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**CORWIN**

# Preface to the Second Edition

When I submitted my final manuscript of *Grading for Equity* to my publisher in the summer of 2018, I felt like I was throwing a bottle with a message into the ocean and wasn't sure anyone would find it. I had spent the previous five years, after two decades of work in schools and districts, working with teachers in about two dozen schools and districts to improve their grading practices to be more accurate, bias-resistant, and intrinsically motivating. The book captured everything I had learned, all the critiques I could counter, all the research I could find to make the case for more equitable grading unassailable, and the need to act unavoidable. Although there had been several great books published on grading, and many excellent books available to support equity in schools, there hadn't yet been an integration of the two fields. I had no reason to believe that there was any real appetite for these ideas.

And then came the Spring of 2020. It would be impossible for me to attempt to capture all the trauma and pain over the next two-and-a-half years. We educators navigated, pivoted, and withstood the immense challenges in our schools, and I wanted to turn the spotlight on how we learned (or arguably, relearned) two very hard lessons: When something harms everyone, it acutely harms the most vulnerable; and when the most vulnerable are harmed by something, it's actually harming everyone. And nowhere were these lessons more pronounced than in our grading.

## **LESSON #1: WHEN SOMETHING HARMS EVERYONE, IT ACUTELY HARMS THE MOST VULNERABLE**

The pandemic created an urgency for schools to make radical, rapid change to almost everything. Most significantly, schools shifted to remote instruction, with teachers using a spectrum of approaches: conducting traditional teacher-centered classes to the Zoom two-dimensional grid of silent faces; using app interfaces to generate student engagement; posting teacher-created videos that taught content with student-generated videos that demonstrated understanding; and shifting

entire pedagogies through “flipped classrooms” that blended asynchronous and synchronous learning.

Yet despite teachers’ creativity and miraculous perseverance, school-age children were profoundly affected by the pandemic in ways we are still discovering. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), more than a third (37 percent) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and nearly half (44 percent) reported they felt persistently sad or hopeless. Over half (55 percent) reported they experienced emotional abuse by an adult in the home. Suicide rates increased, particularly for adolescent girls, and nearly 20 percent of teens said they considered suicide. Many students did not consistently or meaningfully attend school during the pandemic; according to one analysis, an estimated 230,000 public school students across twenty-one states simply “disappeared” from school enrollments (Toness & Lurye, 2023). Unsurprisingly, students’ learning stalled—the percentage of students meeting standards in ELA and math declined, in some cases precipitously (see, e.g., Hough & Chavez, 2022). It was unsurprising, but still shocking, that results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022) showed that a majority of states saw scores decline for fourth- and eighth-graders in mathematics and reading between 2019 and 2022, and the national average score declines in mathematics for fourth- and eighth-graders were the largest ever recorded in that subject.

Even though schools were closed, as a result of the shift to online instruction and the ubiquitous use of computer cameras for virtual classes, we suddenly could witness, sometimes to our discomfort, our students’ and families’ lives in all their rawness and saw how students across all economic categories, neighborhoods, and backgrounds struggled. Students were without support or supervision when their parents’ occupations—across all educational levels and salaries—required them to be away from the house (health professionals to emergency responders and from single-income proprietors to public utilities employees). All students regardless of their home’s size or technology sophistication stretched their finite bandwidth.

Those students fortunate to have more resources—two-parent families, a larger house to allow more quiet learning spaces, caregivers with a higher education background and who had flexibility in their jobs to be available to support their students’ learning—were able to soften the constant blows of the pandemic. We saw that those students who had a weaker safety net—often students of color, with special needs, from families with lower income, or whose first language is not English—the impact of the pandemic was exponentially worse for their learning. Students who did not have sufficient access to technology because of a lack of computers or internet access were simply unable to attend classes. Many students struggled every day to simply find a space quiet and distraction-free (or embarrassment-free) to attend an online class. Students in families who experienced instability in their housing, food, or employment had greater concerns than signing onto a Zoom meeting and would simply disappear from a school’s enrollment. Those with special needs had no way to

access the critically important (and legally provisioned) supports to learn, and students with mental health needs were unable to access counseling. Rarely in the history of our country did a student's learning become so dependent on home resources—a situation that exposed glaring inequities in which those students who were more vulnerable before the pandemic suffered even more during it. And our traditional approaches to grading were only making things worse.

## **LESSON #2: WHEN THE MOST VULNERABLE ARE HARMED BY SOMETHING, IT'S ACTUALLY HARMING EVERYONE**

The other enormous disruption during the spring of 2020 was the momentum and power of the Black Lives Movement. The recordings of killings of Black people ricocheted throughout social media platforms and showed incontrovertible evidence of the state-sanctioned violence Black people had experienced for generations, but which white people had refused to believe, or perhaps believed but ignored. An estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States, making it one of the largest movements in our country's history (Buchanan et al., 2020). The movement forced a deeply reflective and challenging moment for so many white people (including myself), who were challenged to identify how, in their daily lives, in their conversations, in their behaviors and policies, and in their ignorance, avoidance, and inaction, they have perpetuated harm toward Black people.

In schools and districts that were serving students of color, the impact of police violence may have been familiar, but schools and districts regardless of their student population had to recognize the imperative of the BLM movement. We educators were obligated to critically examine how our schools have been accessories, and perhaps active contributors, to the trauma of Black students and to reflect on our agency, endorsement, and complicity. We took a closer look at our disciplinary policies and sought to amplify and respond to the voices of Black students and their families to share their perspectives about how classrooms and school cultures exacted harm in ways subtle and overt. What we realized is that their experiences in schools—their disproportionate punishment by discipline policies, their higher failure rates, their alienation from the curriculum—wasn't something about them; it was a reaction to how we and the structures of our schools were harming them. We couldn't ignore that our common grading practices might be another example of structural inequities. Seeing how school structures and some educators' behavior patterns dehumanized and hurt Black students gave us insight into how those same structures were negatively affecting other historically marginalized groups—Latinx, Indigenous students, LGBTQI+, students with special needs, and students from lower-income families—and in fact might be systemically harming all students. Black students were just the most susceptible to that harm—the canaries in the coal mine.

## GRADING DURING THE PANDEMIC

These two reciprocal ideas—that the harms to everyone disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, and the harms to the vulnerable reflect harms that are being done to everyone—were exemplified in the spotlight that the pandemic and the BLM shone on grading. It’s as if suddenly, finally, educators found an urgency and moral imperative to examine our common grading practices. My book acted as a resource and catalyst for policymakers, principals and superintendents, teachers, journalists, parent and caregiver associations, college faculty and administrators, and nonprofit advocacy organizations—anyone who had a stake in how our grading affects our students’ education, mental health, and life opportunities. And that’s everyone. Improving our grading to be more accurate, bias-resistant, and intrinsically motivating was not just necessary, but it was doable—a concrete and immediate way for individual teachers as well as entire districts to improve learning when so much seemed out of our control and overwhelming.

Beginning in the spring of 2020 and through the 2020–21 school year, education institutions, whether serving kindergarteners, middle and high school students, or undergraduates, changed how they graded—how they measured, described, and reported student achievement. Some changes were granular, such as not deducting points from a grade if students were unable to join the class virtually or if work was submitted late, and some were broader—prohibiting students from failing a class, and assigning an incomplete instead of a zero (0 percent) until the student could fulfill the requirements. Our traditional grading practices seemed inadequate, inappropriate, and plain foolish. It made no sense to award points to students for turning on their computer camera during math class when revealing their kitchen had nothing to do with the quadratic formula, and it seemed plainly unfair when some students had less bandwidth or their parent wasn’t around to help them because they were doing a second straight shift at the hospital. It seemed ridiculous during a global pandemic to subtract points for submitting an assignment a day late when they were responsible for taking care of ill relatives or supporting younger siblings with their Zoom classes, or when on the day it was due the student had to work to backfill the lost wages of a parent’s sudden unemployment. When every student faced emotional, economic, technological, and logistical challenges to some extent, it became self-evident that a student’s grade should not reflect circumstances over which they had no control. It became silly to believe that the threat of points or the threat to take them away would motivate students whose lives were in turmoil and were experiencing significant mental health issues. Traditional and common ways of grading—such as including a student’s nonacademic behaviors in the grade or using practices that make the grade reflective of a student’s background or environment—used in our schools for over a century were completely out of touch from modern reality. More importantly, grading in these ways demotivated so many students and warped the accuracy of so many of their grades. We realized that the ways in which these traditional grading practices were impacting all students were exactly the ways

that these practices had **always** been inapplicable, detached from reality, and harmful to the students who were historically underserved and most vulnerable.

Plus, we gained a stronger awareness of the ways in which our traditional grading specifically harmed and dehumanized Black students. We saw that when we use grading categories of “Participation” or “Effort,” we invite our implicit biases into our grading, awarding or subtracting points based on how well students can conform to a particular archetype of a student, an archetype that reflects our own ways of learning and being or that reflect the dominant/white culture’s. Using grading as a classroom management or assimilation strategy seemed at best inappropriate and at worst dehumanizing. Plus, because our grades traditionally combine academic performance with behavioral compliance, when Black students are judged with biased lenses, they would have less valid and lower grades. Additionally, because Black students have been denied access to educational opportunities over generations, when we average performance over time, particularly on the 0–100 scale, we make it disproportionately harder for them to succeed. This awareness helped us realize that our traditional grading practices, while exacting a particular harm on Black students, was inappropriate and harmful to all students to some extent. As a response, many educators decided to stop including behaviors in the grade and to use the 0–4 scale instead of the 0–100 scale. If these practices were wrong for Black students, why would we use them to grade *any* student?

These changes to grading caused reactions that varied from relief and appreciation to skepticism and resentment, but this is unsurprising. Grades are one of a teacher’s primary responsibilities, and they increase schools’ power and legitimacy. They are also the main criteria for so many major decisions that affect students’ lives—inside and outside school, and in the short and long term. Like I said a few paragraphs ago, everyone has a stake in the integrity of grading. Some criticized these shifts during the pandemic as a watering down of expectations, of sacrificing opportunities of the successful to accommodate the struggling, of conceding accommodations rather than letting students “tough it out.” Others praised the humanity of educators for considering the trauma and challenges of students and for addressing rather than perpetuating harms. Everyone, though, viewed the pivots as temporary—adjustments because of the current emergency conditions—and left open what changes to grading would endure postpandemic.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Now, as the memory of the pandemic begins to fade, we begin to build Mooallem’s (2023) “rickety bridges to some other, slightly more stable place”:

[S]ociety confronted a new source of suffering that seemed intolerable, and then, day by day, beat it back just enough to be tolerated. Over time, we simply stirred the virus in with all the other forms of disorder and

dysfunction we live with—problems that appear to be acceptable because they merely inconvenience some large portion of people, even as they devastate others. If this makes you uneasy, as an ending to our pandemic story, maybe it’s only because, with Covid, we are still able to see the indecency of that arrangement clearly. We haven’t yet made it invisible to ourselves. Right now, we’re still struggling to stretch some feeling of normalcy, like a heavy tarp, over the top. (para. 8)

Each of us, in ways personal and professional, in relationships with loved ones and with colleagues, are trying to find, or create, a “normalcy.” We are all processing the trauma and either seeking to preserve, or run away from, what we experienced and learned during the pandemic and in the stark visibility of anti-Blackness. We who work in educational systems are not only figuring out what the past five years has meant to us but also what we want to be different in our own lives and what, if anything, should be different for our students’ learning. This new edition of *Grading for Equity* is an attempt to provide one small support for this effort. It is a nudge toward remembering how the last five years taught us both about the fragility of students and ourselves, the resilience and creativity that we’re all capable of, and how grading is one of the most powerful elements of the educational system, with the power to devastate and injure, as well as the power to uplift and dignify. We became more acutely aware of how the traditional grading system isn’t just inapplicable, but that it harms so many students because it is biased, demotivating, and often inaccurate. Importantly, our inherited grading practices have always hurt our historically underserved students harshly; it was just that now more students (specifically white, from higher income families, or with stronger supports) were affected.

Two teachers—one who teaches high school and another at the college level—were quoted in a recent article about what they learned about grading from what happened during the pandemic:

In our district, we’ve all realized that there have been inequities, but they have never been clearer. . . . That’s kind of a struggle, because you don’t want to fail this student who you know is capable and would do the stuff if she didn’t have these other circumstances. (high school teacher)

I have been thinking a lot about what kind of grading system would be even remotely fair under these kinds of conditions or other conditions. . . . It’s making me think more deeply about what grades are for and why we assign them and why we have the system that we have in place for them.” (associate professor; Simonetti, 2020)

To adapt an idea from author Arundhati Roy (2020), the pandemic brought the engine of education to a “juddering halt . . . temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment, and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.” We can’t unsee what the pandemic showed

us about our common grading practices. We have the opportunity, license, and the ethical demand to resist reverting to prepandemic practices—to remember how traditional grading has harmed students for too long—and to build a better grading engine that is more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational.

## WHAT'S NEW IN THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition of *Grading for Equity* reflects new understandings—of our country, our schools, and our teachers. It also reflects my new understandings. Since I started working with teachers in 2014, I have tried to synthesize the academic research and teachers' experiences with more equitable grading practices, culminating in the 2018 publication. Five additional years of stress-testing equitable grading practices have allowed thousands more teachers to engage in this journey and translate these equitable grading practices into their classrooms, and these teachers have generously provided much feedback and insight. Their work, and the work of my colleagues at my fledgling organization, Crescendo Education Group, have opened my eyes to potential weaknesses in these practices and possible misinterpretations and incomplete applications of the ideas. **This edition reflects my new learning, with amendments and clarifications to more effectively communicate equitable grading practices and equip teachers to apply them successfully.** Among the updates, I have reframed how, beyond the technical solution of basing a grade on a student's "most recent performance," we should ensure that our grades reflect the most valid evidence of student understanding at the end of their learning (Chapter 8), and I have improved my explanation of proficiency scales to more effectively counteract institutional biases (Chapter 12).

Five years have also deepened the reservoir of positive evidence—both qualitative and quantitative—about the benefits of more equitable grading for students—particularly those historically underserved as well as those historically quite successful. When teachers access the content of this book, and get support to implement the practices, things shift.

After professional development with equitable grading:<sup>1</sup>

- Teachers are **19 times LESS** likely to include in the grade tardiness, attendance, or adherence to class rules
- Teachers are **9 times LESS** likely to provide extra credit opportunities
- Teachers are **7 times LESS** likely to reduce points for work submitted late

<sup>1</sup>Pre- and post-PD surveys administered to over 650 teachers across eleven schools or districts from 2014 to 2022, after participating in a series of workshops and coaching led by my organization, Crescendo Education Group. Data analyzed by Elite Research.



- Teachers are **5 times LESS** likely to include homework performance in the grade
- Teachers are **3 times LESS** likely to assign zeros for missing assignments
- Teachers are **3 times LESS** likely to include participation, effort, or growth in the grade
- Teachers are **1.5 times LESS** likely to average performance over time
- Teachers are **5 times MORE** likely to offer redos/retakes without penalty
- Teachers are **5 times MORE** likely to agree that group scores should never be included in the grades of individual students
- Teachers are **3 times MORE** likely to agree that “students understand how their grade is determined and therefore how specifically they can improve their grade”

Five years after the first edition have given time to deepen the evidence base and strengthen the effectiveness of equitable grading and the durability of the pillars of accuracy, bias-resistance, and intrinsic motivation as supports for the practices. Teachers at the elementary level have shown me how proficiency scales build student agency for the youngest learners, and community college and university faculty have shown me how more of this work applies to them and their students than I had ever imagined. Schools and districts who engage in this work empower their teachers by honoring their creativity and curiosity and by respecting and listening to their classroom data and experiences.

As equitable grading has gathered momentum across the K–16 landscape, I’ve also seen the skeptical and passionate pushback, even more so because the term “equity” has become so misunderstood and political. We need to improve grading specifically to address the generations of educational harm to Black students and students of color, as well as to students from lower-income families, whose first language is not English, and who have special needs. And at the same time, what I’ve found with groups who have not been as historically underserved in our schools is that our traditional grading practices hurt all students, including those who have succeeded or whose parents have succeeded. I understand how people who have been successful at a game don’t want the rules changed, but the “success” within traditional grading systems has often been at a cost: grades that are inaccurate and misleading, that reward or punish students based on criteria unrelated to course content, and that add stress and deprive students of building self-regulation. Traditional grading policies harm everyone, even those who succeed.

Perhaps most importantly, the past five years have shown even more clearly how traditional grading practices reduce the humanity in our classrooms—of both teachers and students—by incentivizing teaching and learning to be a transactional relationship bound within a capitalistic framework of points given and points taken away. No teacher went into teaching to control students through the manipulative power of grades. We entered teaching to prepare our students to be thoughtful, curious, caring, self-actualizing, skilled, knowledgeable, critical-thinking humans who can set goals, have the tools to reach them and find the resources to support them, and who can make the world better. Hopefully this new edition helps promote a conversation about how more equitable grading can move each of us and our students closer to that kind of teaching.

## THE NEW CHAPTER: EQUITABLE GRADING SYSTEMWIDE

For those worried that “We can make grading more equitable in our own classroom/school/district/university, but what about everyone else?” the good news is that there has never been more movement across the K–16 system to improve grading, and the change is accelerating. Grading for so long has been a solitary task by each teacher, indifferent to, even avoiding, any cross-classroom coherence or consistency. As a result, systemwide grading policies usually have been vague, weak compromises, or if they are specific, more honored in their breach than in their observance. Over the last five years, my organization has partnered and supported dozens of schools and districts to move toward systemwide change. Based on our learnings, **this second edition includes a new chapter: how to effect equitable grading not only in individual classrooms but also throughout a system (Chapter 15)**. Whether you are looking to implement more equitable grading throughout a department, grade level, school, district, university, or state, there are unique challenges. We’ve identified common successful strategies, and pitfalls, for those leading systemwide change to ultimately develop more equitable grading policies and a coherent implementation of those policies.

I hope that this second edition refines and improves the conversation about this work. I wrote in the first edition that this book is a conversation between you and me about equitable grading. Perhaps this second edition is really a collaboration that includes you, me, the practices, and the system where you educate (or where your students learn). This book should be a guide for reflection and explanation of what equitable grading is, what it isn’t, and a tool to invite both those who are excited about improving grading and those who are skeptical, even hostile, to the idea. Making our grading practices more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational is absolutely critical to improving our schools, for each and every student, particularly those we’ve often harmed over generations. And it can make our work as educators more fulfilling. At a moment when there is a real crisis in retaining

teachers, we've found that **teachers who learn to grade more equitably express a greater likelihood to stay in their current school or district.**<sup>2</sup> Equitable grading improves the school experience not just of students but also of their teachers.

This work has never been more important now that the pandemic is receding while harms to Black people and those historically underserved persist. I'll conclude this Preface with another insight by Arundhati Roy (2020):

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (p. 45)

Let us imagine that equitable grading is one tiny but significant part of this new world. And let's be ready to fight for it.

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<sup>2</sup>Elite Research synthesis of pre- to post-PD data, 2014–2022.