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## The New Model of Educational Change

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## Free Resources for Educators and Leaders

- **FinishTheDissertation.org** – free one to one support for doctoral candidates around the world
- **CreativeLeadership.net** – free videos, tools, and research




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## Overview

- Why traditional change models fail
- Wrong assumptions
- Wrong tools
- Culture shifts in education
- The new model of educational change
- Research and analysis from *Deep Change Leadership* (2021, Solution Tree Press)

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## Why Traditional Change Models Fail

### Wrong Assumptions and Wrong Tools

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## Wrong Assumptions

- In order for people to change, they must first change knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs
- With enough training, attitudes will change, and the right actions will follow
- What are the elements of school *culture* that lead to these assumptions about change?
- *If change must be popular before it is implemented, you will NEVER change*

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## The Myth of Buy-in

- You think you have buy-in? Check the assumption
- Change is *never* easy or popular
- Change is loss, and losses are painful
- Our personal identity is related to our expertise and competence, and change suggests we are not as expert as we thought




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## Wrong Tools

- Rallies
- Committees and Coalitions
- Structure and hierarchy
- Rewards and punishments
- “Change training”
- Attitude surveys



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## What's Wrong With Rallies?

- The Knowledge Illusion (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017)
- The Buy-in Illusion
- Suppression of skeptics
- Unintended credibility for cynics



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## Respectful Conversations About Change

- *“I’m not asking for buy-in. I’m asking for a fair chance.”*
- *“Equity is not about what how we feel – it’s about what we do.” (Beyond Conversations About Race, 2021)*



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## Behavior Precedes Belief

- Feelings and beliefs don't change because of a workshop
- The best evidence does not overcome deeply ingrained practice. Examples:
- High school start times
- Grading reform
- Multidisciplinary writing



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## What's Wrong With Coalitions?

- Represent interest groups
- Fail to identify essential stakeholders
- Fail to consider those not represented (future students)
- But isn't the "Guiding Coalition" at the heart of Kotter's theory of change?



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## What John Kotter Learned About Guiding Coalitions

- *"In both small and large organizations, a successful guiding team may consist of only three to five people during the first year of a renewal effort."*
- *"Organizations that fail . . . Expect the team to be led by an executive from strategic planning instead of a line manager."*
- Source: "Why Transformation Efforts Fail"



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## What's Wrong With Structure and Hierarchy

- Focus is on boss-pleasing rather than accomplishment
- Everybody's a visionary leader; nobody is getting real work done
- Focus on thinking great thoughts rather than doing real work
- "Formal organization structure and systems cannot lead a renewal process."



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## What's Wrong With Rewards and Punishments?

- Culture of fear and intimidation
- Displaces intrinsic motivation
- Today's reward is tomorrow's entitlement
- Competitive rewards destroy teamwork and knowledge sharing
- Psychological safety is essential for learning, creativity, and trust.  
(*Fearless Schools, 2021*)



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## What's Wrong With Change Training?

- After a four year study of organizational change, researchers found:  
*"The greatest obstacle to revitalization is the idea that it comes about through organizational change programs, particularly when a staff group sponsors them. We call this 'the fallacy of programmatic change.'"*  
Source: On Change Management (2011), Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector. Harvard Business Review Press.



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## What's Wrong With Surveys?

- Everybody Lies (Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, 2017)
- Compare survey responses with known data
- Anonymity is no guarantee of honesty



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## Wrong Tools

- Rallies
- Committees and Coalitions
- Structure and hierarchy
- Rewards and punishments
- "Change training"
- Attitude surveys



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## Getting Change Leadership Right

- The *Deep Change Leadership Model*:
- Imagine
- Focus
- Implement
- Accelerate



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## Imagine

- Need a positive vision of the future – the benefits for all stakeholders
- Passion for the *result, not the process*
- Need a vision of the future *without change*
- Weigh the risks of unpopularity against the risks of failure to change



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## The Key to Imaginative Ideas

- The failure of traditional brainstorming
- Imagine with a purpose
- Welcome outsider perspectives
- Evaluate and debate
- Consider vision without words



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## The Power of Emotion

- Love – completely irrational care for another person
- Students and teachers starved for connection during school shutdowns
- Constructive anger – serious people reserve their anger for serious matters



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## Focus

- Lessons from implementation science in medicine: *de-implementation* is essential first step.
- The rule of six
- The lure of fragmentation



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## Fragmented Lives of Knowledge Workers – That's Us

- Check e-mail, on average, every six minutes (Newport 2021)
- Multi-tasking is a myth – students of the digital age do not have different brains
- Fragmentation hurts relationships, intellectual performance, and organizational productivity



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## The Human Cost of Fragmentation

- More than half the 3.8 billion prescriptions written in the US are taken either incorrectly or not at all
- 69% of hospital admissions and 40% of nursing home admissions is associated with failure to take medication as directed



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## Where to Focus? Find the Levers

- Safety (emotional and physical)
- Engagement with equity sticks and extracurricular activities
- Nonfiction writing in every discipline
- Coaching (not evaluation)
- Feedback that is accurate and fair



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## The Dangers of Misplaced Focus

- Focus on effects – scores and attendance numbers – risks undermining the system
- Focus on the new, new thing prevents mastery of essential skills
- Focus on the illusion of activity rather than meaningful links to learning



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## Implement

- Inside-out change – immediate implementation of pilot projects, well before buy-in.
- Find the unknown innovative practices already happening



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## Monitoring Implementation



- Focus on adult actions – not just test scores
- Frequency of nonfiction writing
- Frequency of teachers cold-calling students
- Frequency of staff meetings devoted to work rather than announcements



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## Accelerate



- Short-cycle feedback – six weeks to 100 Days (see *The 100 Day Leader*, 2019)
- Mid-Course Corrections
- The pandemic as a case study in accelerated change – improving attendance and reducing failures in months



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## Immediate and Decisive Intervention



- Student success as a *health and safety issue*
- If you would take immediate action to defend a child in danger of physical harm, be equally decisive for children in danger of intellectual harm



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## Feedback is the Key to Acceleration

- Consider the models of effective feedback in y hour school:
- Music practices
- Athletic practices
- Coding classes
- *Feedback is immediate and accurate and results in immediate improvements*

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## Getting Change Leadership Right

- The *Deep Change Leadership Model*:
- Imagine
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## The New Model of Educational Change

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# GRADING DURING THE PANDEMIC: A CONVERSATION

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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.**

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**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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

## REFERENCES

Kuhfeld, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2020). The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement. The Collaborative for Student Growth, NWEA.



## 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.

**DOUGLAS REEVES** is director of Creative Leadership Solutions in Boston, Mass., and author of *Achieving Equity and Excellence*. E-mail: douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net. Twitter: @DouglasReeves

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# What Leaders Can Do NOW to Prevent Failure

Douglas Reeves\*

The Equity and Excellence Institute, a Nonprofit Organization

## 1. Equity and Excellence – Essential Twin Goals

- ⇒ Equity without excellence leads to low expectations.
- ⇒ Excellence without equity leads to further dividing students by race and class.

## 2. The 2021 Challenge – Preventing the Dropout Time Bomb

- ⇒ Automated failure – sometimes as a result of district or school policies – such as “ten unexcused absences means an automatic F for the semester.
- ⇒ First quarter of Fall 2020 – record high number of F’s, almost all due to absences and missing work.

## 3. Keys to Digital Equity

- ⇒ Administrator observation of virtual classes.
- ⇒ Student engagement – random calls and equity sticks.
- ⇒ Mini-assessments during on-site or virtual interactive classes – ***much better than homework.***

## 4. 2020 Evidence: Core Competencies of Equity and Excellence Systems

- ⇒ Collaborative scoring of student work.
- ⇒ Nonfiction writing.
- ⇒ Accurate and constructive feedback to students, teachers, and administrators.
- ⇒ Improving feedback to students can lower the failure rate by 80% in one semester. Do not allow “academic corporal punishment.”
- ⇒ Effective instruction – feedback to teachers focused on student engagement and feedback to students that directly improves student learning.
- ⇒ Effective leadership – not “looking at data” but “responding to data.”

\*Dr. Reeves is the author of more than 40 books and 100 articles on leadership and education. Twice named to the Harvard University Distinguished Authors Series, Doug has won many other national and international awards for his service to education. He has worked in 50 states and more than 40 countries. He Tweets @DouglasReeves and blogs at CreativeLeadership.net. His direct contact number is 781.710.9633.

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# STUDENT FAILURE IS A BURNING BUILDING, AND WE NEED TO SHOW THEM THE EXIT

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BY DOUGLAS REEVES  
DECEMBER 13, 2020

The pandemic numbers continue to be grim, but we must be relentless in our support of student learning. While it is true that COVID-19 is a matter of public safety, so is literacy. If we do not revert the looming dropout time bomb, the public health crisis associated with dropouts will last for generations.

This is the equity issue of our time. If educational leaders believe that simply by keeping students and teachers away from school, they have done their jobs, we will be reaping the whirlwind from these decisions for decades. Today's lost year of learning will be tomorrow's lost generation of learning, and those who can least afford to be left behind — the poor and the disconnected, in every sense of the word — will suffer most. We must ring the alarm bell in every conversation we have about this. Better to risk offending a tepid decision-maker on this issue than risk losing a reader, a writer, or any student whose opportunities were extinguished by the indifference of adults.

Do not be timid in your discussions with administrators, board members, and other educational leaders. If you hear someone say, "Gee, I'd like to have fewer failures, but the district policies won't let me," it's time to challenge district policies. If you hear someone say, "I'd like to reduce failure, but I'm afraid that we might not have buy-in," challenge the very notion that buy-in is appropriate in a time of crisis. It's September 11, 2001, and the building is on fire. How much time will we spend deliberating? How much time will we spend asking for buy-in? How much time will we spend worrying about whether the decision will be popular? The building is on fire and we need to evacuate. Perhaps you doubt your role where you stand in the hierarchy of your school or district leadership. But remember that the heroes of 9/11 were not CEOs or people with positional authority. They were the people who saw the danger and led people to the stairwells.

Here is what you can do very specifically to “evacuate the building” right now. Whether you are a teacher, building principal, or district superintendent, please consider the following:

1. Make a list of every student who is failing for the fall of 2020.
2. Determine why these students are failing - attendance, lack of work, behavioral problems, whatever.
3. Create an action plan to change failure to success right now —before the end of this semester.
4. Unplug any computer program that uses the average of work submitted throughout the fall 2020 semester to determine the end-of-semester grade.
5. Demand that student proficiency be the result of demonstrated understanding during live or synchronous instruction, not off-line work.

Challenge, in the most forceful way possible, any contention that “It’s just too late” or “it’s just district policy.” You may not be the CEO, the superintendent, the department head. But you can still be the person who sees the fire and smells the smoke and can lead people to the fire escape and save them. Normally, this may seem risky. But these are not normal times. Grab the bullhorn and take a risk, demand action, and if you offend someone in the process, don’t lose hope.

This is our time to be advocates in the most forceful possible way. This is our time to fight.





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# HOW TO STOP THE COMING DROPOUT TIME BOMB

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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.

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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.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY WHAT'S THE RESEARCH ON HOMEWORK?

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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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# FIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TRANSFORMATIONS FOR A POST-COVID WORLD

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BY DOUGLAS REEVES  
FEBUARY 2021

## 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.

### 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 (William, 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 (Kuhfeld & 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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# WHAT'S WORTH FIGHTING AGAINST IN GRADING

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Four common grading practices can hurt students and erode instructional culture.

BY: DOUGLAS REEVES, LEE ANN JUNG AND KEN O'CONNOR  
MAY 2017

In his classic book *What's Worth Fighting for in the Principalship* identified a dozen action items for principals and school systems that remain as relevant today as they were almost a decade ago. In particular, his clarion call was to "de-privatize teaching" and to "elevate and invest in instructional leadership of the principal" (p. 58). But although there is now no scarcity of administrators, coaches, and other staff who have acquired titles suggesting instructional leadership, it is still difficult to find examples of instructors being led through a coherent set of policies and practices that routinely improve student achievement.

We find this disconnect particularly glaring in the area of grading. Whether the issue is classroom scores on daily work or final report card grades with consequences for scholarship opportunities and university admissions, grading remains the wild west of school improvement, in which policy coherence is more apparent in claims than in practice and anyone armed with a red pen can make decisions with devastating instructional consequences.

Although we don't encourage micromanagement of school grading policies, we insist that Fullan is right that there are a number of things school leaders should fight for—or against. And we are not bothered by the terminology's suggestion of entering into conflict. No professional educator would hesitate to fight for the safety of a student, or to protect a child from physical harm. Some commonly used grading policies, we believe, rise to this level of urgency in that they threaten the emotional well-being and academic outcomes of children. Even the discourse sometimes used to justify noxious grading policies—"getting them ready for the real world"—is eerily akin to the rhetoric of corporal punishment.

We recognize that educators have a wide range of perspectives on grading and can often find researchers to support alternative points of view. But we focus here on four areas in which the evidence is clear and the consequences of inaction are grave (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2011; Reeves, 2016): the use of the average, or arithmetic mean, to calculate a final grade; the grading of practice, or homework; the use of the zero on the 100-point scale; and the use of grading as punishment for misbehavior. Individually and collectively, these practices result in inaccurate measures and encourage students to see school as being about compliance and points accumulation rather than learning.

We realize there are plenty of other questionable grading practices. But we have seen overly ambitious grading-reform initiatives stopped dead in their tracks because of the overwhelming and threatening nature of the changes. In focusing on four commonly used grading policies as first-line priorities for schools, our aim is to avoid sacrificing progress on the altar of perfection.

## USE OF THE AVERAGE

There is no assessment in the real world that matters—not licensing tests for driving or performing brain surgery, not professional exams for becoming an engineer, pilot, hairdresser, or nuclear reactor safety official—that relies on an average of performances. To calculate a grading average across time is to engage in the fantasy that proficient individuals never make mistakes or, more likely, that their mistakes are counterproductive. Watch any toddler learning to walk, and it is clear that mistakes are the engine of success. To say the toddler should get a poor grade in walking because of her many spectacular failures along the way would be ridiculous. She eventually got there. She mastered the skill.

One rationale for the use of the average in calculating a final score appears to be that good students get things right the first time. But this is not true, except in cases where students aren't challenged. When the curriculum is rigorous, all students make mistakes, but the most successful students always learn from those mistakes. To average indicators of the students' performance across time is to neglect this facet of the learning process. It's tantamount to saying that we don't care whether our teaching had any impact on learning, or that how students performed early on will always matter. Do we really believe this?

A grading system that persistently punishes mistakes instead of rewarding eventual progress and mastery guarantees the stagnation of learning. By contrast, a grading system that emphasizes a student's current performance or most recent evidence of achievement gives students a reason to keep trying. Not only do students deserve a grade that reflects their achievements, but teachers deserve credit for their accomplishment in delivering effective instruction and interventions.

## **GRADING HOMEWORK**

No one questions the value of practice. Musicians, athletes, geographers, mathematicians, and poets all practice their craft and, with coaching and support, improve their performance. The characteristics of what Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool (2016) call gold standard practice are consistent. Students must receive coaching and immediate descriptive feedback, proceed in incremental steps, and engage in practice that is specifically designed to help them get to the next level of skill, understanding, or knowledge.

The compulsion to grade homework is often based on the conviction that applying a score to practice, even when done in non-ideal conditions, will lead to better performance. In fact, this approach to homework leads to two types of negative outcomes—blindly compliant students who sullenly work at skills that rarely matter, and their even more sullen peers who work at nothing, unable even to approach the task because they can't do it independently. The first group finds school excruciatingly boring; the second group finds it humiliating. Students in neither group engage in authentic learning.

As Ericsson and Pool argue, exemplary practice is far from easy. But the absence of a grade does not imply the absence of rigor. Real rigor involves persistence, determination, resilience, and commitment to improvement—with the help of expert feedback that is far more demanding than markings of A+ or 100 percent.

## **THE ZERO ON A 100-POINT SCALE**

Teachers' right to give zeros for missing work has many staunch defenders who see it as a no-nonsense assertion of academic values. The most direct way to address this position is to ask colleagues who use the 100-point scale what the minimum number of points is that a student should earn for work that earns an A, a B, a C, to 90, 80, 70, and 60. Why then does the mark for missing work—essentially an F— zero? "It's simple," proponents of the practice contend. "No work, no credit." But especially when combined with the averaging practices already discussed, a zero for missing work results in a grade that does not accurately represent a student's achievement and from which he or she most likely will be unable to recover.

Recognizing the harm this policy can cause, some schools have responded with the minimum 50 grading policy. The idea is that the interval between different grade levels should be equal, and therefore the interval between D and F (60 and 50) should be the same as the other intervals between higher grades. But this inevitably leads to the retort that students are "getting 50 points for doing nothing," and school administrators and policymakers often beat a hasty retreat.

The more appropriate and more direct way to solve the problem is to return to the time-honored grade-point system in which A is 4, B is 3, C is 2, D is 1, and F is a zero. For this system to be mathematically consistent with the 100-point, zero-for-missing-work measure, a teacher would have to contend that while an A is 4 points, a B is 3 points, a C is 2 points, and a D is 1 point, a student's failure to turn in work should result in a score of negative six. We have collectively seen some outlandish grading policies in our work, but, to the best of our knowledge, even the fiercest opponents of grading reform have not suggested this one.

So the solution is simple—implement the 4-point scale. We don't often see education reform initiatives that make teachers' jobs easier, but grading on a 4-point scale instead of a percentage-based scale is one such example. Win-win!

## **GRADING BEHAVIOR AND LATE WORK**

Many classrooms continue to have policies that wield grades as punishment for behavioral issues, such as absences, tardiness, inappropriate conduct, and, most often, submitting late work. The fundamental problem with this approach is that it ignores the primary purpose of academic grades, which is to communicate information about student achievement with reference to learning goals. When grades are used to punish poor behavior, the true meaning of the grade becomes unclear because it is now an uncertain mix of achievement and behavior. A student who receives a C may have learned the content well but failed to submit homework or submitted assignments late. Conversely, the student may have demonstrated compliant behavior but failed to master the content. When indicators of behavior and achievement are combined in this way, we can no longer tell the difference.

Not only does including indicators of behavior in an achievement grade cause difficulties with interpreting the grade; it's also harmful to students' motivation and engagement. When grades are lowered because of late work or missing homework, especially if the penalties are severe, students can lose hope that they can catch up, which reduces their motivation to try.

We believe positive behaviors, including promptness, are important to teach, but consequences for behavior should directly address the behavior and not involve penalties that affect students' academic grades. Students who submit work late don't need a markdown for their indiscretion; they need our support. If the work is important, it is better that it be done late than not done at all.

The appropriate response to late work is to provide places and times where students are required to complete the work. Some students may want to be punctual but have difficulty with executive functioning. Others may have lost interest in the content—or in school in general. Before we can address the behavior of turning work in late, we must understand why a student is experiencing this challenge.



Time management and project management are skills to be learned, not inherent character traits. Our job is to use research- based practices to support these students, both academically and behaviorally.

In addition to supports that directly address behavior, schools and districts should include a limited number of behavioral marks in a separate section of the report card. This makes the clear statement that the behaviors are of such importance that they are brought to the forefront of the report. And doing so ensures that everyone involved has clear and accurate information about each student's academic achievement and behavior.

**STARTING POINTS FOR GRADING REFORM**

The standards-based grading movement—which calls for the evaluation of student progress with respect to clearly delineated performance standards with a limited number of levels—has exposed consistent gaps between recommended grading practices and what is currently happening in schools. The sweeping changes that are needed have many educators and administrators wondering where to begin. But in their attempts to implement standards-based grading fully and quickly, some districts have faced harsh backlash from parents and school boards. Understandably, this leaves other school leaders apprehensive about making changes to grading policies.

The need to implement healthy grading practices is an urgent one; this action will benefit all learners, but especially those who are struggling. Even so, charging forward in a top-down fashion to change all grading practices at once can leave educators and families feeling unprepared and frustrated. It is preferable to establish practical starting points. By taking clear steps to eliminate averaging, achievement grades for homework, zeros on a 100-point scale, and grade penalties for late work, schools will be well on their way to more effective grading practices.

As school leaders take on each of these first four steps in grading reform, we recommend that they include educators and families in the discussion but remain firm about what is good for students. Educators and families will, rightfully, demand to know why these initiatives are necessary. Teachers will want to know what is so wrong with current grading practices. Families will want to know why schools are changing from the type of grades they are familiar with. Leaders must be prepared to answer these and the dozens of other questions that will arise. They will need to continue pushing their understanding forward by examining data and studying the full complexity of issues of grading and assessment and how they affect student outcomes

By staying engaged in the issues and informed by the literature, school leaders will be prepared to take on the next set of grading reform practices as their schools become ready. Implementing school wide or districtwide grading reform can be demanding work. But the serious problems with practices we describe are not controversial among the scholars of classroom assessment. Without question, this is the right work to do.

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