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Engaging Parents and Families in Grading Reforms

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CHAPTER 1

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PARENTS' AND FAMILIES' PERSPECTIVES ON GRADING AND REPORTING REFORMS

I n schools throughout the world today, educators are reforming the way they grade and report student learning. The school leaders and teachers in these schools recognize that many of their current grading policies and practices are out-of-date and sorely inadequate. They also realize that these policies and practices don't align well with recent changes in school curriculums, instructional strategies, and procedures for assessing student learning. Yet despite their commitment and good intentions, most of these dedicated educators are struggling in their reform efforts.

What often eludes so many of these hard-working school leaders and teachers is that to reform grading and reporting means challenging some of education's longest held and most firmly entrenched traditions. It means altering policies and practices that have been a part of schooling for generations. Challenging these well-established traditions prompts concern among all stakeholders and serious opposition from some. In many cases, the most adamant opposition to grading and reporting reforms comes from parents and families.

School leaders and teachers are often surprised by this staunch opposition. Parents and families rarely oppose reasonable changes in schooling. They know the education their children need to succeed in the world today must

be different from the education they received in schools decades ago. Advances in technology, combined with numerous societal changes, have drastically altered the knowledge and skills children need today to succeed in school and in any career or profession they may choose.

So why are parents and families so opposed to reforms in grading and reporting? What makes grading reform such a lightning rod for controversy and contention? Surveys investigating this issue find that parents' and families' opposition to changes in grading stems from two major concerns (Guskey & Link, 2019; Guskey et al., 2011). First and foremost, they don't see the need for change. Grading reforms involve altering traditions that have remained relatively constant in schools for the past century (see Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Challenging those traditions means disrupting the security they provide. It means pushing all stakeholders, and especially parents and families, from what is well-known and familiar to something unknown and uncertain, with no guarantee that the new will be better.

Parents and families don't necessarily support current grading policies or the idiosyncratic grading practices of individual teachers, but at least they understand them. These policies and practices are the same as they experienced when they were in school. Changing grading and reporting not only challenges that understanding, it diminishes parents' and families' confidence in their ability to guide their children in successfully negotiating the grading process.

Second, parents and families are keenly aware of the importance attached to grades by educators and others. Grades are the primary criteria used to determine if their child will be promoted from one grade level to the next. Grades affect their child's eligibility for advanced classes and participation in sports and other extracurricular activities. Grades are a major factor in the college admission process and entry into many careers. Changing grading and reporting could significantly impact these crucial decisions that affect their child in school and beyond (see Franklin et al., 2016).

To succeed in grading reforms, school leaders and teachers must be aware of and anticipate these concerns. But even more important, they must know how to address them. Those leading grading reform efforts must be prepared to discuss these concerns openly and honestly. They need to combine that openness with a deep understanding of the change process and the conditions necessary for successful and sustained change. They must know how to frame grading reforms in ways that make sense to parents and families and be ready to describe both the practical advantages and educational value

of the changes they advocate. Furthermore, they must be able to engage parents and families as meaningful partners in the change process so that they become allies and supporters of grading reforms rather than challengers and opponents.

Parents and families who trust their children's school leaders and teachers tend to be more engaged with and supportive of educational programs (Santiago et al., 2016). The regularity and transparency of the messages parents and families receive from educators are major contributors to that trust. The quality of that communication, however, seems to matter more than the quantity (Adams & Christenson, 2000). This book is designed to provide school leaders and teachers with the awareness, knowledge, understanding, and skills they need to develop that trust among the parents and families with whom they work.

PURPOSE

This book is about parents' and families' concerns regarding grading reforms and how to address those concerns. It is not designed to be a comprehensive analysis of parents' and families' perspectives on education. Other excellent resources provide school leaders and teachers with that insight, especially *Parents and Teachers: Perspectives, Interactions, and Relationships*, edited by Francesco Arcidiacono (2021); *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* by Joyce Epstein and Associates (2009); and *Helping Parents Understand Schools: A Different Perspective on Education and Schooling in America* by Lyndon Furst (2017). This book also does not offer detailed descriptions of the essential aspects of grading reform. Books such as *On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting* (Guskey, 2015) and *Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems* (Guskey, 2020) are specifically designed to do that.

Instead, this book is intended to be a brief, extremely practical, no-nonsense guide to help school leaders and teachers successfully implement meaningful reforms in grading and reporting student learning. The goal is to help reform leaders recognize the concerns of parents and families regarding grading issues, understand the reasons behind those concerns, and know how to address those concerns in meaningful and effective ways.

The need for this book was prompted by an extensive analysis we conducted of press reports and other accounts of school districts that had attempted grading reforms but failed miserably in their efforts (see Guskey, 2021a, 2021b). Studying these reports helped pinpoint the pitfalls school leaders and teachers need to anticipate and gave insight into how to avoid them.

It also helped identify both failed approaches to grading reform and alternative approaches more likely to succeed, and showed how to weigh various options when the evidence is unclear. Following the advice offered on these pages will not necessarily guarantee success in every grading reform effort. Nevertheless, the existing evidence shows that ignoring these issues will most certainly result in failure.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

The seven following chapters in this book describe the issues most crucial to gaining parents' and families' support for grading reforms and how to engage them as genuine partners in the reform process.

Chapter 2: Understand the Change Process

School leaders and teachers often fail in their reform efforts because they don't understand the critical aspects and subtle nuances of the change process. In particular, they make the mistake of trying to change parents' and families' attitudes and beliefs directly through persuasive presentations, discussions, and individual conversations. Strong evidence shows, however, that attitudes and beliefs are rarely changed through verbal persuasion. Instead, they are formed and altered primarily through personal experience. This chapter shows how a focus on changing parents', families', and students' experiences with grading and reporting provides the key to reform success.

Chapter 3: Clarify the Purpose of Grading

Before considering the advantages or shortcomings of changes in grading and reporting, parents and families want to understand *why* change is necessary. This requires school leaders and teachers first to clarify the purpose of grading and reporting. Making the purpose clear, transparent, and well understood by all stakeholders provides the basis for examining all grading policies and practices to determine if they align with that specified purpose.

Chapter 4: Distinguish the Three Components of Computerized Grading Programs

Nearly all schools today use computerized grading programs to simplify grading and reporting tasks. Although these programs vary widely in their format and ease of use, all include three basic components: (1) a gradebook, (2) a report card, and (3) a permanent record or transcript. To use and interpret these components correctly, school leaders and teachers must help parents and families understand the function of these components and the purpose each is designed to serve. Vital to that understanding is the recognition that

not everything recorded in the gradebook will be used in determining students' report card grades.

Chapter 5: Keep the Report Card Simple and Family Friendly

Many grading reform initiatives fail because educators make the report card far too complicated and difficult for parents and families to interpret. This chapter clarifies what parents and families want in a report card and what they find most useful. It describes how to find the crucial balance between being detailed enough to provide meaningful information on which parents and families can act, but not so detailed that it overwhelms them with information they don't understand and don't know how to use.

Chapter 6: Consider How Parents and Families Interpret Labels

Although choosing the labels used to describe different levels of student performance may seem a simple task, how parents and families interpret those labels is vitally important. Some commonly used labels draw significant criticism from parents and families due to their lack of specificity and their ambiguity. This chapter reviews what is known about parents' and families' reactions to different label terms and outlines procedures for selecting labels that are clear, concise, meaningful, and easy for parents and families to interpret.

Chapter 7: Replace Old Traditions With New Traditions

Many long-established school traditions are based on grades. Examples include the honor roll, the determination of students' class rank, procedures for selecting a class valedictorian, and assigning a single grade to students for each subject area or class. Reforming grading doesn't require completely abandoning these traditions. However, it does require replacing traditions that have long outlived their usefulness with new traditions that are better for students and more educationally sound. This chapter describes some of these long-held traditions, explains why they should be changed, and presents new traditions that can be implemented in their place that benefit students, improve communication between school and home, and will likely be supported by parents and families.

Chapter 8: Focus on a Reporting System

Many school leaders and teachers struggle in grading reform efforts because they focus exclusively on changes in the report card. Successful reform leaders take a more holistic approach and consider an entire *reporting system* that includes the many ways educators can communicate information about students' performance in school to parents and families. These include not only report cards and formal parent–teacher conferences but the wide range of less formal means of communication, such as home visits,

phone calls, e-mail, and text messages. This chapter discusses the different components of a comprehensive reporting system and how to take advantage of the positive aspects of each.

CONCLUSION

No simple recipe can assure success in grading and reporting reforms. No specific set of steps or planning procedures can guarantee trouble-free implementation, unfettered by controversy or contention. As we described earlier, changing grading means challenging the longest held and most firmly established traditions that we have in education. In addition, context differences can be very influential. What works in one school, district, or jurisdiction may not work as well in another school community with different students, teachers, school leaders, and parents and families. Adaptations to the unique characteristics of that community are essential.

Nevertheless, the school leaders and teachers most likely to succeed in grading reform efforts are those who understand parents' and families' perspectives on grading and reporting, recognize the issues most important to them, and engage them as true partners in the reform process.

All too often, educators' relations with parents and families are one-sided conversations rather than genuine partnerships (Rebora, 2022). Real partnerships are "concerned with building *reciprocal* relationships, *shared* responsibility, and *joint work* across settings" (Dugan, 2022, p. 20, emphasis added). They focus on mutual understanding, reciprocal respect, and shared concern for doing what is best for students.

To establish such partnerships, reform leaders must anticipate parents' and families' concerns and approach the reform process in ways that meaningfully address those concerns. They need to recognize that parents and families who initially resist grading and reporting reforms are not antagonistic by nature, nor are they collectively opposed to change. Their resistance comes instead from genuine concern for the well-being of students, especially their own children (see Franklin et al., 2016).

Successful school leaders and teachers do not ignore opposition to grading reforms, nor do they try to avoid it. Instead, they anticipate opposition and address it directly with patience, purpose, and resolve. They work to engage parents and families as partners in the reform effort rather than simply impose reforms upon them. By anticipating concerns, addressing those concerns as part of the reform process, and engaging parents and families as true partners throughout, school leaders and teachers can guarantee more trouble-free implementation of grading reform and far greater success.

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