

# Introduction

I was recently on a long layover and finished with work, so I went looking for something leisurely to read. The shop was sold out of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*, my usual go-to choices for easy reading. The *Time* magazine cover caught my attention, so I grabbed it. The lead article was on the economy and conveyed a bleak picture of where the United States was financially:

The US economy remains almost comatose. The slump already ranks as the longest period of sustained weakness since the Great Depression. The economy is staggering under many structural burdens as opposed to familiar cyclical problems. The structural faults represent once in a lifetime dislocations that will take years to work out. Among them job draught, the debt hangover, the banking collapse, the real estate depressing, and the runaway federal deficit. (Gwynne, 1992)

The quote sent chills down my spine. I am the father of three young children and knee-deep in planning financially and maximizing 529 plans. As I read “once in a lifetime dislocations” and “longest period of sustained weakness since the Great Depression,” my heart sank.

I eventually realized that the airport newsstand never throws away old issues because I was actually reading *Time* . . . from September 28, 1992. That was when the quote was published and when the Dow Jones industrial average was 3,276! Yet the quote was still somewhat believable. In over 20 years, very little has changed related to the economy.

## **GRADING: AN 80-YEAR+ WAR**

I have worked with many school districts over the past few years, adjusting or completely revamping existing grading policies and or practices. Many teachers, leaders, and even parents have been open to the idea of looking

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at grading practices just like they do at instruction or assessment practices; effectiveness and what prevents failure and increases achievement trumps what they like personally or what they have been doing for the past decade.

A few places have been very resistant to change. I found myself particularly frustrated at the lack of progress in one district after two full evenings of discussions and brainstorming sessions. Teachers, parents, community members, and even some alumni had voiced concern and even outrage at some ideas that were being considered related to grading practices as well as how grades would be reported. That night, I came across an article written by someone who seemed to have just walked a mile in my shoes. The following is a quote was from his facilitation of a grading committee meeting that seemed to resemble mine:

The Committee on Grading was called upon to study grading procedures. At first, the task of investigating the literature seemed to be rather a hopeless one. What a mass and mess it all was! Could order be brought out of such chaos? Could points of agreement among American educators concerning the perplexing grading problem actually be discovered? It was with considerable misgiving and trepidation that the work was finally begun. (Middleton, 1933)

That statement came from a source published more than 80 years ago. Oh, how very little has changed in 80+ years. The world seemed so different then—a dollar could certainly buy you a lot more, as Figure 1 shows. But teachers, administrators, parents, and others were arguing about grading practices much as they do today.

Grading change dialogue and discussions do not have to continue to be painful and feared experiences. Teachers, administrators, and parents

**Figure 1** How Much Certain Items Cost in 1933

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Average new house: \$5,750</li><li>• Average early wages: \$1,550</li><li>• Gallon of gas: 10 cents</li><li>• Average monthly rent \$18</li><li>• Vacuum cleaner: \$17.75</li><li>• Loaf of bread: 7 cents</li><li>• Newport Boulevard Ladies Hat: \$1.69</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pound of hamburger meat: 11 cents</li><li>• Silk and rayon stockings: 39 cents</li><li>• Plymouth 6 car: \$445</li><li>• Health-building tonic: 89 cents</li><li>• Campbell's vegetable soup: 10 cents</li><li>• Radio: \$52.00</li><li>• Average laborer's weekly wage: \$20</li></ul>
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Source: Adapted from "The Year 1933 News, Prices and Popular Culture" (<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1933.html>).

all want what's best for students. We all simply must keep a sense of perspective that perhaps our beliefs and experiences might not include examples of evidence that current grading actions are truly impacting learning and achievement. Far too often tradition and opinion have driven grading discussions. The ideas and strategies in this book should help with that.

### ***Disagree but Don't Be Disagreeable***

Grading change is a passionate topic. For successful implementation of any changes and potential resolutions to come to fruition, we must agree to not be disagreeable. Far too often debates about grading changes involve anger and indifference. This is usually because we've *all* had grading done to us. Everyone, with rare exception, whether we reside within the confines of the educational world or not, has spent time in schools. We have been administered, given, received, earned, blessed with, rewarded by, or punished with GRADES. This has led to many teachers, parents, and even students having a perception about which grading practices or policies should ring true until the second coming—or the first coming of a Cubs World Series title since 1908. (As a native Chicagoan and die-hard White Sox fan, I sure hope the latter never happens.)

#### *Example*

Former Norfolk Superintendent Dr. Stephen Jones was quoted in an article discussing possible tweaks to a grading system (Bowers, 2009). When talking about minimum grading policies implemented from the previous year, he clearly agreed with critics that “the grading change this year wasn't adequately explained” (para. 4). Jones said he wanted to “encourage students to keep trying as well as create consistency and fairness across the grading scale and between schools” (para. 6). He said, “The intent was to give kids a fighting chance if they had a bad day. Saying to them, ‘You failed this grade, and you have every opportunity to bring it up’” (para. 7).

Despite Jones's admission that there was some fault in the way the change was implemented and his open invitation for suggestions for improvement, commenters were less rational or helpful and more passionate and irritated. Here are some comments from the online article, each followed with my commentary:

1. “To create consistency and fairness across the grading scale and between schools. The scale that begins at zero has been used since I was in school. That's the one that is ‘consistent and fair’ and used all around the world. Stick with it.”

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Here is where we have to ask where our schools would be if we didn't continue to innovate and devise better ways to do things. Technology and specific standards for classroom lessons are just two examples of innovations that are much different than in even the recent past.

2. "I think it should be the teacher's discretion whether the student's lowest grade should be a 61 or a zero. Therefore, no student or parent can complain to an administrator or anyone else if the performance was failing and the student receives a grade less than a 61. This will teach students that they cannot play the system and get away with it."

We must demand consistency and reliability in all classroom practices. Schools can and should provide a proper amount of structured freedom to allow teachers to thrive, but not allow islands of autonomy.

3. "As a certified educator in Virginia Beach, I am outraged that they are going in the same direction. Giving a kid who does nothing a 50 is a lie. What about the kid who tries hard and makes a 50. Why should he bother. Also, he grades are being 'fluffed' up for appearances sake. The kids will suffer when they hit higher education. This is dishonest and wrong!"

We have to be cautious of emotion. This certified teacher forgot the importance of punctuation:

As a certified educator in Virginia Beach, I am outraged that they are going in the same direction. Giving a kid who does nothing a 50 is a lie. **What about the kid who tries hard and makes a 50?** Why should he bother?

We have to remember: Missing punctuation can kill!

My message here is simple. The teacher making this comment is passionate, and I would bet my bottom dollar she cares deeply about her students. We all can lose focus when emotion gets the best of us, though. Trust me, I know; just ask my wife!

This is a prime example of how heated grading change discussions can be—not much different from the 1933 example of passion and anger. Many school districts simply choose to avoid making changes rather than face such pushback. Unfortunately, this means they may be stuck using antiquated grading practices that do not benefit students, teachers, or anyone else in the education community.

In this book, I strive to address why grading changes can be so difficult to implement and what school teachers and administrators must consider when attempting to make meaningful changes in school and classroom grading approaches. I also provide examples and actions that can prevent unnecessary failures and increase the honesty in grading at the middle and high school level without decreasing expectations.

### ***Change Not Usually Welcomed***

So many things have changed in our lives in the past few decades alone. Can you remember not asking for someone's cell phone number? When was the last time you didn't consider Googling something that you had a question about? Only 25 years ago, Germany was two countries—East Germany and West Germany. The world is a much different place than it used to be.

American secondary schools have changed a great deal in the past two decades as well. Was it always the norm for teachers to focus on a standard in their lessons? Is online learning at least some part of the equation for lesson and instructional planning for students? Don't we now consider the least restrictive environment for students with special education needs? Finally, when was the last time middle and high school administrators used paper and pencil instead of computer programs to assist them in scheduling their staff and students?

These are only a few examples of practices and approaches in middle and high schools that have changed in the past 15 to 20 years alone. Many archaic grading *practices* that predated these and other advances in secondary schools are still well in place regardless of changes in grading *policy*. This book is predicated on the notion that practice trumps policy.

#### *Example*

In 2009, Texas state senator Jane Nelson (R-Flower Mound) authored Senate Bill 2033, barring minimum grade policies in schools. This occurred after some teachers had voiced concern that they had been ordered not to assign grades lower than a minimum percentage—usually a 50 on a 100% scale. The legislation was called the “truth in grading” law. The law was created to minimize the ability of schools and districts to put forth policy that mandates minimum grading (Robelen, 2010).

Eleven school districts filed lawsuits to stop the full implementation of the law. They felt the law was unclear and that it should apply only to class assignments and not to progress reports or semester report cards. They cited vague language in the law. The Texas School Alliance, representing

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the state's large, urban districts, argued that minimum grades provide early failure detection for students at risk of dropping out, so that one blown grade doesn't doom them to failing a semester.

The courts ruled against the schools and stated that the law was not ambiguous and reflected the legislature's intent to protect teachers from having to issue grades to students they felt they did not earn. Some called the policies fundamental grade inflation. Districts in Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth that had minimum grading policies that were approved and being implemented abolished them. Shortly after the ruling, Linda Bridges, president of the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), said, "We believe that any shred of doubt about the meaning of this law has been eliminated and that all school districts must, without further delay, comply fully with the legislative intent to outlaw minimum grades" (quoted in Stutz, 2010, para. 6). She went on to say that the Texas AFT would "be on watch" to make sure all school districts come into compliance with the truth-in-grading law.

In November 2012, Senator Nelson pre-filed SB 132 to clarify the law and its verbiage prohibiting what is considered grade inflation (Texas AFT, 2012).

Sec. 28.0216. DISTRICT GRADING POLICY. A school district shall adopt a grading policy, including provisions for the assignment of grades on class assignments and examinations, before each school year. A district grading policy:

- (1) Must require a classroom teacher to assign a grade that reflects the student's relative mastery of an assignment;
- (2) May not require a classroom teacher to assign a minimum grade for an assignment without regard to the student's quality of work; and
- (3) May allow a student a reasonable opportunity to make up or redo a class assignment or examination for which the student received a failing grade.

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*Source:* Texas Education Code. (2003). Retrieved from [http://www.easylawlookup.com/\\_easylookup.blp?ru\\_sz=50&data=EDUCAT2&site=EASY&spon=&stype=P&setnewzip=y&sterm=%2B&smode=AND&exact=ON&pgno=176&par=0&dlevel=0&subject=&topic=&ZipCodeLocation=78232&goaction=Continue&submit=Go#par\\_0](http://www.easylawlookup.com/_easylookup.blp?ru_sz=50&data=EDUCAT2&site=EASY&spon=&stype=P&setnewzip=y&sterm=%2B&smode=AND&exact=ON&pgno=176&par=0&dlevel=0&subject=&topic=&ZipCodeLocation=78232&goaction=Continue&submit=Go#par_0).

We must fully support the AFT's stance on ensuring schools and districts uphold and abide by all laws. The question becomes, are we then ensuring that all schools are just as much on watch to ensure the quality of

classroom instruction related to student achievement is held to the highest standard? The issue here is not easily answered, and people are very passionate about it. This book tackles issues like this by addressing specifically classroom and school grading practices to minimize unnecessary failures and to support student needs when recovering grades and credits.

### ***Standards-Based Grading***

The standards movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s sent shockwaves into many high school classrooms where, prior to their conception and implementation, teacher autonomy in terms of what was taught and how it was timed was the norm—as was how anything students turned in was graded.

There was, however, a well-founded belief that students and parents should expect the same standard of classroom instruction in all classrooms in any given school or any given school district. This idea gave birth to the instructional standards revolution of the early 21st century. The thought that some standards would be taught and assessed at a high level in all classrooms regardless of teacher opinion, judgment, and belief was ground-breaking for some and earth-shattering for others. While logically this made sense, it certainly infringed on a common belief among many teachers: “I know what’s best for my students.” Standards attempted to eliminate the educational lottery, whereby a school’s computer-based student information system may assign a student to teacher X versus teacher Y, and thus determine a different set of expectations and ultimately different grades for that course for the same level of proficiency.

Districts nationwide have spent the past decade working on aligning curriculum and assessment practices to match their adopted set of standards. Many states are still attempting to eliminate the same lottery on a nationwide basis with the advent and implementation of national standards like the Common Core. While there has been much commentary about their intent or merit, for the most part weren’t they created to ensure that, whether you are a Hoosier, a Buckeye, or from the Show Me State, there is not a different set of standards and objectives for our students? Finally, attempts at standards-based and standards-referenced grading are becoming more and more prevalent in schools and districts. Many are having a hard time implementing standards-based and standards-referenced grading because of the fear of abandoning the letter grades that teachers and parents are comfortable with. This book will address how schools can increase the quantity and quality of standards-based and standards-referenced grades successfully without having to completely abandon traditional letter grades.

### ***Dialogue Not Monologue***

Schools must have open and transparent communication with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders about both *how* and *why* any grading changes are taking place. They must start first by sharing what will not change—or what will be the grading givens. Far too many grading change initiatives have failed because of a lack of two-way communication. A lack of listening, most often on the part of the schools, has directly led to these failed attempts at change.

My grandmother told me often, “You have two ears and one mouth for a reason, David Theodore!” We need to apply this lesson to the topic of grading practices as much as anything else. Listening to what is perceived about grades and grading practices may open the door to conversations and dialogue to not only avoid anger but also lead to support for implementation. This book will also address how to better communicate and collaborate on grading decisions with the entire school community.

### ***Emotion and Thought***

When any discussion involves passion, there is potential for an absence of reasoning. Fred Kincer, a former colleague of mine, often said, “God gave us two great gifts—emotion and thought, both useful and powerful. The problem is, you can only use one at a time.”

We have all been in situations where we may have been arguing or trying to prove a point so much that it’s quite possible we forgot what we were trying to argue about. When this happens, with rare exception, it would benefit us greatly to acknowledge we are usually trying to come to some sort of resolution. Will it be safe to say that—based on evidence from arguments 80 years ago, laws being passed in Texas, and a superintendent being blasted for doing his very best to make sure students do not unnecessarily fail—the grading debate quite possibly makes us need to consider Fred’s emotion and thought metaphor?

Ownership of discovery can limit emotion. Far too often, secondary teachers have not been involved in many of the grading decisions that directly impact their day-to-day work. In this book I will refer to a gap in the evidence and research related to effective grading practices, where teacher voice is noticeably absent. Allowing, and even demanding, teachers to conduct their own grading action research is essential for emotion to be eliminated from grading practice adjustments and decisions. Finally, this book will focus specifically on how to create and conduct grading action research to better help districts in minimizing emotion and maximizing logical buy-in and benefit for the entire education community.

## DO NOT WORRY OVER OUTLIERS

Secondary schools must implement strategies to best prevent failures while increasing overall student success. Teachers and administrators should not dwell on a few students that a particular or nontraditional grading practice may not work for, or worry about students that may attempt to beat the new system—because many are already beating the old one. Middle and high school teachers applying strategies to prevent failure by offering students multiple paths for proficiency can create a clearer picture of which students need specific interventions and which are ready to advance to higher levels. I have strived to share in this book strategies that are evidence based but also practical. I have been fortunate to have witnessed the positive impacts of many of these strategies in schools I have directly worked in.

The average rate of return on the U.S. stock market has been 8% since the late 19th century, but unless adjustments are made, we see huge dips in its success. Every time one of these strategies was reattempted or implemented a second time, adjustments had to be made for its success. There is not any one grading practice that will be equally effective in every classroom; however, there are approaches that provide teachers with a roadmap for increased success with students. Together, we can navigate them.

I thank you for taking the time to read and consider the ideas in this book.

*Yours in education,  
Dave*