

Thomas Guskey on Overcoming Obstacles to Better Grading

(Originally titled “Five Obstacles to Grading Reform”)

“Educators seeking to reform grading must combat five long-held traditions that stand as formidable obstacles to change,” says University of Kentucky professor Thomas Guskey in this *Educational Leadership* article. “... Leaders who have the courage to challenge the traditional approach and the conviction to press for thoughtful, positive reforms are likely to see remarkable results.” Here are the obstacles:

- *Obstacle #1: Grades should differentiate students on the basis of talent.* “Students who show superior talent receive high grades, whereas those who display lesser talent receive lower grades,” explains Guskey. This view suggests that schools are in the business of *selecting* rather than *developing* talent. If the goal is selection, then a school should maximize the achievement differences among students. One way of doing this is using assessments like the SAT and ACT, which eliminate questions on which most students score well. Another way to maximize student-achievement differences is to teach poorly; it works every time. But if the goal is developing talent, the school should be clear about learning outcomes and do everything possible to ensure that all students learn. The result should be almost all students reach high levels of achievement.

- *Obstacle #2: Grade distributions should form a bell-shaped curve.* The logic here is that intelligence is distributed along a bell-shaped curve, and achievement is related to intelligence, so grades should look the same. The flaw in this logic is that bell-shaped curves represent human variation when nothing intervenes. When learning conditions are optimized, the relationship between intelligence and achievement approaches zero. With effective teaching, the curve should look much different. In fact, if there’s a normal curve after teaching, it’s a sign that instruction was ineffective.

- *Obstacle #3: Grades should be based on students’ standing compared to classmates.* This kind of grading means that a student who receives an A did better than others in the class, versus achieving objective success. The problem with norm-referenced grading is that it’s possible for students to perform poorly and still get high grades compared to other students who are performing even worse. Comparative grading also cranks up competitiveness. “Students are discouraged from cooperating or helping one another because doing so might hurt the helper’s chance of success,” says Guskey. “Similarly, teachers may refrain from helping individual students because some students might construe this as showing favoritism and biasing the competition.” In standards-based grading, on the other hand, grades are based on rigorous, challenging, and transparent learning outcomes and have much more meaning.

- *Obstacle #4: Getting low grades makes students try harder.* There is no research evidence that low grades are motivational. In fact, low grades often lead students to dismiss the importance of grades and stop trying. A much more effective strategy is giving students who don’t achieve mastery an *I* for incomplete and requiring them to get help the same day (during lunch or after school) to reach mastery.

• *Obstacle #5: Students should get a single grade for each subject or course.* There's plenty of evidence that combining achievement, attitude, effort, behavior, punctuality, and level of responsibility into one composite grade doesn't work, says Guskey. It's far more effective to give separate grades for *product* (a summative assessment of student learning, usually using A, B, C, D, and F), *process* (how students got there), and *progress* (the value-added from the learning experience), usually using a 4-3-2-1 grading scale, with separate marks and rubrics for homework, class participation, punctuality, effort, etc. Using this system, grade-point averages are based solely on the product grade. Guskey says that splitting up grades this way actually saves teachers time – and also saves constant arguments about how different factors counted in a composite grade. It's important, of course, to be clear up front about how grades will be reported.

“Five Obstacles to Grading Reform” by Thomas Guskey in *Educational Leadership*, November 2011 (Vol. 69, #3, p. 16-21), <http://www.ascd.org>; Guskey can be reached at Guskey@uky.edu.