Grading Visible Learners

Dedications

From Dave:

This book is dedicated to my family. It is through their steadfast support, understanding, and strength that I have reached this stage in my career. Kristen, you are an incredible partner, a loving wife, and a devoted mother—I am truly fortunate to have you in my life! Nicholas, Zachary, and Jacob, you have all grown into remarkable young men who bring me immense pride and serve as a true inspiration. I can't wait to see the man each of you is going to become. I am deeply grateful to all three of you for your unwavering love and patience—and heaven knows Dad doesn't have a lot of patience. . . . So I thank you from the bottom of my heart for yours!

From Bruce:

This book is dedicated to my family. It has only been with their unwavering understanding, support, and strength that I have arrived at this point in my career. Rebecca, you are a tremendous partner, a wonderful wife, and dedicated mother—I am so lucky! Jaxen and Landon, you both have become tremendous men who are not only my pride and joy but a true inspiration to me. I must thank all three of you for your constant love and patience. I love you!

Grading Visible Learners

Learning With Fluidity, Not Finality

Dave Nagel

Bruce Potter

Foreword by John Almarode

Afterword by John Hattie

CORWIN
A Sage Company

CORWIN
A Sage Company

FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Printed in the United States of America

Apple Core Icon from istock.com/arcady_31 and Second Chances icon from istock.com/dinosoftlabs

Paperback ISBN 978-1-0719-3429-6

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Vice President and
Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Senior Publisher: Jessica Allan
Senior Content
Development Editor: Mia Rodriguez
Production Editor: Tori Mirsadjadi
Copy Editor: Michelle Ponce
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Cover Designer: Scott Van Atta
Marketing Manager: Olivia Bartlett

25 26 27 28 29 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Online Appendix Contents

Visit the companion website at
https://companion.corwin.com/courses/GradingVisibleLearners
for the downloadable resources listed above.

Note From the Publisher: The authors have provided web content in this book that is available to you through QR (quick response) codes. To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

Foreword

I remember it as if it were yesterday. My professor, who will remain anonymous, handed back a test in one of my college mathematics courses. On the top in bright red ink was the number 42. Yes, I had earned 42 of the 100 possible points on the test. My professor gently said to me, "Mr. Almarode, I assume I will see you during office hours this week." My professor was right, I would be visiting him during office hours that week and for the remaining weeks of the semester. However, as I walked to his office to meet with him, I had no idea what I was going to say or ask. While I clearly failed the test and did not have an acceptable grasp of the content, I could not articulate where I was going in my learning, how I was progressing in my learning, and where I needed to go next to close the gap in my learning. The grade of 42 told me nothing other than that I had only earned 42 percent of the possible points on the test. The 42 percent told me that I had failed the test. What that grade meant for me as a learner, the information communicated by that particular grade, was simply that I had earned an F. This begs the question, what is a grade? What purpose does it serve in teaching and learning? Are grades helpful in teaching and learning?

Grades have long been a cornerstone of educational systems, serving as shorthand for what students know and how well they perform. Yet, for many educators, students, and families, grades evoke complex feelings: pride, frustration, confusion, or even anxiety. In this landscape, where the meaning of grades can sometimes feel elusive or arbitrary, Dave Nagel and Bruce Potter provide an essential guide to understanding how grades, when used thoughtfully and intentionally, can become powerful tools for learning.

At their best, grades are more than symbols on a report card—they are a form of communication. A well-constructed grade should not merely categorize performance but illuminate understanding and provide a path forward (e.g., where am I going in my learning, how am I progressing in my learning, and where do I need to go next to close the gap). Dave and Bruce remind us that grades can be a bridge between where learners are now and where they are headed. This perspective, rooted in research and shaped by years of classroom experience, challenges us to think differently about grading. Instead of treating grades as the end point of learning, they invite us to view them as one of many sources of feedback that guide students toward growth: learning with fluidity, not finality.

This book is a timely and much-needed contribution to the ongoing conversation about evaluation in education. What is most impressive about this book is that Dave and Bruce do not shy away from the complexities of grading, nor do they offer quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, they equip us with practical tools and nuanced perspectives, grounded in both evidence and empathy, to navigate the challenges of grading in ways that move student learning forward.

One of the book's most powerful arguments is its assertion that grading should serve learning rather than overshadow it. Too often, grades are wielded as tools of compliance, used to rank or punish rather than to support. The authors challenge us to reframe grading as a process that fosters growth and self-reflection. They show how clear, consistent, and fair grading practices can enhance students' understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, empowering them to take an active role in their own learning journey.

The authors also emphasize the relational aspect of grading. Effective grading is not an isolated act; it is part of a larger ecosystem of feedback, communication, and trust. By aligning grading practices with learning intentions and success criteria and creating opportunities for dialogue about what grades mean, we can build stronger partnerships with our students and their families. These partnerships, in turn, deepen everyone's investment in the learning process.

What sets this work apart is its commitment to bridging theory and practice. The authors delve into a wide array of research on grading and feedback, distilling complex findings into clear and actionable insights. This synthesis is no small feat. While the academic literature on grading is vast, much of it remains inaccessible to those working on the front lines of education. Instead, we are left in the middle of grading policy battles where teaching and learning are collateral damage. By translating this body of research into practical strategies, Dave and Bruce ensure that we can not only understand the principles of effective grading but also apply them in our classrooms.

As you turn these pages, you will find a wealth of strategies for implementing grading practices that are transparent, equitable, and purposeful. You will encounter stories from classrooms where grading has been transformed from a source of frustration into a catalyst for growth. You will be guided through practical steps for aligning grading policies with the principles of effective feedback, ensuring that your practices support—not hinder—learning.

But this book does more than provide guidance; it inspires reflection. It challenges educators to examine their own assumptions about grading and to ask critical questions: What do my grades communicate? Do they reflect what students have truly learned? How can I ensure that my grading practices promote equity and opportunity? These questions are not always easy to answer, but they are essential for fostering a culture of learning that values progress over performance.

What makes this work so compelling is the authors' unwavering belief in the potential of all learners and the potential for grades to be an essential part of the learning process. This belief is woven through every chapter, infusing their recommendations with a sense of purpose and possibility. They remind us that grading, when done well, is not just about assigning a number or a letter. It is about helping students see their own growth and inspiring them to reach their next level of understanding.

The authors of this book are more than educators; they are advocates for a better, more equitable system of evaluation. They advocate for schools and classrooms where a 42 percent tells the learner where they are going, how they are progressing, and what they need to do to close the gap. Their insights, drawn from research and practice, are a gift to anyone seeking to make grading a meaningful and constructive part of education. Whether you are an experienced teacher looking to refine your practices, a school leader seeking to implement systemwide change, or a new educator grappling with the complexities of evaluation, this book offers both guidance and hope.

As you embark on this journey, know that you are not alone. The questions and challenges you face are shared by educators around the world. But with the tools and perspectives offered here, you will be equipped to turn grading into a force for good—a process that supports learning, inspires growth, and communicates possibility.

Grading, done right, can be transformative. Again, learning with fluidity, not finality. This book shows us how.

—John Almarode, Associate Professor of Education,
James Madison University

Acknowledgments

From Dave:

Getting to a successful place in your career never happens without support, a little bit of luck, as well as others who have supported and shaped you. I am extremely grateful for being able to earn a master's degree from Butler University's Experiential Program for Preparing School Principals (EPPSP Group 17), where I learned from Dr. Steve Heck what it really means to be a true leader. I would like to thank Jeff Hubble, my first principal when I became a building administrator. Jeff taught me the value of teamwork and making sure that if you would not expose your own children to an environment, then you should not allow someone else there without trying to make it better. I would like to thank Dr. B. R. Jones, superintendent of Jones County schools in Mississippi. He has been a dear friend and colleague of mine for over a decade, and he is my *Ambassador of Quan!* Next, I would like to thank Bruce—without you with me on this journey, my vision for this book would have never come to fruition. Thanks, as well, to Jessica Allan, our editor, and Mia Rodriguez for all your support. And finally, my dad, Ken Nagel, who alone taught me that you cannot live if you are *Standing OUTSIDE the fire!*

From Bruce:

You don't get anywhere in your life traveling alone. Over a 30-year career working in multiple schools serving in multiple roles, you are bound to experience success and failure. I've had many wonderful people positively influence my growth and development. I'd like to give a special acknowledgement to three influential colleagues: Christine Burke, Dan Kalbliesh, and Cathy O'Brien, as well as three influential mentors: Wayne Bertrand, Lee Bordick, and Mike Ford. The six of you have been by my side; keeping me humble during the success, and picking me up during the challenges—sincerely, thank you!

Publisher's Acknowledgments

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Alisa Barrett
Director of Instruction
Greenfield Exempted Village Schools
Greenfield, Ohio

Mike Ford
Educational Consultant
New York State Council of School Superintendents
Albany, NY

B. R. Jones
Superintendent of Education and Former international Visible Learning Consultant
Jones County School District
Ellisville, Mississippi

Dan Kalbfliesh
Superintendent of Schools
Green Island UFSD
New York, NY

O'Shean Moran
Principal
Billings Public Schools
Billings, MT

Ken O'Connor
Consultant and Author
AFS Inc
Toronto, Ontario

Jenny Starr
Science Teacher, Middle School
Green Island UFSD
Green Island, NY

Krista Thomsen
Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
Lancaster School District
Lancaster, CA

About the Authors

Dave Nagel has been a professional developer and educational consultant both nationally and internationally since 2003 and has done so as his primary job in education since 2008. Prior to that, he was a middle and high school science teacher and administrator in a large district in Indianapolis. As a school leader at Ben Davis High School (enrollment 3,000 students), Dave was instrumental in developing a focused plan for differentiated goals for students based on specific proficiency measures that supported the school in improving its graduation rate 14 percent in just over four years.

Dave's primary areas of expertise are in the areas of effective teacher and leader collaboration, assessment and feedback, and, specifically, effective grading actions both at the school and classroom level. He has been working specifically with Professor John Hattie's Visible Learning research since 2011, which is a driving force for all of his work with teachers, coaches, and administrators. He has authored five books previous to this one, including four within the *PLC+* series of publications (Corwin). He has also published multiple times in various publications such as *Principal Leadership* and *Educational Leadership* and has also presented at various national conferences.

Dave has a strong moral aspect, strives to be very relatable and practical when working with people, and has a savvy sense of humor that supports him in his life and work. Dave stays very busy with his beautiful and supportive wife, Kristen, and three boys (ages 20, 15, and 13). He acknowledges every day that the Lord guides his actions and is the driving force in his life. Dave is an independent consultant for Corwin and is the owner of NZJ Learning LLC (named after his three boys) and the founder of the Center for Collaborative Expertise.

Bruce Potter is a school administrator with over thirty years of experience. Bruce began his career as a classroom teacher and has held leadership roles at the building level as a principal and at the district level as a superintendent for eleven years. In 2013, he secured special legislation that was signed into law by the governor of New York to open a public school for at-risk and special education students who were identified by their home districts as future high school dropouts. Over a six-year period, they achieved a graduation rate of 80 percent. In his current role, he is leading his district's certification as a Visible Learning school through the implementation of effective PLCs. Over the course of his career, he has shared his district's successes at several national conferences. Bruce is an independent consultant for Corwin and is cofounder of the Center for Collaborative Expertise.

Part I

Setting the Stage for Grading to Develop Great Learners

CHAPTER 1

Changing the Narrative of Grading From Finality to Fluidity

"The measure of intelligence is the ability to change"

—Albert Einstein

Consider the following scenarios where a student comes home from school and engages with their parents over dinner talking about what happened in school that day.

SCENARIO 1	SCENARIO 2
The classroom buzzed as students packed up at the end of the day. Mrs. Smith scanned the room for lingering questions, noting both excitement and anxiety about the upcoming math test. **Mrs. Smith:** Hey Sam, can I see you for a moment? **Sam** (hunched over notes): What's up, Mrs. Smith? **Mrs. Smith:** You seem stressed about tomorrow's test. Is that what's wrong?	In the days leading up to the unit test, Mrs. Smith stood at the front of the classroom with a detailed outline of the criteria students would be assessed on displayed prominently behind her. **Mrs. Smith:** Okay, class, today we're going to review exactly what you need to know for the upcoming exam. This test will gauge your understanding of key concepts from our unit, and I want to ensure that everyone knows what they need to do to prepare. Note the criteria from the unit displayed on the whiteboard:

(Continued)

(Continued)

SCENARIO 1	SCENARIO 2
Sam: I'm worried about my grade. I've studied, but I think I'll get a D **Mrs. Smith:** Only a D? You know I'm offering extra assignments to boost your grade if you struggle, right? Just put in some effort and get those completed and in by next Friday. **Sam:** Yeah, I know, but it's tough to focus on all that we have covered in this unit. **Mrs. Smith:** I want you to focus on studying the key concepts, but everything we have covered is important. How well you do matters a lot related to your grade, so all is fair game for the test. Do your best, and no matter what, keep track of those extra assignments, and you'll be alright. *Remember, every point counts so let's make a plan to get those assignments in on time!* **Sam** (nodded): I'll do my best, and either way I'll finish those extra tasks by the deadline for sure. **Mrs. Smith** (smiling sympathetically): I know you will, a good grade shows your effort. Just aim for that B. As they returned to the chaotic classroom, Sam felt the weight of his grades pressing down even more. His focus shifted from studying and preparing for the test to figuring out how and when he would complete the additional assignments.	• Define and be able to interpret essential terms such as photosynthesis and cellular respiration • Explain their processes and draw comparisons between them Expect multiple-choice questions on vocabulary, short answer questions focused on the functions of plant and animal cells. And some open-ended questions and prompts for you to articulate understanding of the stages of photosynthesis and cellular respiration in your own words. *(Mrs. Smith refers as well to her grading criteria for the assessment)* As you can see, your grade will reflect what you are able to demonstrate in your learning. Sam, a student who sometimes is a little lazy but tries hard to be prepared for tests and thrives in environments where expectations are made clear, says to himself, "Ok, I feel good about photosynthesis but not as much about cellular respiration. And I feel pretty good about being able to decipher what's being asked on multiple choice questions but less so when it comes to explaining my thinking in short responses." To provide a little more clarity, Mrs. Smith held up a sample question. **Mrs. Smith:** For instance, a short-answer question might ask you to describe the role of chlorophyll. It's crucial that you can explain how it functions in the process, rather than just listing what it is. You will also need to label the parts of a cell and provide brief descriptions of their functions. Sam felt a little bit better knowing that he would be expected to label the parts of the cell but less confident about being able to provide descriptions. **Mrs. Smith:** Remember learning is a journey, and Monday's test is a rest stop to see where we are. Yes, there will be a grade, but remember—that grade tells us where we need to go next. We will go back through the test afterward to see where we need to focus next during our science learning expedition.
Sam Goes Home Monday After the Test	**Sam Goes Home Monday After the Test**

SCENARIO 1	SCENARIO 2
Parent: Sam, how did you do on your test? **Sam:** Not very well, I think I got a D. **Parent:** Oh no, did you study? **Sam:** Yes, but not that hard because we are never sure what is going to be on the test. Mrs. Smith said if I do a few extra assignments I can get the points back and still get a B. **Parent:** Whew! Ok then, as long as you can still get a B! Just make sure you get those assignments done and turned in. Pass the peas, please!	**Parent:** Sam, how did you do on your test? **Sam:** Not as well as I would have liked, but I knew going in I was likely going to struggle on some of the criteria that was going to be on it. **Parent:** So, what's next? What feedback did you get? **Sam:** Mrs. Smith had us go through the questions first to see what we got right and whether we thought the question or concept was easy or if we got it right because we worked hard on that question or idea. Then for what we got wrong, we had to figure out if it was stuff we know but need to practice and get feedback from her, or if it is stuff we still need her to reteach. **Parent:** That's awesome. Of course, we want you to get good grades, but making sure you are learning what you need to and how you are making a plan for where you need to go next in that class is most important. Please pass the peas, kiddo!

Both scenarios are hypothetical but far from fictitious. Scenario 1 is unfortunately much more common and is the result of grades being viewed as *a symbol* to which meaning is attached and far too often not about learning and progress; rather, more of a prize to be attained than about what's next.

Scenario 2 is *not* Pollyanna. It is a glimpse into what we should espouse to create in every classroom where grades are used as a form of feedback to determine the next steps in learning. If we desire this to become the normal narrative related to grades with all stakeholders (students, parents, other educators, etc.), then we must commit to taking certain actions that lead to grades being viewed as an interval in the learning journey and not just the destination or prize at the end.

Aligning Grading With Learning

How would you describe learning in your school or classroom? What are the students doing? What is the teacher doing? Is it fluid and ongoing, or is it thought of as something that must stop at a specific point in time. like the end *of a lesson, week, unit, or semester?* Most, if not all, teachers talk about learning being a lifelong endeavor that never ends, never as an ultimate destination. Now, how would you describe grading in your school or classroom? Is there congruence between the two, or are they very dissimilar?

Grading actions are often the most misaligned strategies from research and evidence of any that take place in schools and are the most inconsistent of all practices from one classroom to another. We send so many mixed messages to our students on a regular basis by how we grade. Students are told to be curious, take risks, and have ownership of their learning, but then we implement a grading system that rewards and promotes a culture of completion compliance and, at times, punishes students when they do take risks and don't follow a predetermined path of learning. We teach them that they have to learn how to play a new grading game every year and sometimes from one hour to the next. This disrupts so many of the instructional, assessment, and affective actions of teachers who truly desire to have the greatest impact on the learning of their students.

This book *is* about improving grading approaches, actions, and practices while providing specific and concrete tools and strategies teachers and collaborative teams can adapt and use in their classrooms right away. It is also about empowering educators to maximize their impact by ensuring that grading serves as a constructive tool rather than a hindrance to student success.

This book is about how we *best impact the learning* of all students and develop them to be great learners in everything we do in our schools and classrooms. Unfortunately, grading actions far too often derail efforts to do so.

If we truly desire our students to view learning as an ongoing, never-ending journey, one that is fluid and moving versus one that is final, and to take more ownership, then certain mindsets and actions are called for:

1. Viewing grades as feedback
2. Ensuring clarity is the driver
3. Disrupting the culture of completion compliance
4. Having a formative mindset

Acknowledge That Grades Are a Form of Feedback

The two scenarios at the start of the chapter highlight contrasting views on grades. In the first, grades are seen as the result of actions that may not align with learning goals, resembling a game where students collect points for a reward. In the second, grades are viewed as feedback for learning, helping students bridge the gap between where they are and their goals. According to Winne and Butler (1994), feedback helps learners refine their knowledge and strategies. If teachers view grading actions with the same lens they do instructional feedback, we can shift students' focus from "What did I get?" to "Where do I go next?"

Clarity First and Above All Else

When students are asked, "How did you get that grade?" their common response is often, "I don't know!" They're not being dishonest; clarity is the missing link in grading. Future chapters emphasize the importance of clarity for both teachers and students, especially regarding expectations for learning, demonstration of that learning, and assessment methods. The grading aspect is frequently overlooked and is essential for changing the perception of grades as a final judgment on learning.

To facilitate this shift, teachers must clearly understand what they are teaching and ensure students grasp the intended learning outcomes. They need to be aware of potential learning progressions so students can see their path toward achieving goals. This knowledge empowers teachers to select effective assessment tools that accurately reflect student understanding and the rigor of tasks.

Additionally, collaboration in developing quality, rigorous tasks aligned with agreed-upon success criteria is crucial. Teachers must share the criteria for mastery and define what progress looks like at the start of learning cycles. This way, they can evaluate evidence of learning and make informed decisions about the next steps for their students.

Disrupting the Culture of Completion Compliance

One mindset we must dismantle in education through adult actions is the focus on simply completing tasks as students' primary goal. Consider this question: How often have you said, "I need my students to complete this task, assignment, homework, or lab," without explaining, or having thought through, *why?* Or, without communicating how that work aligns with specific learning goals or how it informs your instructional approach? How does it help students understand their next steps in learning?

We recognize that teachers face overwhelming demands and are often tasked with more than they can achieve in the time frames they are allotted. As a result, grading can become merely another item to check off, leading to a culture of *completion compliance.* Papers, tests, and essays are graded, entered in the gradebook, and returned to students, prompting the thought, "Whew, I'm finally caught up!" This reflects the historical habit of bribery as described by Jenkins (2021): If students submit their work, they receive credit.

Consequently, students then learn to view the completion and submission of assignments *as their ultimate goal.* They receive grades as a transaction: Timely work equals X amount of points or credit, while late submissions mean *X-minus.* This fosters a mindset of, "I'm done, what's my grade?" Parents reinforce this by telling their children to "make sure get your work done and handed in," totally emphasizing the completion over quality. This perspective halts the learning process, reducing education to a task that feels final once completed.

Having a Formative Mindset

Educators must recognize that a student's learning is ongoing and fluid, rather than a fixed endpoint. Educators with a *formative mindset* constantly recognize that all evidence they gather from their students, especially what they intentionally elicit, must primarily inform instructional actions aimed at helping students meet targeted objectives. This represents a significant shift from a more traditional view of ensuring that evidence in the form of scores is entered into a gradebook to track performance fairly. While grade recording isn't inherently bad, it should take a backseat to how teachers and students use that evidence to enhance learning. Many educators enter the field with an expert blind spot, assuming their own learning paths dictate how students should reach their goals. This perspective often prevents teachers from accurately diagnosing students' current learning stages and adjusting their instructional approaches accordingly (Nagel, 2015). When they embrace a mindset and always view evidence they gather formatively, to impact *their next instructional decision or approach,* they are much more keenly aware of how to best diagnose their students' next learning needs.

Effective Grading Is Not a Game or a Crap Shoot

Students learn to navigate the "game of school," structured by adult-established rules, which vary significantly between classrooms. Unfortunately, grades often reflect a student's ability to play this game rather than their actual learning (Scouller, 1998; Stanger-Hall, 2012; Towns & Robinson, 1993). There's no universal formula to enhance learning and achievement through grading; however, there are guiding principles.

Here in 2025, we have gained more evidence of effective practices that increase positive outcomes in education. We frequently reference Professor John Hattie's Visible Learning research, which highlights effective actions and approaches to consider and those to avoid. Grading practices are no exception and are often the most misaligned strategies from research and evidence of any that take place in schools and are the most inconsistent from one classroom to another.

Dr. Tom Guskey, a leading expert in grading research, and Susan Brookhart have synthesized over a century of grading research in their publication, *What We Know About Grading: What Works, What Doesn't, and What's Next* (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

Figure 1.1 is a snapshot of some research evidence that should impact our decision-making in schools and classrooms related to grading. We developed a question to consider before reading each statement or summary. Please read through them, and reflect on how each statement and the question posed currently does or could impact your or your schools' grading actions.

FIGURE 1.1: EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE GRADING RESEARCH AND CONSIDERATIONS

RESEARCH	CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE IN YOUR SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM
Do we prevent risk taking by grading early? High-achieving students on initial graded assignments appear somewhat sheltered from some of the negative impacts of grades, as they tend to maintain their interest in completing future assignments; presumably in anticipation of receiving additional good grades, but they may the lack the desire to take risks when success is not guaranteed (Butler, 1988).	• Keep students interested with challenging, meaningful tasks. • Encourage learning and experimentation to foster risk taking. • Use assessments and feedback to emphasize skill development and progress. • Design assignments that push creative and critical thinking. • Acknowledge high-quality work and effort, promoting persistence and resilience.
Do we confuse undesired behavior for a lack of achievement or aptitude? Students with disruptive behavior are 10 times more likely to have a gap between their achievement (grades) and their IQ (McCall et al., 1992; Guskey & Bailey, 2009).	• Separate behavior from grades to reflect true academic skills. • A gap between grades and IQ may signal unmet needs. • Offer clear feedback focused on academic improvement. • Address behavioral issues to minimize their impact on performance.
Do we enable behaviors and reward them in the form of academic grades? McMillan (2001) surveyed 1,483 classroom teachers in Grades 6-12. The researcher found effort and participation were the factors considered most often to determine a grade.	• Fairly assess these factors in grading. • Combine effort and participation with academic performance. • Clearly explain their impact on grades. • Use them to boost engagement, without compromising academic focus.
Do rigid mathematical formulas put students in a place to consider opting out of learning due to lack of potential reward? Oettinger (2002) and Grant and Green (2013) looked specifically for positive impacts of grades as incentives for students on the threshold between grade categories in a class. They hypothesized that, for example, a student on the borderline between a C and a D in a class would be more motivated to study for a final exam than a student solidly in the middle of the C range.	• Grades can motivate students near grade boundaries. • These students may be driven by the chance for a higher grade. • Use grade advancement as a motivation tool. • Assess if this strategy boosts outcomes without causing undue stress.
Are grades undesired carrots? Too often grades are the carrot intended to motivate students. We hear often that what used to motivate students doesn't anymore. Well, we believe it never really did, it was a game that fewer students in 2025 are interested in playing. In classrooms where grades are emphasized, students tend to attribute performance to ability rather than effort (Ames, 1992). Therefore, using grades as a carrot to promote effort may defeat the purpose (Guskey, 2019)!	• Grades may no longer effectively motivate students. • Emphasizing grades can shift focus to ability rather than effort. • Using grades just to motivate may undermine genuine effort.

Grades Are Not Evil and We Should Not Just Do Away With Them!—Our Goals for This Work

The challenges of grading have persisted for over a century (Starch & Elliott, 1912), with researchers offering ideas to address issues of validity and subjectivity but some saying it simply cannot be done. Some quip that transforming grading requires so many nuances, from policy development, to clear understanding by teachers, students, and parents, as well as to ensuring we have complete interrater reliability, and even then, there will still be challenges. However, teachers should not throw away their gradebooks, as some authors have suggested. We scoff at approaches like this as they would likely harm students and, in most districts, would be a termination offense.

Our goal in putting this work together is for educators, parents, and stakeholders to begin to view grades as part of students' learning journeys rather than as final judgments. This is not to create the notion of eliminating the importance of scores from tests and quizzes, which are vital in the classroom. While summative grades hold some value, they should constitute a small part of the overall assessment. Most feedback should emphasize enhancing learning and provide multiple opportunities for student success. Assessment plays a crucial role in final grades, but they shouldn't rely solely on traditional exams that reward correct answers. A grading structure that recognizes participation and effort is more effective in motivating students to improve (Swinton, 2010).

Instead, our goal in this work is to equip teachers with effective strategies for gathering evidence from students to make informed instructional decisions, fostering a supportive learning environment viewed through a lens of fluidity. We want professionals, students, and parents to see grades as fluid rather than final.

Imagine the norm being parents asking students not, "What grade did you get?" but rather, "What feedback did you receive, and what's your next step?" This would be a shift that encourages a mindset of ongoing learning where grades serve as road markers on a journey focused on progress and improvement. We desire to enable teachers to determine their impact through grading and feedback, moving away from traditional practices lacking research backing (Guskey, 2019).

Our aim is ultimately to create schools and classrooms where grades communicate goals and expectations and serve as milestones on a journey, not destinations—where learning is viewed with a sense of fluidity rather than one of finality.

REFLECT AND CONSIDER

Right now, how do you, your colleagues, your students, and other stakeholders view grades in your school . . . with more finality or more fluidity? ●

Throughout the text, we will focus intently on the importance of clarity as a driver of assessment, feedback, and grading actions in all schools and classrooms. Each chapter will have some specific objectives, but the following are overarching success criteria that readers should be able to accomplish throughout the text.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

As a reader, after reading the subsequent chapters, I will be able to

1. Recognize certain commonly held beliefs about grading actions that may inhibit both student achievement and student assessment capabilities
2. Recognize the paradox between research and evidence related to grading and feedback versus the day-to-day actions of classroom teachers
3. Understand the six traits of a visible learner who drives their own learning and how grading and feedback actions can promote these traits in students or undermine them
4. Understand the alignment between research and evidence to grading practices at the school and classroom level

(Continued)

(Continued)

5. Determine grading and feedback actions that are simply incongruent with Visible Learning and research and need to be abandoned
6. Determine specific grading and feedback actions that can replace those that are incongruent with research that are still easily adaptable and implementable into classroom practice
7. Recognize how to monitor the impact of grading and feedback actions on both student learning and achievement as well as desired behaviors ●

NOTES