

POWERED BY  
BNET.com

[FindArticles](#) > [Kappa Delta Pi Record](#) > [Spring 2008](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)

## Making the Grade in Middle School

Dyrness, Ruth

The right grading policies can promote both self-esteem and academic success among middle schoolers.

The middle school years are among the most formidable, as students transition from youth to adulthood. A student's psyche endures the assault of peer pressure, parental pressure, and hormonal dynamics. Self-esteem, consequently, is a significant attribute in developing the strong character necessary to successfully navigate middle school. Because a student's grades can greatly influence how the student feels about his or her ability to learn, teachers and administrators have an imperative to strive to report grades that are an accurate measure of the student's achievement in a subject.

The initial step toward achieving accurate assessment is acknowledging the inherent difficulty. Among other challenges, teachers must separate academic merit from behavior incentives, and develop instruction and assessments that encourage success.

### Promoting Self-Esteem

Common sense and a decade of research have shown that a close relationship exists between self-esteem and academic achievement (Shindler 2006). Even those who would downplay the role of self-esteem in student achievement admit that positive self-esteem is a helpful attribute and improves a student's ability to deal with adversity (Baumeister et al. 2005). Implicit in a teacher's charter should be to cultivate and promote self-esteem by teaching students how to be successful.

Some teachers practice a method of teaching in which students are allowed to fail in the hope that they may learn from their mistakes and be motivated to improve. The problem with this approach is that in order to learn, students actually must fail. Failing for the sake of a motivational lesson could lead to such poor self-esteem that students may lack the will or courage to try again.

An example of this learn-by-failing approach occurs when a teacher requires students to take lecture notes as the sole study resource for an exam. If the notes are insufficient or erroneous, the student will learn this only through a poor exam score; the lesson is that the student needs to take better notes. By reviewing and correcting the notes prior to the exam, a teacher could help students avoid failure and cultivate success. The student's lesson in this case is that good notes result in good scores. If the purpose of the assignment was to learn to take good notes, the notes could be graded and returned prior to the exam.

Appropriate grading of the student's work is as important as the grading policy itself. Grading of exams and assignments is a naturally negative event. The work begins with perfection, and points are deducted for each error until the final score is compiled. Typically, the grader makes comments only on wrong-not right-answers. According to Richard Curwin and Allen Mendler's principal teachings (as cited in Charles 2005), teachers should use a grading system that provides encouraging feedback without damaging the student's willingness to try. Students would be encouraged if a grader commented, "Creative answer, but not quite what I was looking for."

In the liberal arts, ample opportunity exists to give students positive feedback. If criticism is needed, it should come in a "criticism sandwich"-that is, a compliment followed by criticism followed by another compliment (Webber 2005). This grading technique would help to preserve the student's self-esteem while giving a fair assessment of the student's work. Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) suggested that convincing students they can succeed is an important element in keeping them engaged and

motivated.

In designing an appropriate grading system, middle school teachers have the added burden of dealing with the mental and emotional challenges of adolescence. Considerable research has shown a decline in student motivation as students transition from elementary to middle school (Anderman and Midgley 1998). Middle school students typically need to be motivated to do the work necessary to establish their knowledge of a subject and make it their own. This work can be repetitive, uninteresting, and viewed as having no applicability to their future, leaving teachers with the challenge of motivating students to do the necessary work and to remember to turn it in on time.

#### Using Grades as a Motivator

A mistake some middle school teachers make is to use grades as a behavioral motivator. Many teachers view grading and behavioral management together as one and the same (Friedman 1998). Whenever these teachers need to motivate their students, they attach some effect to the student's grade. If the teacher believes that homework is important, credit toward the student's grade is attached to the homework. If behavior is a problem, some teachers will award extra credit toward the student's grade for exemplary behavior and deduct credit as a deterrent to poor behavior.

Using a student's grade as a motivator is not educationally defensible (Friedman 1998). Grades should not be based on a student's behavior, but should remain exclusively a reflection of the student's command of the subject (London 1996). Teachers need to explore other ways to motivate students (Friedman 1998). Brewster and Fager (2000) have assimilated some suggestions to motivate students that do not involve grades:

- \* ensure that course materials relate to students' lives and highlight ways learning can be applied in real-life situations;
- \* allow students to have some degree of control over learning;
- \* assign challenging, but achievable tasks for all students;
- \* arouse students' curiosity about the topic being studied; and
- \* design projects that allow students to share new knowledge with others.

#### Late-Work Policies

Many schools maintain a policy of not accepting late or incomplete work. This practice might limit the amount of grading the teacher or aides would have to perform, but does not provide an opportunity for the teacher to evaluate the student's progress. Further, the practice makes no distinction between a student who does the work but does not turn it in on time and a student who does not do the work at all. When grading on a strict percentage, the absence of this distinction degrades the intrinsic meaning of the grading scale.

In a strict percentage grading methodology, late work must be accepted because getting a zero for a late assignment is an incorrect measure of the student's knowledge. Because average scores of work that are turned in are generally much higher than zero, including a zero in the grade calculation would create an unintended bias. Using the median instead of the mean would provide a fairer assessment when combining scores with a single zero and would not dramatically affect the overall grade (London 1996).

If a teacher is not going to accept late work, he or she must provide evidence that the work was not turned in on time. Students

should initial a log, acknowledging that they did or did not turn in the assignment on the due date. This system avoids potential student claims that the assignment was turned in but lost by the grader.

When grading a project or presentation, the emphasis should be placed on content, not instructions. If a cover sheet is missing, for example, teachers should not deduct enough points that would result in a letter-grade reduction, because the resulting grade is not a true measure of the student's knowledge. Some teachers make the mistake of grading students on their ability to follow directions, giving it equal weight with a student's ability to comprehend the subject. This system makes the student's knowledge assessment intrinsically less accurate.

Some might find the no-credit-for-late-work policy an incentive for students to be more responsible about their assignments. When the student fails to complete the assignment on time, however, no further incentive for completion remains after the due date has expired. In this case, the student does not get an opportunity to learn, and the teacher forfeits an opportunity to evaluate the student. Even as an incentive, this policy falls short, because the consequences of being irresponsible are suffered sometimes weeks after the time of the infraction. The consequence—a lower grade reported once a quarter—is so far removed from the time of the infraction that any intended cause-and-effect relationship is virtually lost.

Not only is the no-credit-for-late-work policy an ineffective motivator, but it also can result in unintended outcomes. For example, the policy can inadvertently encourage truancy in students who are grade-conscious. Schools that use this policy typically allow the absent student to make up the missed work without a penalty. Any time a student completes an assignment at home but forgets to bring it to school, that student must make a choice: Does the student skip class and thereby get an extra day to turn in the assignment, or does the student go to class and get no credit for the late work? Depending on the importance of the assignment to the student's grade, one might find that even well-intentioned students would choose skipping class over the prospect of suffering the lower grade.

Perhaps a better approach would be to offer students the opportunity to turn in late work with a penalty. The penalty should not be a decrease in the student's grade, but instead should require additional work for the benefit of receiving full credit on the original assignment. This gives students an opportunity to repent for being irresponsible and allows them to benefit from being exposed to additional material. The threat of additional work provides the incentive to be more responsible in the future. The amount of work assigned by a teacher is a much more effective motivator than just the prospect of a lower grade by the end of the quarter.

#### Closing Thoughts

Primarily because of the strong relationship between grades and resulting self-esteem, the obligation of teachers and administrators is to strive to make grades a true reflection of the student's demonstrated knowledge. Grades should represent a measure of students' knowledge of the subject and not be used to coerce a certain behavior.

With initiative and forethought, teachers can, no doubt, devise a system that motivates students to complete and turn in the assigned work. The key is for teachers and administrators to recognize the limits of various grading practices (Moll 1998) and to embrace the idea that student assessment need not be constructed with inflexible rules. Rather, a grading system is an investigative effort to ascertain the student's true knowledge of a subject and to convert that information into a defined grade.

Accurate assessment can help cultivate the often fragile self-esteem of the middle school student. A wellconceived grading policy will not allow students to feel helpless, but will lead them to conclude that earnest effort will result in academic success.

#### References

Anderman, L. H., and C. Midgley. 1998. Motivation and middle school students. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. ERIC ED 421 281.

Baumeister, R. F., J. D. Campbell, J. I. Krueger, and K. D. Vohs. 2005. Exploding the self-esteem myth. *Scientific American* 292 (1): 84-91.

Brewster, C., and J. Fager. 2000. Increasing student engagement and motivation: From time-on-task to homework. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Available at: [www.nwrel.org/request/octoo/textonly.html](http://www.nwrel.org/request/octoo/textonly.html).

Charles, C. M. 2005. *Building classroom discipline*, 8th ed. Boston: Pearson Education.

Criswell, J. R., and S. J. Criswell. 2004. Asking essay questions: Answering contemporary needs. *Education* 124(3): 510.

Friedman, S. J. 1998. Grading teachers' grading policies. *NASSP Bulletin* 82(597): 77-83.

London, H. 1996. Do our grading systems contribute to dumbing down? *NASSP Bulletin* 80(580): 117-21.

McMillan, J. H. 2000. Fundamental assessment principles for teachers and school administrators. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 7(8). Available at: <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=8>.

Moll, M. 1998. A brief history of grading. *Teacher: Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation* 11 (3). Available at: [www.bctf.ca/publications/NewsmagArticle.aspx?id=13110](http://www.bctf.ca/publications/NewsmagArticle.aspx?id=13110).

Shindler, J. V. 2006. Creating a psychology of success in the classroom: Enhancing academic achievement by systematically promoting student self-esteem. Available at: [www.calstatela.edu/faculty/jshindl/teaching/self-es.htm](http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/jshindl/teaching/self-es.htm).

Spears, M. 2006. One-sample inference-Estimation. *MATH 419: Intersession 2006 class minutes*. Available at: [www.harding.edu/mspears/class/math419/Summer2006/minutes.html](http://www.harding.edu/mspears/class/math419/Summer2006/minutes.html).

Strong, R., H. F. Silver, and A. Robinson. 1995. Strengthening student engagement: What do students want (and what really motivates them)? *educational Leadership* 53(1): 8-12.

Webber, C. 2005. Self-esteem. Available at: [www.netdoctor.co.uk/sex\\_relationships/facts/selfesteem.htm](http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/sex_relationships/facts/selfesteem.htm).

Ruth Dyrness has been a paraprofessional for the San Ramon Unified School District for two years. She earned a S.S. in Biology and a Multiple Subject Teaching Credential from California State University, East Bay.

Albert Dyrness is Vice President of ADVENT Engineering, Division of Professional Education, in San Ramon, CA. He is a former Executive Producer of edutainment software for children at RPJ Multimedia. He earned a BSME at CSU Sacramento and an MSME at MIT.

Copyright Kappa Delta Pi Spring 2008

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved



**The Principals' Partnership**  
<http://www.principalspartnership.com/>  
A Program of Union Pacific Foundation

## Research Brief

### Role of Zero in Grading

**Question: What is the role of "zero" in grading?**

#### Summary of Findings:

A student who consistently makes high marks falls into some hard times for a couple of weeks, in fact, she did not turn in one assignment. It was recorded as a "0" and her grade in the course reflected that one lapse. Another student has received low marks on assignments, although while he is showing continuous growth, he continues to receive "Fs" on his assignments that are translated into "Os." When his scores are calculated, the "Fs" do not reflect what he learned and his final grade is a "Fail." Another student has turned in fewer than half of the assignments and the grades for the missing assignments are "Os." Both she and the young man mentioned above received the same final grade of "F," yet clearly the male student may have learned a great deal more than the female student. According to the available literature, the purposes of grading are to: inform instructional decisions; document both students' and teachers' progress; and provide feedback to the students, parents, and teachers about what has been learned and what students are able to do with that knowledge. If these are the purposes of grading, what role does and should a zero play in the assessment of what has been learned?

According to several authors, giving students a zero lets them too easily off the hook, seldom serves as a motivator for them to do better and is not an accurate reflection of what has been learned. While students do need to be responsible and accountable for their work, assigning a zero skews the grade and it tends to be inaccurate. An equitable distribution would make the grade more appropriately representative of what a student had learned. Typically grade spans are 100-94=A, 93-84=B, 83-73=C, 72-64=D, 63-0=F. If using letter grades, an "F" equates to a 0. The literature suggests that it should be a 1.0 not a zero. According to several articles, each mark should have an appropriate influence on a student's grade.

Some schools and districts are exploring recording a 50 or 60 in lieu of an "F" or "0" because then it helps make the spread more equitable. An example of scoring in the Olympics was cited where the high and low scores are thrown out so that one judge is not in control of the results (Policies work against standards). A zero plays the role of the judge that is in total control of the outcome of the grade. The following charts taken from Wormeli's book, *Fair Isn't Always Equal*, pages 138-139, visually demonstrate the effect of a zero on a student's grade.

Negative Impact of a zero on the 100 – Point Grading Scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Percentage	Grade
0, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100	83	C+
60, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100	93	B+

Comparing the negative impact of zero on the -point and 100 point scales

Test Scores for Six Tests	Percentage	Grade
4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 0	83	C+
100, 100, 100, 100, 100, 0	83	C+



**The Principals' Partnership**  
<http://www.principalspartnership.com/>  
A Program of Union Pacific Foundation

## Research Brief

Using 1.0 as the low score on the 4-point scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Average	Grade
1.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0, 4.0	88%	B

Using the mean on the 4-point scale

Test Scores for Six Tests	Mean	Grade
0, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4	3.3	B
1, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4	3.5	B+

The biggest argument against utilizing 50 or 1.0 in lieu of a zero is that students would not experience the consequences of not doing their work and will not be motivated to do better. However, as the previous charts indicate, one zero can have a devastating effect on a grade and seldom spurs the student on to do better. Some schools and districts are using systems such as:

- A, B, C, not yet achieved
- A, B, keep going
- A, B, C, I (incomplete)
- Proficient, capable, adequate, limited, poor
- Exceeds standards, meets standards, making progress, getting started, no attempt
- Advanced, proficient, basic, below basic (Wormeli, p. 158)

For those students who received an Incomplete, Not yet achieved, keep going, no attempt, poor, or below basic, they are expected to continue to get the assignments done in order to move the quality of their work up to at least a sufficient level. Some ways in which this can be done are to require students attend before and/or after-school tutoring and/or Saturday school/tutoring. If they still have not measured up to the standards, they must attend summer school.

Faculty should discuss and agree upon the following when establishing a grading policy:

- learning goals of the school
- the purposes of grades
- factors that should be included when grading
- the role of zero and how lack of achievement will be assessed and recorded
- weighting of grades
- ways in which to document student progress
- how feedback will inform the instructional program
- programs that will assist students and help them become responsible for their own learning
- communication with students and parents about the school's grading policy and expectations
- define and develop meaningful assessments
- periodic reexamination, assessment and modification of the grading system



**The Principals' Partnership**  
<http://www.principalspartnership.com/>  
A Program of Union Pacific Foundation

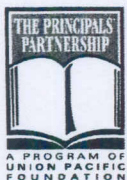
## Research Brief

### Online Resources:

- Are students getting a free ride?  
Some pros and cons of using "50" instead of zero as the lowest grade are described in this article.  
<http://www.nysut.org/newyorkteacher/2003-2004/040602grading.html>
- Assessment for learning  
This article provides an overview of the role and importance of assessment where students are guided to be responsible for their own learning and intellectual growth.  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2002/03/13/26stiggins.h21.html>
- Competitive grading sabotages good teaching  
Reasons why competitive grading is unproductive are presented in this article.  
<http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/krumbol.htm>
- Grading policies that work against standards...and how to fix them  
Four typical grading policies that tend to work against students are described and remedies are provided in this piece.  
[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3696/is\\_200012/ai\\_n8921332/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3696/is_200012/ai_n8921332/print)
- Grading with points: The determination of report card grades by high school science teachers  
Results of research on science teachers who use a point system to grade students are reported in this article.  
[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3667/is\\_199803/ai\\_n8797491/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3667/is_199803/ai_n8797491/print)
- Maximum grades, minimum motivation  
This is a brief statement citing reasons why a score of "50" given to a student who has not done work could be detrimental to them.  
<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/gadfly/issue.cfm?id=151#1850>
- The case against zero  
Some reasons why zeros should not be used in grading are given in this piece.  
[http://www.ncep.org/sail/Case\\_Against\\_Zero.pdf#search=%22%22The%20case%20against%20zero%22%22](http://www.ncep.org/sail/Case_Against_Zero.pdf#search=%22%22The%20case%20against%20zero%22%22)
- The Pavlovian dogs of education  
This editorial describes why grades are Pavlovian and counterproductive.  
<http://daily.stanford.edu/article/2005/10/27/thePavlovianDogsOfEducation>

### Books

- Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.  
This book covers the gamut of the history of grades, to issues in policies and procedures, as well as some suggestions for grading systems and considerations.



**The Principals' Partnership**  
<http://www.principalspartnership.com/>  
A Program of Union Pacific Foundation

## Research Brief

<http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.book/menuitem.ccf6e1bf6046da7cdeb3ffdb62108a0c/?bookMgmtId=7b92a2948ecaff00VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD>

Wormeli, R. (2006). Fair isn't always equal. Stenhouse: Portland, ME.

“Differentiated instruction is a nice idea, but what happens when it comes to assessing and grading students? What's both fair and leads to real student learning? Rick Wormeli offers the latest research and common sense thinking that teachers and administrators seek when it comes to assessment and grading in differentiated classes. Filled with real examples and 'gray' areas that middle- and high-school educators will easily recognize, Rick tackles important and sometimes controversial assessment and grading issues constructively.”

[http://www.stenhouse.com/productcart/pc/advSearch\\_p.asp?idcategory=0&idSupplier=&priceFrom=0&priceUntil=999999999&idBrand=0&sku=&resultCnt=20&keyWord=Fair+Isn%27t+always+equal&x=12&y=10](http://www.stenhouse.com/productcart/pc/advSearch_p.asp?idcategory=0&idSupplier=&priceFrom=0&priceUntil=999999999&idBrand=0&sku=&resultCnt=20&keyWord=Fair+Isn%27t+always+equal&x=12&y=10)

Submitted Date: 10/9/06

By: Dr. Karen Walker Lebanon Valley College

<http://www.principalspartnership.com/>

This is provided as a service to educators by The Principals Partnership and Union Pacific Foundation, neither of which assumes any responsibility for the content of the brief or the positions taken by the authors or the Web sites or other authors whose works are included. This research brief reflects information currently available and is not the official position of The Principals Partnership or Union Pacific Foundation.

Disclaimer: All URLs listed in this site have been tested for accuracy, and contents of Web sites examined for quality, at the time of addition. Content accuracy and appropriateness, however, cannot be guaranteed over time as Web sites and their contents change constantly. The author takes no responsibility for difficulties which may result from the use of any Web site listed herein. Please notify the [Webmaster](#) if you find any dead links or inappropriate material.

Permission: You may use or download content for research or educational purposes, or for your personal, noncommercial purposes, provided you keep unchanged all copyright and other notices with them. No other use of any content is permitted. You agree that you will make only lawful use of this research brief, and will only use these briefs in compliance with all federal, state and local laws and regulations. You agree that you will make no use of the research that violates anyone else's rights, including copyright, trademark, trade secret, right of privacy, right of publicity or other rights.





## **IN CASE YOU MISSED IT: Insights from Internet E-mail**

---

[Back to the IN CASE YOU MISSED IT index](#)

### **A Teacher Researches a Middle School's Grading Practices**

[Frequent Middle-L contributor Susan L. Ray, an eighth grade math teacher in suburban Louisville, KY, reports on some qualitative research she conducted about grading practices.]

Since we are still on the subject of grades and grading practices, I thought that I'd share some things I found out on the topic of grades and pose some questions for "thought." Last year, as part of a graduate class, I had to learn how to do research and our professor thought that the best way to learn this was by choosing a topic and conducting research. I've been fascinated by grades and grading practices for a long time so I decided to do a qualitative study on the grading practices of a middle school.

The principal of the school chose seven teachers based on a variety of demographics such as age, number of years teaching, subject area, gender, philosophy, etc. I interviewed each teacher and asked a variety of questions. By the time I was finished, I had information on grading systems, teachers philosophies on grades, etc. Here are some of my findings:

- 1) None of the teachers had the same grading system although some portions of systems were the same or similar.
- 2) With the exception of the gifted/talented seminar teacher, none of the teachers included students or parents in the grading process (construction of grading system).
- 3) All teachers believed that effort should be included when deciding report card grades. In some cases, a teacher would pass a child who did not understand the material if s/he put forth effort.
- 5) Lower functioning/special ed kids were given preferential treatment over gifted/talented kids. In other words, if a low functioning student was on the fence and had put forth effort, s/he would get the higher grade but a gifted/talented student who had not put forth as much effort and was on the fence would not get the higher grade.
- 6) By definition, an "A" on one class wasn't determined by the same criteria as an "A" in another class. For instance, in one class the "A" would be determined by the number of points earned. In another, it was based on a rubric. In another, students earned grades by showing up to class, paying attention and having all their materials and completing assignments.
- 7) With one exception, teachers indicated that students "earn" grades. The gifted/talented seminar teacher