PART 7

GRADES, MARKS, SCORES, LEVELS, REPORT CARDS & ELIGIBILITY
Grading is perhaps one of the hottest issues to discuss in education, particularly at the secondary level. Let anyone suggest a different approach, and people will come from every direction to praise and criticize. Standards-based? Portfolios? Rubrics? Averages? Totals? Weighting? Retesting grades? Extra credit? Make-ups, incompletes and do overs? Narratives? Eligibility? No pass, no play? It doesn’t matter what one’s position is, someone will disagree, and someone will celebrate.

Some of our beliefs about grades, scores and marks include:

1. Parents have a right, and we have a need for parents and guardians to know the progress of their students.

2. There are so many approaches to grades, one can tell very little about what a student has learned, knows, or is like in school by looking at grades.

3. Teachers’ standards for grades vary so widely, that grades tend not to mean the same thing from any two teachers.

4. Grades can have a highly motivating effect on students in both positive and negative ways.

5. Grades have little to no effect on some students’ performance.

6. Many students become very discouraged and quit because of their grades.

7. Many students cap their efforts because of grades.

8. Recognizing effort tends to have, for many, a more positive impact on effort and achievement than recognizing their achievement.
9. Grades are not as important an issue as whether or not students learn well.

10. People learn at different rates and grades should not be impacted by learning speed or ability.

11. There is an important difference between students needing more time to learn and students choosing to not do their part ... and the difference is often hard to detect, and it is often misdiagnosed.

12. Students’ brains are typically not developed adequately yet for risk analysis reasoning, so they should not be given choices resulting in poor grades and the option not to meet learning standards.

13. Assigning grades that are not changeable puts caps on student learning and allows students to not meet standards, thus leading students to develop poor work ethics.

**Record Keeping, Eligibility, Grading Periods**

The process of using multiple parallel assessments takes more than the one day typically allocated to evaluation in the old system. Consequently, grading periods and semesters often end somewhere during an assessment process for a unit. When this is the case, save all grades and marks for these “open” units and record them in the next grading period or semester.

**A Few Words about Grades, Accountability, and Standards**

Grades, marks, scores, and other such tools have been a part of schooling for a long time. Whatever their original purposes, they have become almost a sacred part of education today. We could certainly offer many arguments to either support their continued use or to justify considerations for changes. But, rather than doing either, it may be more important to devote a few words to what they are and what implications they have for learning.

Grades are commonly considered as tools used for achieving the following purposes:

- Reporting progress to students, parents and others
- Documenting overall achievement
- Maintaining accountability and standards
- Enhancing motivation

Unfortunately, as is often the case, whenever a single tool is used to perform multiple functions, it tends to do none of them well. This could be strongly argued to be the case with grades as well.

Grades are certainly recognized as a way of reporting student progress and achievement. However, since teachers tend to compute grades in their own unique ways, they don’t provide a very accurate picture. Certainly, whether they are accurate or not, grades do provide some indication of performance and progress to others, but is it to a level that is appropriate? A student’s grade is a better measure of the teacher’s opinion of what the student has learned than anything else. (But even this can be argued if the teacher cannot list specifically what a student knows and can do when not told a student’s name in his or her grade book but is told the grade he or she gave the student.) As for accountability, we’re not convinced grades do that well either. For something to be considered an effective tool for maintaining accountability and standards, it has to work. If grades were effective for maintaining standards, then
students wouldn't be able to choose how well to do something and consequently the grade they consider to be good enough. In our opinion, grades don't hold students accountable for reaching standards; they simply label the extent to which a standard has been met, or, even worse, not met. How can we present a solid argument for the effectiveness of grades measuring much of anything, let alone in maintaining accountability and standards if the computation of grades is an lumpy mess of numerous performance measures that cover the gamut of test scores, behavior, effort, attendance, practice and homework, quizzes, and lucky guesses during selected response tests? When extra credit is thrown into the mix as a means of improving grades, there is almost no strong argument left connecting grades with accountability and standards.

Grades certainly are motivating for many students, but not for all. In fact, we have all seen students for whom grades have no positive motivating influence. When students are doing well, the accumulation of good grades can be motivating. Also, grades seem to be motivating for those students from families that value education and good grades because those students need the grades to get something else they desire.

What about the students who don’t do well and don’t earn good grades in school? Many of these students lose interest in trying. Why should they? What difference does it make? They can’t succeed anyway. For these students, grades become evidence of their lack of success and actually can become the apparent motivators to disengage in school. If a student tries hard and succeeds, the grade provides a desired evidence of success. And when students engage and do poorly, the grades are the undesirable evidence of a lack of success. But when students don’t engage, then the poor grades that result are not evidence of failure or a lack of ability, and the students have actually found a way of protecting themselves from evidence of lack of ability or success accumulating around themselves.

As our students go beyond school, they certainly will be held accountable to varying degrees for their actions. It is also probably the case that others will at various times document their achievement for numerous reasons. In addition, our students can expect to be evaluated from time to time throughout their lives. One might also surmise that there will be times in our students’ lives when their performance on the job will be documented and reported to others. So what does all this have to do with grades?

The problem isn’t the grades themselves; the problem is the process of grading. The distinction here can be important – we are drawing a distinction between the actual grade “recorded” and the method used to determine it. The grade earned by a student is a label intended to indicate a level of quality. The act of grading is an action taken by a teacher – it is the act of appropriately determining and labeling the level of quality of a student’s work. Grades are labels; grading is the act of determining and labeling levels of quality.

In the food industry, for example, the government has determined that there are several grades for beef – USDA prime, choice, good, and commercial to name a few. The meat inspector’s job is to label meat appropriately based on its quality. However, the people who raise the beef approach the “grading” issue differently. They typically determine the grade of beef they wish to take to market, and do what they need to do in raising the cattle so that the desired standard is met.

In the PEAK approach, we see the job of teacher to be similar to the job of the cattle ranchers, not the job of the meat inspectors. Teachers have a choice. They may choose to hold students accountable for reaching standards – in which case they will award the students with the appropriate good grades that indicate performance excellence as soon as the standard is met.
Or, teachers may choose to allow students to complete tasks to varying levels, whether it is an issue of choice or speed of learning, and assign whatever is the appropriate grade to each completed task.

When teachers give students grades of A through F, they are not holding the students accountable for reaching performance excellence. Students may or may not have reached the standard. The price is too high for allowing bad grades. Students aren’t learning the content, and they aren’t learning how to meet standards. Further, allowing bad grades fails to give some students the additional time they truly need to meet the standards. Students pay a very high price when they miss learning that is important to their futures. As the teachers, the choice is ours as to which lessons are most important in each situation.

In the PEAK approach to teaching and learning, we believe that students should be held accountable for reaching standards. We also believe that since people learn in varying rates and in different ways, it may take some students longer to learn than others, but we are prepared to work with each student until the standards are met. Also, because the objectives have been designed from the course level to the unit level to the lesson level, we can focus long term instead of dwelling on a single poor grade.

**Effort Counts**

Recognizing strong effort can go a long way. When we recognize a desired level of performance with points, grades, marks or words, we can unintentionally cap the performance for some and discourage others.

In her book, *Mindset*, Carol Dweck, Psychology Professor at Stanford, writes of her findings regarding recognizing effort. She shares that in her research she found that recognizing effort as opposed to a level of accomplishment tends to produce greater long-term effort and achievement.

When "Managing Time, NOT Numbers" in activities such as Skill Drills, Fact Tracks, Table Jam, Walk About Quizzes and “work until I say stop warm ups,” the students will have varying amounts of work completed. If giving points or marks is a must, assign full points to all students who worked throughout.

**Grading and Scoring with the PEAK Approach**

Rather than using a single grade for multiple purposes and achieving none of them well, why not use grades in multiple ways? What if an easy system could be created to use grades and address all the four common uses?

Consider the possible benefits of each teacher being responsible for reporting multiple grades for each student. This is not a new idea, but here is where you might find a new twist for school that could actually improve the accuracy and the usefulness of grades.

Separate grades that are used to report progress from grades that are used to report achievement. When point totals and averages are used to compute grades, they clearly can lose accuracy if they are expected to be documentation of a level of achievement reached. For example, two students might earn the same grade of a C. For a student who started out poorly and finally did well with the more complex and demanding tasks toward the end,
his C actually represents a lower level of achievement than he finally earned. Similarly, for another student who started out excellently and accumulated many of her good grades early and then dropped off sharply, her C grade reflected a higher level of knowledge than she actually attained. Two very different levels of final achievement, yet they both received a C.

What if parents and students knew that two different grades would be issued – one to indicate progress during each period (the level of achievement demonstrated during the period) and the other to indicate the final achievement level or levels reached? This second grade or grades would not be computed using averages, totals, or any other amalgamation from the course or year. Its purpose would be to serve as an actual measure of final achievement.

Consider further the benefits that could come from splitting the grades even further. What if each of these two grades were actually split into more grades (or other indicators) in order to report progress throughout a course or subject for each objective, and then finally to report actual final achievement for each course or subject objective.

The Grading Dilemma

- About 20% of students really care about grades.
- Many students learn to not care, and only strive for the minimum or none at all.
- Giving grades of A-F allows many students to choose not to meet standards.
- Grading teaches kids they can choose what to do and how well to do it.
- Human brains do not mature adequately for cause and effect reasoning until age 18-21.

In the PEAK approach, students are held accountable for meeting standards at the course level in order to prepare them for future courses and state assessments. This practice also helps prepare students for the level of expectations that will be put on them beyond their formal schooling. Students are also held accountable for meeting unit level standards, which we call objectives. In this case, the purpose of unit objectives is also to ensure the students will continue to be successful as they move through the course. Holding students accountable for learning to this degree requires some shifts from typical grading and scoring procedures.

1. First, if students are to be held accountable, then any grade or score earned is only a temporary indicator of progress until the student legitimately earns a good grade by reaching the predetermined standard. In the PEAK approach, whatever students do that is to be scored or graded, receives a grade of A if it is done excellently, B if it is done well, or a “Not Yet” if it has not yet met the standard. B level work may be refined for a better grade. For any work that has not yet met the standard or standards, the student is expected to do corrective work until the standard is met and a grade of A or B has been earned.
2. Second, if students are being held accountable for meeting standards, the apparent problem of shifting deadlines must be addressed. To avoid this being a real problem, we operate from the perspective that students have the given time allocated to learn the entire course content, and everything that happens within that time can be flexible. This is facilitated by treating students the way many employers and parents treat people. If there is an absolute deadline for something, it is usually requested before the deadline, so any needed adjustment or corrections can be made.

The same thing occurs in the PEAK approach. The final assessment is given to the students before the course is officially over. This allows the students to “get credit” for those standards they have met with the assessment. It also allows the students to complete corrective work and further instruction with any standards that have not yet been met. The students are not being allowed to “slack off” and miss deadlines. The final deadlines are still there we just start working toward them earlier than usual.

This same approach is used within the units as well as at the course level, but it has even more justification. Since research studies suggest learners need to practice skills and work with concepts numerous times, it follows that much of what is contained within a unit could not be learned well by the end of the unit. Therefore, if immediately at the end of the unit the students are assessed, they may not yet be ready. We only check to see how well they have learned the unit objectives to that point. Then, if they have not yet mastered all the objectives, we don’t let them off the hook. We don’t blame them for needing the extra instruction and practice research suggests they require. We provide them with corrective support and assess them again until they meet the objectives.

3. The third issue addresses the question, “What is an A or B?” In many school situations, teachers use the percentage of correct responses to determine a grade. This seldom makes sense outside of school. For example, if we are teaching someone to make left turns while driving, the decision of whether or not the person is qualified to drive should probably not be based on the percentage of correctly made left turns. Turning left correctly should probably be a requirement, and if a grade for left turns must be given, an A would probably represent all turns being made correctly, safely and in a well-timed, smooth manner. A B would probably represent all turns being made correctly and safely, but not necessarily in a well-timed or smooth way.

Assessments in education can be well designed so truer measures than percentages can be used. For this reason, with assessments designed using the PEAK approach, the grades awarded may only seem to be inconsistent with percentages. The questions or tasks are often designed so that if a student does, for example, two out of three things correctly, there is strong reason to support awarding the student with at least a B. The questions or tasks have been constructed so that, in this example, correctly doing two out of three would imply understanding of what is to be understood, but the work probably has a few relatively unimportant errors.
Tracking Students’ Progress within Units and Grading Periods – Forms that Keep It All Manageable

The task of keeping track of student progress by individual objectives within each unit and also at the course level can seem unmanageable. However, there are forms and procedures that make it very doable. Yes, it is a little more work than more typical approaches, but the rewards of increased student motivation and achievement make the effort worthwhile.

The following is a blank PEAK progress tracking form. It can be easily adapted to any unit or course by adding the appropriate objectives and qualifiers.

If the students do not reach an A or B level with any of the objectives, they are then put through a corrective loop. This corrective loop will typically contain several elements.

1. Any assignments from the unit that were not done to an honors level are now required to be completed to that level in order for the students to be qualified for the reassessment.
2. The students are provided some form of instruction in the un-mastered objectives. This instruction needs to be different from the initial instruction for the missed objectives.
3. Focused practice is provided for the students in these targeted objectives.

As soon as the corrective loop is complete, the students are reassessed in the objectives they have yet to master (or any others they have already mastered but for which they engaged in the corrective loop out of a desire to improve). Their scores of A, B, or Not Yet are then circled as appropriate on the tracking form in the Form B column. This process is continued for as long as the students and teacher are able to continue it, at which point the student has earned whatever is the highest score recorded for each objective. Any objectives not yet mastered to this point may be reassessed at any future point as deemed appropriate by the teacher.
Grades can actually contribute to students’ being motivated to disengage from learning in school.

Grades and Eligibility Management Realities for the Classroom Teacher Using Parallel Assessment

The bottom line purpose for grades, eligibility reports, report cards, and progress is to inform parents, students, and other stakeholders as to the progress of students with their learning objectives. In a classroom where students are only given one “test” to determine progress at various points, this whole process is relatively easy – add the points and compute an average. However, in classrooms that focus on holding students accountable for reaching objectives, i.e., truly standards-based classrooms, the process becomes a bit more complicated.

In the true standards-based classrooms, teachers often find themselves submitting grades for students who have one or more incompletes for various objectives. The incompletes are the result of teachers providing multiple assessments for each objective. These incompletes are simply used to facilitate recordkeeping for objectives that particular students have not yet had enough time to learn. This record keeping ensures that each student has adequate time, practice, and mental engagement to meet the standard. Because students are required to meet the learning standards and not be “let off the hook,” teachers need to keep track of learning while providing additional instruction. The incompletes are only temporary until students reach the learning objectives. The number of assessment opportunities and the amount of time teachers provide for objectives to be mastered are all based on the teachers’ professional opinions as to what is necessary to ensure mastery given the students’ varied backgrounds and learning styles. What this all means is that a true grade cannot be determined until the necessary time is factored into the process of changing incompletes. Students should be able to improve their learning, and thus have grades replaced by ones indicating mastery, until the end of the full time allotted for mastery has expired (28/3.)

In typical grading systems, incompletes function in a different way – usually to indicate that a student has missing or incomplete work to be made up due to excused absences. However, in
a standards-based classroom, they function as temporary recordkeeping tools for monitoring learning-in-progress. Grades can only be issued once the learning time is completed.

What follows is a number of suggestions for assigning grades and making extracurricular eligibility decisions.

1. Limit the number of reassessment opportunities to three for most situations. Give partial scores for students who have not met mastery by the third opportunity.

2. Do not enter scores into your grade book or grade program for ANY student until the completion of the third or last opportunity for ALL students. This honors and supports your belief about the amount of time needed for the unit and your understanding that some students will finish early. Consider keeping these records in a traditional grade book until the appropriate time to enter them in your computerized grade program. (Note: using a traditional grade book can also help with #4.)

3. As long as students are working hard within your corrective loops, use the system and consider them “eligible.” If students are not working hard within your corrective loops, consider them “ineligible” and complete any associated reports accordingly.

4. At the end of the quarter or marking period, “FLOAT” the grades or scores for any units or tasks for which additional time is provided beyond the report card or eligibility report dates. Do this for ALL students, whether or not some have finished early. Remember, the due date is NOT the date of the first opportunity or assessment; it is the date of the last one.

5. Be certain grades and scores are indicative of performance levels and not just percentages. The whole idea behind the PEAK approach is to support students until they meet mastery. Consequently, assessments are typically designed so mastery can be demonstrated at either an A or B level. Make certain the score that is entered for each student reflects the levels of knowledge or skills demonstrated and not just a percentage.

6. Ensure students have received the highest scores for any objectives for which they retested in order to improve their score.

7. If students do NOT reach your minimum mastery level for an objective by the last opportunity within a unit (usually the second or third form), there are several options, but no matter what, this is a difficult situation. If a less than a mastery score is recorded, the students who do not want to work for mastery will quickly learn that if they “jump through the hoops with minimum effort,” they will be able to get by with lower performance and grades. If you hold the line:
   a. Record a score of zero if there are multiple objectives on each assessment that are scored separately. If there are not multiple objectives, then this procedure is too harsh
      • Plan on a future opportunity toward the end of the marking period or semester for the students to reassess to replace the zero with a mastery level score.
      • Replace the zero with a mastery level score as soon as the student demonstrates mastery of the objective on a future assessment or on the final.
• Assign a score of less than mastery if the student’s response shows “a minimal level” of mastery but contains too many errors to be considered mastery – then consider the above.

• Leave the score of zero but be prepared to struggle with significant opposition that may not be supportable.

b. Record an incomplete which most grading programs will count as a zero and then follow the steps in item “a” above.

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**Grades for Report Cards, Progress Reports, and Eligibility Reports**

In the PEAK approach, the research regarding learning time, retention, and practice are all used to determine by when, or how fast, learning should occur. If the teacher is using three forms of an assessment (with corrective loops), then the teacher is declaring that some students will need longer to master the content than others. This declaration is a commitment to letting the time and instruction given to students vary while holding mastery of content as the standard. In a more common approach, when only one form of a test is used, the teachers holds time to be constant and allows learning or achievement levels to vary based on effort, background knowledge, and matches between the learners’ needs and the instructional methods.

What the PEAK approach means for report cards is that until all correctives and reassessments have been administered for a unit, the grades for the unit are not final and should not be included in determining grades for report cards, progress reports or eligibility decisions.

**Eligibility**

In “no pass – no play” schools, it is important to understand and be consistent with the intent of the policy and the operational realities of an approach to teaching with the higher standards for learning associated with the PEAK Teaching for Excellence Model™. If a student still has re-assessment opportunities (a total of 3 assessments with well designed correctives is normally more than sufficient), then they should not be considered ineligible if they have not yet mastered objectives as long as they are conscientiously applying themselves and engaging in all corrective activities and scheduled reassessments.
CAUTION! Watch Your Step!

In a perfect world, we won’t see:

- Grades computed by averages or point totals
- Grades or scores for objectives on formal assessments based on percentages
- Graded quizzes before research shows the students could have learned (28/3)
- Practice and homework of a practice variety exceeding 10% of a grade
- Final grades computed by point totals or averages
- Marking period grades and eligibility determined by point totals and averages
- Questions asked of individual students as opposed to responses being developed by groups of students
- Assessments, grades and evaluations used to threaten low achieving students
IN A PERFECT WORLD

In a perfect world,

1. Extra credit would not exist. Instead, students would be supported until they meet the standards.
2. Point totals and averages would not be used in an attempt to represent what students know, can do, or understand at the end of a course or grade level.
3. Students would have pre-due dates for assignments, projects, papers and other expectations that would be used to give full credit to those done well already and to determine who needs extra support systems to ensure the standards are met and full credit is earned.
4. There is final accountability for culminating outcomes, standards or objectives.
5. Students are not exempt from final demonstration of mastery.
6. Homework, practice and daily “stuff” count 10% or less.
7. Practice is used as practice and is not graded (marks assigned to varying levels of performance).
8. Practice is expected and coached to effectiveness – not graded. If it is counted in grades (evaluation), it does not exceed 10%.
9. Grades and marks are recognized as labels and documentation – they are typically used as such once mastery occurs.
10. Coaching rubrics are used to drive performance and product development until standards are met.
11. Tests, quizzes and other graded events are used to maintain pressure with high achieving, NOT low achieving students.