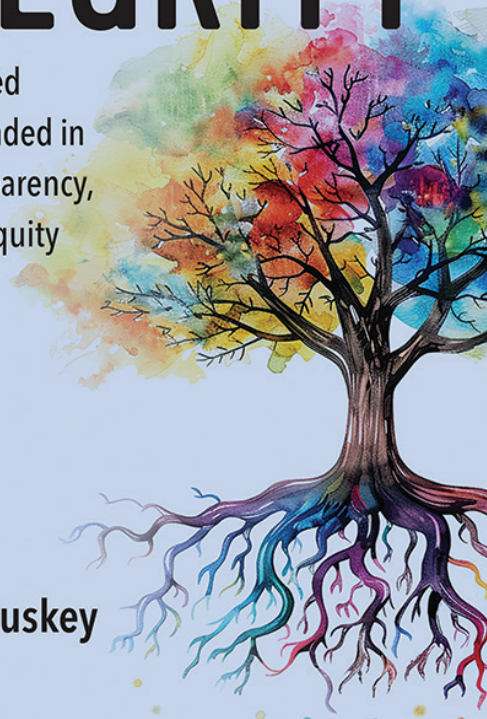


GRADING WITH INTEGRITY

A Research-Based
Approach Grounded in
Honesty, Transparency,
Accuracy, and Equity



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CORWIN
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Grading with Integrity by Thomas R. Guskey.

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Why Grading With Integrity?

Few topics in education have generated as much interest in recent years as grading and reporting student learning. Although grading practices in most schools have remained relatively unchanged for much of the past century (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019), grading has today become a focal point for education reformers across all grade levels. Ironically, recent grading reform efforts have also triggered unprecedented controversy and unexpected opposition, with parents and families emerging as some of the most vocal opponents of proposed changes (Bonsu, 2022; Habeeb, 2023; Young, 2023).

This juncture of heightened interest and significant controversy has given rise to a surge in both new books and new consultants dedicated to grading and reporting reform. These resources aim to provide guidance to teachers and school leaders seeking to overhaul their grading policies and practices. The remarkable growth in the number of these authorities on grading and reporting is nothing short of astonishing.

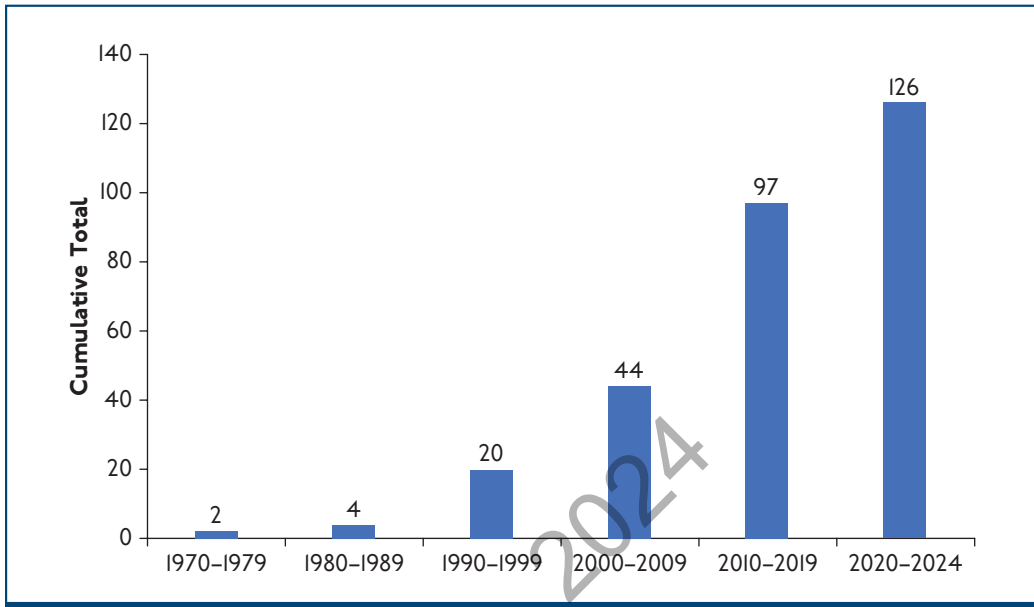
We recently conducted a comprehensive review of published resources to determine the number of new books addressing grading issues that have been published over the past five decades. Figure 1.1 presents a summary of our findings, and Figure 1.2 illustrates these outcomes graphically. The titles of the books referred to in the table can be found in Appendices I and II.

Figure I.1 • Number of Books Published on Grading and Reporting by Years

YEARS	NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED ON GRADING AND REPORTING STUDENT LEARNING	
	NUMBER	CUMULATIVE TOTAL
1970–1989	4	4
1990–1991	2	6
1992–1993	3	9
1994–1995	3	12
1996–1997	4	16
1998–1999	4	20
2000–2001	3	23
2002–2003	7	30
2004–2005	5	35
2006–2007	5	40
2008–2009	4	44
2010–2011	6	50
2012–2013	12	62
2014–2015	8	70
2016–2017	13	83
2018–2019	14	97
2020–2021	10	107
2022–2023	14	121
2024	5	126

Surprisingly, our investigation revealed that in the two decades spanning from 1970 to 1989, only *four* significant books were published on grading student learning. The first and most prominent was the 1971 book, *Wad-Ja-Get? The Grading Game in American Education* by Howard Kirschenbaum, Rodney Napier, and Sidney Simon, which has since become a hallmark work in the field. This book

Figure 1.2 ♦ Cumulative Total Number of Books Published on Grading and Reporting by Decade



explored the dynamics and challenges associated with grading in American education during the latter part of the twentieth century. A 50th anniversary edition of this classic book was republished in 2021.

In the decade from 1990 to 1999, 16 new books addressing grading emerged, and from 2000 to 2009, 24 additional books on the subject were published. However, in the subsequent decade from 2010 to 2019, an astonishing 53 new books on grading reform were released, with an additional 29 published just since 2020. To our knowledge, no topic in the history of education has witnessed such a dramatic surge in the number of books authored by new experts purporting to possess unique insights into the improvements that need to be made and how to implement them.

This collection of new books on grading covers a diverse array of topics and presents a wide range of perspectives on enhancing grading and reporting systems. Some delve into grading for growth (Clark & Talbert, 2023), others for equity (Feldman, 2023), for impact (Hierck & Larson, 2018), and for learning (O'Connor, 2017). Although the authors contribute

well-intentioned insights on how grading policies and practices should be reformed, a notable gap exists in terms of supporting evidence demonstrating thorough testing of their theories and tangible improvements in classroom practices or student learning outcomes resulting from their ideas. Equally absent are clear explanations as to why changes in grading and reporting are needed or even why it is essential now. The critical importance of addressing these *why* questions brings us to the pivotal topic of *grading with integrity*.

Reflect and React

What are your thoughts about the increase in books focused on grading?

What are the current challenges with grading policies and practices in your classroom, school, or district?

WHAT IS INTEGRITY?

Integrity is a concept that is seldom discussed in education—and rarely within the specific context of grading and reporting student learning. It typically gets more attention in discussions related to governance, policymaking, and public service. Particularly in contemporary times, discussions about the integrity of lawmakers and their actions have taken center stage in political debates and legal disputes. However, the concept of integrity holds significance across all segments of society, including the roles and responsibilities of teachers and school leaders.

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As educators, we aspire to be recognized as individuals who uphold high standards of integrity in all our interactions with students, parents and families, fellow educators, and community members. It comes as a shock to us when our integrity is called into question, as we firmly believe that we should exemplify a commitment beyond the pettiness and arrogance that sometimes prevails in certain governance and political circles.

Integrity in education, particularly within the realm of grading and reporting, is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various characteristics for teachers, school leaders, and schools. An educator acting with integrity can be characterized as one who is embodying ethical principles, maintaining coherence in actions, and demonstrating professional responsibility. In the literature on integrity, issues of moral values and norms also emerge (Huberts, 2014, pp. 39–44). An integrity teacher, school leader, or school is one that operates within this ethical framework, consistently aligning actions with these foundational principles.

A dominant perspective of integrity aligns with the Latin *integras*, meaning intact, whole, harmony, consistency, and coherence in principles and values (Montefiore & Vines, 1999, p. 9). *Integras* is the root of words such as *integral* and *integrate*. Another view sees integrity as acting in line with virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance (Becker & Talsma, 2016; Tongeren & Becker, 2009). Still another perspective stresses that integrity is something to strive for; it is described as the “stuff of moral courage and even heroism” (Brenkert, 2004, p. 5) and “complying in an exemplary way with specific moral standards” (Luijk, 2004, p. 39).

In the context of grading and reporting student learning, we see integrity as the quality of acting in accordance with the principles of *honesty*, *transparency*, *accuracy*, and *equity*. But integrity also has a moral dimension. Decisions and subsequent actions guided by integrity are consistently driven by a steadfast focus on what is in the best interests of our students. The values, norms, and rules shaping our conduct as educators all emanate from this unwavering commitment to the well-being of the students under our care.

INTEGRITY IN GRADING

We believe there are three different facets of grading with integrity. Although related, each of these facets is distinct and has unique importance in the process of grading and reporting student learning. These facets include the following:

1. The integrity of the grade
2. The integrity of the grading process
3. The integrity of the grader

Let’s examine each facet in more detail.

1. Integrity of the Grade

The integrity of the grade relates to what a grade means and how it should be interpreted. The foundational premise of this facet of grading is the shared understanding that grades are assigned to performance—*not* to students. In other words,

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Grading With Integrity

grades reflect students' level of learning at a particular point in time, not who students are as learners or what they are capable of learning. Furthermore, because performance is always temporary, subject to changes in students' knowledge and skills, so too should grades always be considered temporary. Most importantly, we don't want students ever to think of themselves as "C students" or "B students" in any subject area or course. Rather, we want them to see a grade of C or B as being at step three or four in a five-step process to reaching mastery of a particular learning goal, standard, or competency.

Integrity of the grade is compromised when teachers' unconscious biases or expectations, rather than evidence, influence the grades assigned. For example, if a student has been performing poorly in general, then the teacher might view the current work in that historical context, overlooking the level of learning the current work actually represents and assigning a lower grade as a result. The reverse could also be true. Students who historically perform well are typically given the benefit of the doubt and get higher grades overall, even if their current performance is a bit off. In both scenarios, there is a level of dishonesty to the grade, whether the teacher is aware of this or not.

Connect and Conclude

How were the grading systems that you experienced as a learner consistent with, or in conflict with, the idea of the integrity of the grade?

Integrity of the grade is also compromised when time is fixed and grades are not current. For example, when a student's grade that is based on a writing task in October is not updated based on new learning and a new level of performance in November, then the honesty of the grade is called into question. As well, if grades on these similar tasks are averaged over time, then the integrity of the grade is in question again—now because the accuracy of the grade is imprecise.

2. Integrity of the Grading Process

Ensuring the integrity of the grading process necessitates the alignment of all grading procedures with the stated purpose of grading. With this approach, before assigning any grade, teachers and school leaders must collectively establish consensus on what the grade signifies and why it is assigned. For instance, if the primary purpose of grades is to describe students' academic achievement, then nonachievement factors associated with students' behavior should not be factored into determining the

achievement grade. Instead, those factors should be reported separately. Similarly, if the goal is to describe students' current level of performance, then practices such as averaging evidence over time must be eliminated. The deliberate clarification of the purpose of grading serves as a fundamental step toward maintaining integrity in grading, and we will examine the role of clarification in more detail in Chapter 3.

Integrity of the grading process is also compromised when extra credit is offered to students, especially when those tasks are unrelated to the learning. Examples include giving extra credit for attending school events or bringing supplies such as tissues to class. The reverse is also true. In some cases, teachers have been known to lower students' grades for failing to comply with supply requests. BuzzFeed (Bramwell, 2023) reported, for example, that students' grades were sometimes lowered if they did not bring communal class supplies, including tissues, hand sanitizer, and wipes. Other research shows that teachers often alter students' grades based on whether they arrive to class with a pencil or pen (Fisher et al., 2012). This is clearly at odds with the assertion that the grades are equitable. Including evidence based on learning practice, such as homework or formative assessment results, similarly compromises the grading process.

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Connect and Conclude

How were the grading systems that you experienced as a learner consistent with, or in conflict with, the idea of the integrity of the grading process?

3. Integrity of the Grader

Integrity of the grader implies that teachers *always* must be able to defend the grades they assign based on the prescribed purpose, and they must have valid and reliable evidence related to that purpose to support their grading decisions. Grades cannot be based on teachers' whims or intuitions. Grades also cannot be decided by the mindless calculations of a computerized grading program (Guskey, 2002). Instead, grades must be determined by teachers' thoughtful and informed professional judgment of students' performance, based on clear performance criteria and a well-articulated purpose.

The integrity of the grader is compromised when teachers are not specific about what success looks like or when they don't communicate clearly to students the criteria for success. Without specific performance criteria, not only are teachers' judgments of students' performance inconsistent, but also the

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feedback they offer students for improvement lacks clarity and direction. In these situations, students are left to guess what the teachers thinks is important, how their performance will be evaluated, and how best to please the teacher. Rather than being transparent, grading becomes a gaming competition of “doing school” (Pope, 2003).

When the integrity of the grade, the grading process, and the grader are established, the principles of honesty, transparency, accuracy, and equity in grading are assured. This also means that when equally knowledgeable and experienced teachers look at the same body of evidence on students' performance, they will all assign the same grade. They will be able to defend that grade based on the sound evidence and the consistent application of the grade's purpose.

OUR PURPOSE IN THE BOOK

Our primary purpose in this book is to guide teachers and school leaders in implementing better and more defensible grading and reporting policies and practices; that is, to grade with integrity. Despite the contentions of some critics, grades are not evil. They do not contaminate the learning process nor impede students' development as learners. Grades are simply the symbols educators assign to individual pieces of student work or to composite measures of student performance created for report cards and other summary documents (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). Grades can be letters, numbers, words, symbols, or any set of descriptors that designate different levels of performance. As such, they can be a useful and vital form of feedback to students (Guskey, 2022).

Undoubtedly, the grading process is susceptible to corruption and misuse. This is especially true in instances where grades are perceived as currency students must strive to attain (Bleske, 2019) or as a source of power and control for teachers (Holt et al., 2022). However, addressing this issue doesn't necessitate eliminating grades outright and going gradeless. Instead, the focus should be on enhancing the grading process to make it more meaningful and educationally sound (Guskey, 2017). The key to success lies in improving the underlying system rather than abandoning it entirely, emphasizing a shift toward practices that align with important educational goals and foster a more genuine and effective learning environment.

OUR FOCUS ON INTEGRITY

Discussions about integrity consistently center on the behavior of individuals in decision making and decision implementation. Integrity is perceived as the quality of acting in alignment or harmony with relevant norms, rules, and moral principles (Huberts, 2018). The primary facet often associated with integrity is consistency, emphasizing the importance of not altering behaviors based on the situation and not expressing one thing but acting differently.

However, while consistency is a crucial element of integrity, consistency alone is insufficient. For example, there are instances where teachers are highly consistent in misusing grades and implementing inappropriate grading practices. Therefore, grading with integrity always includes an ethical or moral dimension, raising questions about what is considered helpful and beneficial to students and their learning and what is not. This necessitates ensuring that consistency is coupled with honesty, transparency, accuracy, and equity. Grading with integrity involves approaches that consistently prioritize students' best interests and support students' overall learning success. This is the true meaning of grading with integrity.

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Summarize and Speculate

What are your thoughts thus far? How are these ideas about grading resonating with you? What might need to change to increase the integrating of grading in your classroom, school, or district?

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

As we stressed at the beginning of this chapter, there is a lot of noise when it comes to grading and the reform of grading practices. Much of the advice given to school leaders on how to reform grading and reporting is opinion based rather than evidence based. Our goal is to help you find your way through that noise and the accompanying onslaught of opinions.

In this book, we take a measured approach to grading reform, only making recommendations that are backed by clear and trustworthy evidence. We also retrace the history of grading, noting the problems associated with representing student learning in meaningful ways. Most importantly, we present evidence that educators can use to make informed decisions about the grades they assign.

Grading With Integrity

Each chapter in this book is designed to address a central question. These questions provide the foundation to ensure that grading is done with a clear sense of purpose and integrity. Each chapter also offers a series of specific policies and practices necessary to implement grading reforms in a way that will be both effective and successful. Here is a brief overview of the material covered in this book.

Chapter 1: Why Grading With Integrity?

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, we examine the significant increase of interest in grading reforms that has occurred in recent years. Second, we define what it means to grade with integrity, and we explain why this should serve as the foundation for all endeavors aimed at enhancing procedures for grading and reporting of student learning.

Chapter 2: A Brief History of Grading: How Did We Get Here?

Knowing how grading and reporting practices developed and how they have evolved is essential as we strive to make wise decisions about future policies and practices. It also helps us avoid past mistakes. In this chapter, we explore how grading and reporting have changed over the years, both for better and worse. We also describe several crucial understandings that provide the foundation for all reform efforts.

Chapter 3: Asking Why: What Is Our Purpose for Grading?

Any successful grading reform effort must begin with clarifying the purpose for grading. Once the purpose is established and agreed to, it becomes much easier to address and resolve the questions about the alignment of policies and practices to that purpose. In this chapter, we describe procedures for developing meaningful statements of purpose for grading and how to use such statements to then guide all discussions about grading policies and practices.

Chapter 4: Current Grading Schemas: What Are the Existing Problems?

Confronting the shortcomings of current grading systems provides us with an opportunity to revise policies, practices, and behaviors based on current information about their effectiveness and outcomes. In this chapter, we delve into some of the most significant challenges and issues inherent in these systems, and we explore how to organize productive discussions of these issues with different groups of stakeholders in grading procedures.

Chapter 5: Product: What Is Standards-Based or Competency-Based Grading?

The debate on standards-based grading (SBG) and competency-based grading (CBG) has challenged many districts. We draw on the research and practical experiences surrounding standards-based and competency-based approaches to grading, including strengths and the growing pains that often accompany these reform efforts. We propose several considerations for identifying the grain size and success criteria needed to accurately report academic grades, and we discuss the different audiences for gradebooks, report cards, and transcripts.

Chapter 6: Process: How Do We Include Nonachievement Learning Goals in Grading?

A significant problem in grading is that academic achievement and nonachievement factors (e.g., effort, homework completion, attitude in class) are often combined in a single, amalgamated grade that is impossible to interpret accurately or meaningfully. In this chapter, we consider nonachievement factors often considered in grading that enable or derail learning, and we discuss how those can be reported more meaningfully. As with decisions about reporting academic achievement, leaders should ensure that the criteria for these elements are developed in collaboration with appropriate educational partners.

Chapter 7: Progress: How Do We Report Growth and Improvement?

Learning involves growth and improvement as students progress toward mastery of important academic achievement and nonachievement learning goals. However, most online grading programs do not include procedures for documenting students' growth or improvement. This chapter looks at the use of ipsative assessments that compare students' prior and current work in order to gauge progress. It also includes descriptions of other reporting tools that can be used to provide information about students' progress, including descriptive feedback, low-stakes grading, portfolios, and formative practice assessments.

Chapter 8: Grading With Integrity: How Do We Get There?

This final chapter is a call to action. We describe four factors that serve as potential barriers to grading reform initiatives, including long-held traditions, guidance centered on opinion and persuasion rather than on research, grading technologies that thwart efforts to promote learning and academic risk taking, and failure to attend to the change process. We offer recommendations for moving to a system of grading with integrity in which consistency and meaningful communication are key. We describe how this approach requires building consensus among educators and their partners about the purpose of grading, using grading scales that offer consistency and reliability, and reporting multiple grades to provide a fuller picture of students' performance.

SUMMARY

Grading has been the subject of conflict, debate, and various reform efforts for more than a century. As education and society evolve and change, and as our knowledge about the teaching and learning process deepens and expands, grading policies and practices should similarly evolve. Yet, unlike other aspects of education, grading policies and practices seem especially resistant to change. Perhaps because they are seen as long-established traditions, many of these policies and practices have been preserved in amber like a prehistoric insect.

We think it is time to crack open that amber. We believe our ever-expanding knowledge of effective grading compels us to do it. But with that in mind, we also need to do it in ways that are thoughtful and respectful of the perspectives of all of the various groups involved in education, based on the principles of honesty, transparency, accuracy, and equity. We are pleased you are joining us in this journey as we discuss the research and promising practices that form our central argument: the need for *grading with integrity* to elevate the grade, the grading process, and the grader.

Interpret and Infer

1. If you conducted a gap analysis between current practices and the basics of grading with integrity, what might you find?
2. Which of the various educational stakeholders are most likely to support changes in grading policies and practices? Which are least likely?
3. What are your initial thoughts about the inclusion of academic and nonachievement factors when it comes to grading?

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