

Superintendent's Message

It's Time to Look at Our Student Grading Practices

It is common for teachers to hand out zeros when students fail to complete homework, or drastically reduce a student's grade when it is handed in late. Is that good practice? School districts across the nation are now reexamining their grading policies and practices, especially in view of No Child Left Behind mandates. Many school districts have implemented "no zero" policies based on the premise that all children should be given an opportunity to learn and should be allowed to redo assignments, especially if a child makes a failing grade. That includes daily grades and test grades as well. These school districts support the philosophy that if your child scores below 70 percent, the teacher is to re-teach the standard using a variety of resources, under the Response to Intervention model. After the intervention, the teacher is to reassess. Therefore, the focus remains on improving student learning.

Many school districts have now made zeros unacceptable. Teachers give children an incomplete for work not turned in and students must complete the assignment or be subjected to the loss of certain school privileges. Parent notification and involvement is of critical importance to help students. Teachers must communicate often and well with parents, and grades are expected to be posted to the Parent Portal grade book no less than once per week.

No-zero policies are the subject of much debate. Those in favor of such policies hold that it provides a model where teachers continue to coach students through material until mastery, versus ending a lesson with a test, which a student may fail but not have an opportunity to thoroughly learn the material at her/his own pace. Academic failure is a major reason that students drop out of school. After all, when zeros begin to mount, students know that it becomes impossible to pass and therefore, they give up. On the other hand, critics of "no zero" policies argue that it allows students to shirk responsibility and when a student simply refuses to commit to learning or complete assignments, there's little a teacher can do. Students, they say, must not be taught to do as little as possible; they must be taught to be accountable and responsible.

But, can we teach students to be accountable and responsible in different ways? I think we all agree that students should not be given passing grades; rather, they must earn passing scores. I believe it is common sense that students should not be excused from doing assignments or taking tests. As educators we also recognize that students learn at different rates and in different ways. Our goal must be for all students to master course content and skills. If we are to be a school district that aspires to excellence every day, failure cannot be acceptable. We must provide students with opportunities to improve, not saddle them with so many zeros that they just give up.

So, let the discussion about grading begin in our school district.

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Superintendent of Schools