Educational Leadership*, November 2011 (Vol. 69, #3, p. 66-), <http://www.ascd.org>; Erickson can be reached at [jeffrey.erickson@minnetonka.k12.mn.us](mailto:jeffrey.erickson@minnetonka.k12.mn.us).