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**What Educators and School Leaders
Can Do NOW to Accelerate Learning
and Improve Assessment,
Attendance, Engagement, and
Achievement**

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Learning Objectives



- Understand the Competencies of "Equity and Excellence" Schools
- Apply the Evidence on Leadership Challenges in Virtual and Blended Environment
- Analyze the Trust Imperative
- Synthesize the Best Evidence on Resilience



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Core Competencies of "Equity and Excellence Schools"



- Focus –Teaching, Curriculum, and Leadership
- Feedback – Fair, Accurate, Specific, Timely
- Instructional Effectiveness
- Leadership Impact
- Efficacy



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Focused Teaching and Leadership



- Power Standards
 - Leverage
 - Endurance
 - Essentiality
- Initiative Fatigue
 - The Rule of Six
 - Impact Insight – Saving Money NOW



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Effective Feedback is FAST



- **Fair** (consistent definition of "proficiency")
- **Accurate** (grade what we think we are grading)
- **Specific** (feedback designed to improve performance, not just award a grade)
- **Timely** (feedback in time to use it)



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Feedback is the Big Picture

- Don't lead with "grading"
- Lead with "feedback"
- Ask teachers and parents about their best (and worst) experiences with feedback
- THEN talk about FAST – Fair, Accurate, Specific, and Timely feedback



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Rule #1 for Improving Feedback: Assure Parents and Teachers About What will NOT Change

- We still have transcripts for secondary school students
- We still have GPA's – 3.2, 3.8, 4.0, etc.
- We still have academic honors (but more accurate and fair)



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Simple Improvements for Feedback

- Use "exemplary" – not "exceeds standards"
- Keep simple A,B,C,D,F grades, with A = 4; B = 3; C = 2; D = 1; and F = 0.
- Use latest and best evidence, not the average to determine final grade
- Use traditional A,B,C,D,F grades, not 100 point grades
- Latin Honors – Highest Honors, High Honors, Honors



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Instructional Effectiveness



- Mini-observations
- Focus on engagement, learning objective, next steps, and checks for understanding
- NO giant and inscrutable rubrics
- YES to immediate personal (in-person or call) feedback – not e-mail or automated systems



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Applying the Lessons of Special Education



- Incremental tasks – what I thought was one task may be four tasks. Maintain rigor, but break it down
- Adaptation and accommodation – ask special educators for example. This is “good ed” – not “special ed”



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Prioritize Professional Learning



- Special support for new teachers who did not receive field experience in the Spring of 2020
- Specific and incremental feedback – use Marshall mini-observation rubrics – just one page at a time
- Systematically gather student work and score collaboratively – key PLC practice
- Data without tears – learning, not judgment



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Lessons from the Shutdown



- Don't fill in silence with worst fears – find out WHY students are absent or disengaged
- Personal relationships more important now than ever
- VERY short assessments – 2-3 items – with meaningful checks for understanding

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Student Leadership: Arts and Service



- Key to emotional health: Students are valuable as people with purpose and meaning – not helpless victims
 - Poetry slams
 - Musical groups
 - Art displays
 - Story time – 20 minutes for primary students
 - Check in on elders
 - Other service ideas?

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Inquire About the Causes of Failure



- Absences
- Missing work
- Neither of these are related to student proficiency
- Who benefits from high failure rates?
- Must evaluate based on proficiency, not compliance

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Homework Menus



- Stop expecting long assignments. The best work is done in class with immediate feedback and support
- Homework menu:
- Meals – doubling and halving recipes
- Interviews – family and history
- Neighborhood newspaper
- Read aloud



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“On Call” Academic Content



- Very short 3 to 5-minute presentations, designed to convey a single concept
- Students can play and review – then ask specific questions
- MUCH better than 30-minute lectures



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Meaningful Checks for Understanding



- Never “Everybody with me?” or “Any questions?”
- Teachers very frustrated with copying and cheating
- The answer is a meaningful check for understanding



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Example of Checking for Understanding



"Jerome, I really appreciate that you cited two sources in your essay. Please explain why you chose these sources and why you rejected other sources you might have cited. What made these sources credible to you?"



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Example of Checking for Understanding



"Christina, you got the right answer on your geometry proof, but I don't follow how you got from step 2 to step 3 - please explain that to me."



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Wellness Checks



- Use "circles" to start class, with introductions and wellness checks.
- "Question Zero" in PLC's: What do students need to support learning this week?



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Egg Timer



- 3-minute presentation of concept
- 3-minute small group or breakout
- 3-minute whole class review
- Five concepts in 9-minute cycles makes fast-paced and energized class



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High Impact Leadership



- Low-stakes observations with immediate feedback
- Meaningful meetings with real work
- Lead instruction by DOING instruction
- Explicit relief for teachers – what they do NOT have to do



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Coping in a Virtual Environment



- Very brief (15-20 minute) reading, writing, and math assessment for every student, K-12
- Immediate use of assessment for student support
- “Question Zero” for PLC meetings
- Personal meetings, including home visits, for all students with chronic absenteeism or suspensions



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Leadership Focus

- The **ONLY** way to assess success: Proficiency at the time the end of term grade is awarded.
- Stop “automatic failure” due to absence or missing work – proficiency is all that matters




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Efficacy. : “What are the causes of student achievement?”

- Factors we can neither control nor influence
- Factors we can influence, but not control
- Factors we both influence and control




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Leadership Challenges in a Virtual or Blended Environment

- Classroom Observations
- Multi-channel communication
- Digging into the “why” of disengagement




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The Trust Imperative

- Greater learning
- More resilience
- Better collaboration
- Deeper communication



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Trust Requires Admission of Mistakes

- Which hospital would you rather go to – the one with a low error rate or a high error rate?



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Leaders Must Create Psychological Safety

- Constant rhythm of learning from mistakes in safe environment
- Public acknowledgment
- System level learning
- Zero humiliation or embarrassment



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Psychological Safety – Learning from Mistakes

- Careless mistakes
- Experimental mistakes – deliberate test of hypotheses
- Learning mistakes – analyze the root cause and experiment with solutions



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Careless Mistakes

- Failure to observe classrooms
- Failure to provide immediate and accurate feedback to students
- Failure to provide multi-channel communication with parents and community



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Experimental Mistakes

- Try a new technology that doesn't work
- Try a new student engagement technique that doesn't work
- Try a new faculty support technique that doesn't work



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Learning Mistakes

- Quick and public acknowledgement
- Analyze root causes – insufficient practice or ineffective practice?
- Clear and persistent alternatives




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Fearless Classrooms

- Equity sticks – no fear in participation, even without knowing the answer
- Peer and teacher relationships reflect confidence and never fear
- Zero tolerance for sarcasm - by students and adults




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Fearless Practice

- Authentic practice with real-time feedback
- Practice with a coach, not alone
- Practice with immediate improvement
- *Traditional homework never meets the standards of fearless practice*




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Fearless Leadership

- Consistent modeling of learning mistakes
- Start the year with *“My three biggest bloopers of the past six months.”*
- Confront threats to the emotional safety of students and colleagues



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Fearless Change

- The old model:
 - 1) Attitudes and beliefs – must get buy-in before change
 - 2) Tentative changes in practice
 - 3) Evidence of success



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The New Model of Change Leadership

- 1) Practices
- 2) Evidence of impact – *“Science Fair”*
- 3) Attitudes and beliefs – buy-in is after evidence, not before



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The Progress Principle (Amabile)

- Positive emotions
- Good will toward coworkers
- Higher personal and job satisfaction
- Sense of personal ownership of ideas
- Civility
- Communication




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Practical Implications of Progress Principle in Virtual and Blended Environments

- From unit tests to mini-assessments
- From teacher evaluation to peer reviews
- Three-Column Rubrics
- Weekly goals – daily for students at home
- Universal assessment of Power Standards




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Efficacy

- Ask your faculty: What causes student achievement?
- Separate paper or message for each cause
- 1) Factors we cannot control
- 2) Factors we can influence but not control
- 3) Factors we control




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Resilience

- Key component of social and emotional learning for students, families, teachers, and leaders
- Greatest threat to resilience: punishing students at the end of the term for absences and errors at the beginning of the term – don't tolerate it



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Summary

- Core Competencies of "Equity and Excellence" Schools
- Leadership Challenges in Virtual and Blended Environment
- The Trust Imperative
- Resilience – students, staff, and leaders



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What Educators and School Leaders Can Do NOW to Accelerate Learning and Improve Assessment, Attendance, Engagement, and Achievement

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GRADING DURING THE PANDEMIC: A CONVERSATION

JOE FELDMAN AND DOUGLAS REEVES
SEPTEMBER 2020

While differing on particulars, two experts agree that now's the time to look hard at "broken" grading practices.

In this dialogue, two leading advocates of grading reform, Joe Feldman and Douglas Reeves, consider how grading practices and policies could be influenced by the ongoing pandemic and the widespread school closures last spring.

Q: What major grading issues are schools facing as the new school year begins?

Joe Feldman: Every fall, students enter classes with a range of prior knowledge and educational experiences, but this year, the spectrum may be wider than we've ever seen. Last spring, students with more resources and supports were more insulated from the effects of the pandemic, and better able to meaningfully participate in school. Other students—those who had insufficient technology access, who had home responsibilities like caring for younger siblings, or who felt the overwhelming stress of social isolation or a family member losing their job or becoming sick—had their learning essentially placed "on hold." These learning losses likely occurred more frequently among students with fewer economic means and less racial privilege.

We'll need to be more focused on essential content, more explicit about what it takes to earn specific grades, more responsive and strategic with our supports, and more expansive about how and when students can demonstrate what they know. For example, we could revise our tradition of report card grades being final and unalterable, and instead make ways for teachers to update grades when students catch up and demonstrate higher achievement. Some school districts, such as Chicago Public Schools and San Leandro Unified in California, and several districts in Washington state, piloted this idea last spring by assigning students who were unable to show sufficient performance an "Incomplete" until the student could access instruction, receive supports, and demonstrate understanding.

Douglas Reeves: I agree we'll need to select what's most crucial to teach now. Because many students missed three months of school, with only a fraction of the missing learning replaced by online classes, most teachers face the challenge of addressing 12 months of curriculum in a 9-month school year. And that's for students who only required one year of learning in a school year, since they were basically on track; in some schools, students were a year or more behind before the COVID-19 pandemic.

NWEA estimates the impact of school closings in the spring of 2020 will range from 30 percent in reading and math to the loss of a full year of learning.¹ Teachers can't address 24–36 months of curriculum in nine months.

Now's the time to finally face the reality that not every academic standard is equal. Schools need a systematic way of establishing priorities for what students need to learn. My own work on "power standards" suggests a remedy. Schools must identify the few standards that provide leverage by applying to multiple disciplines, enduring through several grade levels, and being essential for the next level of learning.

Q: How can schools ensure that grading is equitable and meaningful in this academic year, given the disruptions students have experienced?

JF: First, our grading must be both accurate (so grades describe a student's level of course understanding) and equitable (so we aren't giving an advantage to students who have more resources). For example, we don't want to average a student's performance over time, which—although seemingly an objective calculation—actually hides what students ultimately achieve and makes it harder for students who start further behind to succeed.

Second, let's frame grades not as the end of our instruction and students' learning, but as a guide for future decisions. Equity isn't just offering students equal access to support; it means tailoring our support based on each student's needs. For instance, when we allow retakes, we allow students to succeed even if they start further behind. The "Incomplete" option, used strategically, offers hope to students whose education we know was significantly disrupted and who deserve more time to be as successful as are students whose education was less disrupted. Students anxious about their learning loss will be more motivated to persevere, because high grades are possible despite what they endured.

With so many students having gaps in their learning from last spring, grading can give both us and our students a diagnosis and a prescription of what comes next in their learning.

DR: Education leaders need to remember that some students go home to safe, two-parent homes, filled with books and technology, often supplemented with tutors. Others go home to challenges in housing, food insecurity, medical care, and family support. In some of these homes, success in school might be a lower priority. A commitment to equity means both groups of students have equal access to support, and that success in school doesn't depend upon the conditions of the home—in particular, that a student can achieve academic distinction based on the work they accomplish during the school day.

Providing students sympathy or diminished expectations doesn't answer the challenges of inequity. Providing them engagement, rigorous work, and support during the school day does. Effective grading policies are an essential part of combining rigorous expectations with meaningful feedback. For example, when students were missing assignments during March through June of 2020, giving zeroes for the missing work and then averaging in those zeroes to determine the final grade to give in June of 2020 would be ludicrous. Teachers had to evaluate student performance based on the latest and best evidence that they had available, not the average. Abandoning the average is not only a good practice during school closures, but should be part of grading reforms when students return to classrooms. In any learning environment, evaluation of student work should be based on their latest and best evidence.

Q: What best practices can teachers use to ensure their grading is tied to evidence of learning but isn't punitive, given students' individual circumstances?

DR: Schools must clearly define the purpose of grading. In my judgment, the purpose is neither punishment nor reward; it is to provide accurate feedback in order to improve the performance of students and teachers. This means, among other things, that grades focus on academic proficiency, not behavior, compliance, or other nonacademic attributes. It means discarding the practices of averaging all of a student's grades into one (the frequent default of electronic grading programs) and eliminating the mathematical distortions involved in the 100-point scale.

Accurate feedback rests not solely on a grade, but on explicit descriptions of the learning needs of students. For example, if a student receives a failing grade, we owe that student and his parents an explanation of what was missing. Did he really fail the entire term? Many schools are addressing learning deficiencies during the recent shutdown by identifying specific missing work—a paper, project, or lab—that a student can make up in this fall to avoid the frustration and even expense of repeating an entire course.

JF: I agree about excluding nonacademic attributes or behaviors. To ensure grades accurately reflect student learning and don't perpetuate achievement disparities, we must be more deliberate about what knowledge and skills are essential for each course, and explicitly describe what students must demonstrate to achieve each level of mastery (A-F) against those standards. At the same time, we should be more intentional about excluding from grades criteria that can perpetuate inequities. Traditionally, most teachers include in the grade things like extra-credit assignments and performance on homework. Let's clearly recognize that both these things are highly dependent on a student's home environment and resources. Including them makes grading less equitable.

Q: Is Pass/Fail grading a good practice to use as students try to make up lost learning?

JF: Last spring, most of us struggled to teach while managing our own stress from shelter-in-place restrictions and the economic and health effects of the pandemic. Most schools chose not to award letter grades during fourth quarter or second semester. They humbly and empathetically realized that it would've been impossible to give grades that accurately described students' understanding of course content while our instruction was so compromised. Anything other than grading Pass/Fail/Incomplete would've made grades both inaccurate and inequitable.

Some districts chose a hybrid model of allowing students to choose whether to receive a letter grade or a Pass/Fail grade. Although this policy might seem neutral and "hold harmless" on its face, this "choice" of letter grades was in effect disproportionately available to students with more resources. In other words, the policy actually perpetuated disparities by creating a two-tiered system of grades—letters (presumably As and Bs) for those who could succeed during the pandemic, and non-letters for those who were more susceptible to its disruptive impact.

This fall, although "school" still isn't like it was, we have more experience in how to adapt our instruction and supports (including tutoring or health and counseling services) to mitigate disparities outside the school. I'm not sure I'd support using Pass/Fail once schools reopen, but—assuming the impact of the pandemic continues through the fall—we don't want students to fail because of circumstances outside their control. If we're confident that we can be accurate and equitable, letter grades are worth using—but if we're in doubt, we should normalize our use of the Incomplete grade, which accepts that our struggling students need more time and supports, but that everyone can ultimately succeed.

DR: I disagree, especially for secondary students. While Pass/Fail or Incomplete grades might have merit for elementary school, this approach can lead to devastating inequities for secondary school students. In a Pass/Fail system, or other systems used in spring 2020 in which every student was awarded an A, there was no distinction between students earning As and those earning Ds. So for economically disadvantaged students who depend on high grades to qualify for scholarships for postsecondary education, Pass/Fail grades deprive them of the chance to compete for scarce scholarship dollars, and dramatically reduce the probability that they will have access to college or technical school. That is a path to inequity with lifelong consequences.

Q: So what should the pandemic teach us about grading policies and practices going forward?

JF: In deciding how to grade students in the fourth quarter of last school year, we began to recognize how our traditional grading practices often perpetuate external disparities. Educators must continue this critical examination to ensure that our grading aligns with, and doesn't undermine, our commitment to high-quality, equitable education.

DR: The pandemic should teach us what we already should have known: Many grading systems are broken. When these systems rely on antiquated, inaccurate, and unfair practices, such as the average and using the 100-point scale, then we systematically put students at a disadvantage—not only during extended school absences caused by this pandemic, but throughout their educational experiences. Now is the time to learn these lessons and make changes.

Joe Feldman is the founder and CEO of Crescendo Education Group and the Equitable Grading Project and author of *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (Corwin, 2018). Douglas Reeves is founder of Creative Leadership Solutions, a global professional learning organization and author, most recently, of *The Learning Leader, 2nd Edition* (ASCD, 2020). Follow them on Twitter and Twitter.

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Too Many Standards? My Four Answers

WELL BEFORE the global pandemic caused a wave of school building closures and consequent learning losses, teachers complained there were too many standards for student learning. The problem was that, however well-intentioned and thoughtfully designed, state standards all suffer from the same faulty assumption: Students need only one year of learning.

That assumption always has been questionable, but after students in 2020 lost at least six months of learning (and many would argue they lost more), teachers in 2021 are facing students who may be two years or more behind their current grade level. The idea of teaching and assessing three years of learning in a single year

is preposterous. Fortunately, some practical solutions are available.

Facing Reality

First, stop the illusion of perfect alignment of curriculum and standards. Curriculum leaders at state and district levels have invested an enormous amount of time in the process of alignment, establishing connections between state standards and the details of curriculum and assessment at each grade level.

However elaborate these documents may be, they do not represent the reality of the classroom in which teachers have a limited amount of time to help students catch up in missing essential skills and assess — and reassess — the academic content of the current year. Rather than the coherence that curriculum alignment was intended to provide, teachers are left to make idiosyncratic choices about what they teach, with little regard to standards and curriculum documents.

Second, focus assessments on the essentials. The folly of most assessments, from end-of-unit tests to the ubiquitous benchmark assessments and end-of-year tests, is that every standard is equally important. A better approach is for districts to embrace what I have called “power standards,” that subset of standards that gives students the knowledge and skills that are most important.

My experience with secondary school math teachers nationwide is that they are dealing with students who lack basic skills in number operations, fractions, decimals and measurement. Data from state tests show chronically low levels of math achievement, yet rather than focus on these essentials, many math teachers ignore student deficiencies in the basics and plow through the required curriculum items on the rhombus and trapezoid.

These teachers need courageous leaders who will tell them to “punt the

rhombus” and focus on the essentials that will help students succeed at the next level of learning.

Stop Accumulation

Third, commit to a “zero-sum” rule on curriculum. For any new curriculum item added, something must be subtracted. For example, some schools are embracing the 1619 Project curriculum based on the work of *The New York Times* surrounding the introduction of slavery in America. While this may be a worthy endeavor, please don’t ask social studies teachers to do this unless you either explicitly remove something else from the curriculum or give them an 11-month school year.

Fourth, recognize there is more to student success than academic content standards. Many students have been traumatized by illnesses and deaths of loved ones and the isolation from friends associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s hard to focus on prepositional phrases, the map of South America and the quadratic equation when you are not physically and emotionally safe.

The process of establishing standards, from the Common Core to those adopted by individual states, is a political one and often a process of accumulation, with different stakeholders demanding that the standards include “what every child should know.” Because there is no constituency favoring a reduction in academic content, it is up to education leaders at the local level — superintendents, curriculum directors and teacher-leaders — to say what we all know to be true: There are too many learning standards. Teachers are depending on you to tell them what’s most important.

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HOW TO STOP THE COMING DROPOUT TIME BOMB

BY DOUGLAS REEVES
OCTOBER 18, 2020

Schools are facing an avoidable crisis—students dropping out of high school because of toxic policies that lead to a cascading series of failures that will undermine any reason for them to persist in their studies. When students fail to complete high school, they face a lifetime of unemployment, poverty, increased health care needs, and greater involvement in the criminal justice system. If these students were inside a burning building, we would not convene focus groups, hire consultants, or begin a strategic plan. We would get them out of the burning building. There are only a few weeks left in the fall of 2020 to decide how to respond to this crisis.

There are three causes of the dropout time bomb: irrational attendance policies, the elevation of compliance over proficiency, and toxic grading policies. First, district attendance policies frequently require that after 10 unexcused absences, students will automatically fail a class. By October 2020, many students—in some schools as many as 80 percent—have already missed 10 days of class. For all the talk of equity over the past six months, these irrational policies remain in effect in schools across the land, dooming students to failure no matter how hard they work. Two decades after the United States made a commitment to standards-based education, most schools continue to prioritize seat time over proficiency. The achievement of standards means nothing, and in 2020, logging on or showing up means everything.

The second cause of the dropout time bomb is the elevation of compliance over proficiency. Closely linked to irrational attendance policies is the use of submitted work as the primary method of evaluating students. Conduct this simple experiment in your school: Look at a random sample of 30 students who are failing right now. While the stereotype of the failing student is one who is negligent, disruptive, or incapable of meeting teacher expectations, you will find that one of the most common causes of failure is none of these factors, but “missing work”—often work that is not related to student proficiency but highly related to their access to technology, connectivity, and support.

The third cause of the dropout time bomb is persistently irrational grading policies. The final grade for most high school students has little to do with their ability to solve an algebra equation, write a theme, or analyze historical events. The grade, almost always the average of performance throughout the semester, is a toxic cauldron of punishment for missing work, inscrutable or absent feedback for their mistakes, and a pervasive confidence in the efficacy of punishment for disobedience. A century ago, we administered corporal punishment, beating students who failed to toe the line. Today we administer academic corporal punishment. They have a chilling similarity: Although the bruises from corporal punishment heal, the psychological trauma can live on for years. Similarly, the consequences of dropouts due to academic corporal punishment can last a lifetime.

It doesn't have to be this way. Educational leaders must take the following steps immediately. First, disable the automated systems that link absences—either physical absence or the failure to log on to virtual classes—to failure. Say it with me: Seat time doesn't matter; proficiency does.

Second, disable grading systems that automatically calculate final semester grades based on the average scores of student work during the semester. Don't listen to the vendors or technology department personnel who tell you it can't be done or that it's just the way the system is. Unplug the damn thing if you have to, but stop using the average to calculate final scores, and stop allowing anyone except the instructional leaders of your system to engage in instructional leadership.

Third, establish clear expectations for every class. It's not 50 content standards or 80 items on a proficiency scale that students must achieve. Use the Power Standards approach that provides a concise set of six or so expectations for each class. If students fail to meet those, give them feedback on how to improve, and let them try again. If the targets are clear and the feedback is constructive, the vast majority can succeed. If you are asking students to climb from the depths of the Grand Canyon to the summit of Mount Everest—and that is what it feels like for many students in the fall of 2020—they will find it easier to disengage. While the faculty is attending a workshop on social and emotional learning and hear another heartfelt lecture about equity, their students simply stop coming to school.

Do not be seduced by “credit recovery” or other facile measures that give schools the illusion of proficiency after students have failed. We can prevent failure right now. Our nation faces an avoidable crisis. The pandemic is bad, but a generation of dropouts will be even worse. There is no vaccine for a dropout. There is no bailout for the unemployable adolescent who gives up on school because educational leaders failed to intervene. Teachers and school leaders have done heroic work in 2020, and the nation is grateful. Let us not squander this goodwill by being bystanders to an avoidable tragedy.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT'S THE RESEARCH ON HOMEWORK?

BY DOUGLAS REEVES

APRIL 14, 2019

There are few more emotional topics in education than homework. Advocates of homework contend that it is necessary because students need practice. The other side in the debate claims that homework is little more than an exercise in mindless compliance – “busywork,” in the terminology students often use. Here is a summary of recent research on the subject.

1. Students do need practice. Therefore, the relevant question is: What sort of practice is most effective? Anders Ericsson is the leading researcher in the field of expert performance and expert practice. Ericsson, not Malcolm Gladwell, is the real originator of “the 10,000-hour rule.” His conclusion is that it is not the number of hours of practice that leads to expertise, but rather the use of “gold-standard practice.” Two students can have the same number of hours of practice in calculus, music, or reading, and some will stagnate and other will make exceptional progress. The characteristics of gold-standard practice include immediate feedback, explicit coaching on how to improve, and differentiation so that practice is slightly outside of their comfort zone – neither too easy nor too difficult. If the purpose of homework is practice, then the probability that typical homework assignments meet the criteria for gold-standard practice is zero. Some outstanding teachers, such as Harvard physics professor Eric Mazur, have radically changed the way that student practice. They work on problems during class – not in their dorm rooms – so that Professor Mazur can immediately identify and address misconceptions.

Michael Doll, a nationally recognized high school math teacher, uses similar techniques, explaining that “we need to make it safe for students to admit mistakes and discuss what they don’t know.” Homework that is always conveniently right creates the illusion of perfection and prevents students and teachers from having honest conversations about learning. Both Mazur and Doll make the point that the shift to in-class practice rather than homework is not a lowering of standards; students are learning more college physics and high school math, as evidenced by their final exam performance.

2. Students and parents do benefit from collaborative academic pursuits. When I hear parents talk about titanic struggles, often ending in tears, with their children at every level – elementary, middle, and high school – it doesn’t call to mind the phrase “collaborative academic pursuits.” If we really want work done at home, then constructive ideas include reading aloud, joint meal preparation (with recipes doubled, tripled, or halved), and interviewing family members for a family history are all wonderful alternatives to angry arguments about completing the odd-numbered problems one through thirty.

3. Most homework assignments have no impact on student academic performance. In her synthesis of 37 studies on homework, Alexandria Neason concluded that the value of homework for elementary school students is zero,

and the impact for students in middle and high school is negligible. Although practice is necessary, the sorts of tasks entailed in the vast majority of homework are not effective practice.

4. Homework, combined with toxic grading practices such as the average to calculate semester grades, discourages students from making intellectual breakthroughs that represent the best in teaching and learning.

Many people have experienced the phenomenon of struggle and mistakes, followed by learning and performance. That is precisely the sort of intellectual resilience and persistence that we should encourage in every student. Yet the use of averages and the weighting of homework to calculate final grades essentially tells the student, “It doesn’t make any difference how you perform at the end of the semester that matters, because we are still going to punish you for the mistakes you made at the beginning of the semester.” Imagine if the instructions in the program for the end-of-year concerts and athletic competitions instructed the audience, “Please do not applaud or otherwise recognize these students, because we have evidence that they made many mistakes in rehearsals and practices earlier in the year for which they need to be held accountable.” As absurd as that sounds, it is the logic behind the weighting of homework and the use of the average to calculate end-of-semester grades.

Certainly people of good will disagree on homework policies. The reasoned middle ground is neither “all homework, all the time, because that’s what worked for me” nor “never assign homework because it’s irrelevant and harmful.” Rather, the reasoned middle ground is engaging in practice that matters –gold-standard practice with feedback, coaching, and differentiation. As for work done at home, there are many great alternatives to traditional homework assignments. As MIT Professor Alan Lightman suggests, we might even let them play with friends, organize a game without adult assistance, and discover the world beyond school.





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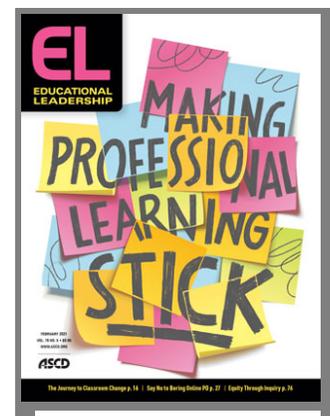
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Five Professional Learning Transformations for a Post-COVID World

Douglas Reeves

Using lessons from the pandemic to reshape teacher learning.

As schools continue to recover from the tragedy of a global pandemic, they can look to new opportunities emerging amidst the trauma and grief. These opportunities include a return to the primacy of relationships among adults and students, the abandonment of ineffective practices such as inspirational monologues without meaningful interaction, and dramatic improvements in professional learning. To realize the latter, educators need to drive toward five transformations in professional learning. Although we have long known the inadequacies of traditional approaches to PD, the constraints imposed on schools by the pandemic create a sense of urgency that should make us intolerant of such ineffective practices.



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Transformation #1: Goodbye to the Drive-By

Professional learning is hard work and takes time. While it doesn't have to be onerous and dreary, the idea that learning can and even should be fun and entertaining is inconsistent with the evidence. Researchers have debated the logic behind the "10,000 Hour Rule" popularized by Malcolm Gladwell and challenged by many others (Ericsson & Pool, 2016), but it would be impossible to find evidence that three-hour workshops or 90-minute keynotes on their own, however popular and entertaining, result in learning or changes in professional practices. A review of the research on practices that lead to learning (Killian, 2019) noted that *deliberate practice*—practice that is motivated by a compelling desire to improve, requires extra effort, is sustained over a long period of time, and is accompanied by feedback—can result in significant gains in learning for adults and students. This kind of learning simply can't happen in a drive-by workshop or presentation.

The feedback typically associated with these events has more to do with the food, temperature of the room, and the speaker's sense of humor than what the participants actually learn. If we aspire to be a learning profession, then we will stop conflating entertainment and soothing affirmations with the difficult cognitive and emotional challenges of professional learning and changes in practice.

Transformation #2: From Homogenization to Personalization

Personalized learning is a common aspiration for students, yet adult learning remains astonishingly homogenous. The passive voice is pervasive and intentional in the phrase, "all the teachers were trained," having been fed the same diet regardless of their needs. While pre-assessment is a vital and common part of personalized learning for students, it is rare for faculty members and administrators to be offered the opportunity for a pre-assessment before they are marched into the auditorium to receive the message of the day—perhaps an inspirational speech about the importance of personalized learning. This is reminiscent of the practice among universities to require that doctoral candidates studying collaborative learning write their dissertations entirely alone.

If we are to practice the personalization that we preach, then every faculty member will have a professional learning profile that shows current knowledge and skills, immediate and long-term professional learning needs, and the ability and willingness to support colleagues in critical skill areas. In the summer of 2020, I interviewed senior district leaders about the amount of time it takes for teachers and administrators to fully learn to use and successfully apply their technology programs for lesson delivery, assessment, grading, attendance, and behavior—all vital skills in virtual and blended learning environments. The jaw-dropping answer was *three years*.

While many schools delivered laptops, tablets, and Chromebooks in a matter of weeks after closing in March of 2020, leaders soon learned that the delivery of hardware does not automatically lead to effective teaching and learning. The "learn to be a pilot while the plane is flying" approach might have been necessary in the spring of 2020; but it is indefensible in 2021. Teachers and administrators need comprehensive and personalized assessment, training, and continual support. The best way I have seen this delivered is not through one-size-fits-all workshops, but one-to-one coaching support. Every day spent in a workshop that is not tailored to meet the needs of the individual professional is a day that could have been devoted to addressing immediate and specific learning requirements.

Transformation #3: Less Inspiration, More Perspiration

Who doesn't love inspiration? I know I do. As a teacher and leader, I've done my best to inspire others. But inspiration without action leads to cynicism, undermining the very hope that inspirational words sought to generate. For example, as schools focus on equity amidst a global cry for racial justice, professional learning can take two strikingly different paths—feelings or actions. The notion that feelings and beliefs must *precede* changes in actions and practices is unsupported by the evidence (Guskey, 2020). On the contrary, behavior often precedes belief.

If we aspire for more equitable practices from the classroom to the central office, we dare not wait for feelings to emerge over time. It is, to be blunt, unlikely that a person with racist tendencies will emerge from a workshop on white fragility (DiAngelo & Dyson, 2018) with changed practices, no matter how abundant their tears (Bergner, 2020). On the other hand, when schools change inequitable practices, such as toxic grading practices (Reeves, 2020a), they can have an immediate and positive impact on equity. The feelings and attitudes may or may not follow, but the immediate imperative for equitable practices is now—not after the elusive and often illusionary buy-in of staff.

Transformation #4: From Evaluation to Coaching

I have never seen anyone evaluated into better performance, and there is ample evidence that prevailing evaluation systems are expensive, ineffective, and counterproductive (Marshall, 2019). By contrast, coaching

—the collaborative process of objective observation, immediate and specific feedback, followed by the application of that feedback for improved practice—has been used in professions as diverse as medicine, engineering, leadership, and teaching. Our understanding of effective assessment practices has advanced significantly over the years (Wiliam, 2014); we should apply that same evidence-based discipline to teacher evaluations.

Effective assessment that is destined to improve learning and professional practices should occur throughout the year with multiple and objective observations, immediate and personal feedback, and an immediate response to that feedback. Yet evaluation systems remain mired in the annual drill of end-of-year paperwork and the charade of evidence demonstrating that, along with more the 99 percent of their colleagues, the recipient of the evaluation is effective. As time is inherently a zero-sum game, every hour devoted to this pointless evaluation drill is an hour that could have been devoted to coaching and supporting teachers and leaders throughout the year.

Transformation #5: From Fragmentation to Focus

During the recent school closures caused by the global pandemic, many students lost at least a half a year of learning and some estimates suggest that learning losses far exceeded the length of time away from the classroom (Kuhnfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Nevertheless, not a single state has retreated from the fantasy of academic content standards that were designed on the premise that *every* student is on grade level—and needs no remediation or reteaching of skills and knowledge. While many states suspended annual testing, there has been no reduction of the expectations that teachers cover all grade-level standards. That was preposterous before the pandemic and remains doubly so today. It leaves teachers in an impossible position, attempting to engage in frantic and fragmented "delivery" of content rather than focused learning experiences. School leaders also face the temptation of fragmentation, as federal funds associated with pandemic relief have frequently been used to purchase one program after another. This leaves schools buried under the weight of initiative fatigue (Reeves, 2020b).

This final transformation, from fragmentation to focus, is one on which all other transformations depend. Rather than covering dozens of discrete content objectives and performance standards, teachers must focus on the essentials—what I have called "power standards." These are the standards that have leverage in multiple disciplines, recur in one grade after another, and are most essential for the next level of learning. The political process of setting standards is one of accumulation and ultimate ambiguity. The educational process of setting standards, by contrast, must be one of focus and clarity.

Similarly, leaders must avoid risking initiative fatigue, no matter how enticing and well-intentioned the program providers are. No grant, no technology, no program, and no initiative can give you another hour in the day. The essential task of the leader is to say no to every temptation that fragments the time, attention, and energy of students and teachers.

Beyond the Suffering

The lessons learned from the global pandemic must be worthy of their costs. The costs in human lives, in emotional devastation, in frayed relationships, in economic calamity, and in lost learning continue to be tallied. We owe it to those who have suffered to learn from this crisis and to apply its lessons so that we improve outcomes for the students we serve and for every professional in the education system.

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