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## Pros and cons of minimum grading: Is 'what's fair' the wrong question?

Some high schools have adopted a policy of giving students minimum grades to reduce failure rates and dropout rates.

While there are many variations on the minimum grading practice, typically it means teachers give grades no lower than a minimum threshold, often set at 50.

A major goal of minimum grades is to keep students motivated if they suffer an academic setback, according to a recent article in *The High School Journal*. Minimum grades were developed particularly for students who have a 1st-quarter grade that is so low it is difficult for the student to recover and to make effective use of the remaining school year.



"Just one or two catastrophically low grades could convince the student that no reasonable effort on her or his part can affect the desired outcome of passing the course," write the authors.

"This state and condition could be especially true if these failures happen early in the process—before the student can establish any sense of efficacy in the undertaking."

Critics of minimum grades make the following arguments against the policy:

- A minimum grade softens competency requirements and contributes to grade inflation
- It offers unfair and unearned assistance to low-performing students; makes it too easy for them.
- It gives students a falsely optimistic view of their abilities.

Pro arguments based on theories

Students who stand to benefit the most from minimum grading are those who perform erratically during the quarter or semester, the researchers write. Minimum grading may also be useful in “high-risk” courses and subject matters.

In this study, the researchers examine educational and psychological theories to explain how minimum grading can help buffer students from some of the detrimental effects of typical grading policies.

Many students engage in defensive and self-defeating behaviors under typical grading policies, the authors write. Students whose achievement motivation is to avoid failure rather than to seek out success look for any opportunity to relieve their anxieties about an uncertain outcome.

If they have a grade that is so hopelessly low there is little chance of passing, the outcome becomes virtually certain and they have an easy out: They can quickly relieve their performance anxiety simply by giving up.


Similarly, students who have an external “locus of control” orientation rather than an internal locus of control orientation are more likely to be stopped by a bad grade. A student with an internal locus of control believes that what happens in life is the results of one’s own actions and thus controllable; those with an external locus of control see events as the results of random external factors.

“Externals” often exhibit classic self-destructive behaviors and quit more easily and quickly than “internals.”

## Minimum grades on tests

“The sudden impact that failing grades can have on a student’s psyche suggests that using minimum grading on individual tests and assignments within marking periods may be more effective in countering these cues than adjusting term grades after the fact,” the researchers write.

Schools understand the importance of providing students a stable environment, but few provide predictable, consistent grading that is easily understood, the authors write.

According to attribution theory (how one attributes causes to events), grading practices need to be stable if they are to help students understand that future performance is  in their personal control. Wide variations in teacher grading practices may prevent students (and parents) from seeing a consistent and predictable pattern in grading performance.

When grading is on a typical 100-point scale, failing grades cover a disproportionate 3/5s of the scale while passing grades cover 2/5s. Other grades have an interval of 10 points or less while an “F” has an interval of 60 points or more. This means that low scores or grades can have a profound effect on a student’s overall grade when grades are averaged.

From the perspective of self-worth theory, minimum grades help deter students from another self-defeating behavior: Not working very hard in order to save face. In elementary school, the authors write, students associate effort with better performance. But once they reach middle school, some students develop the belief that ability is a stable, inherent trait rather than an acquirable skill.

Rather than risk working hard and failing, students will often try to protect their self-image by adopting classic avoidance strategies. Strangely, students avoid the perception of low ability through deliberate failure.

At the core of any grading policy should be the goal of helping students gain a realistic perspective of the true relationship between effort, ability and achievement, the article says. Minimum grades may be one way to help students make this connection.

## Self-efficacy

And finally, according to self-efficacy theory, people generally tend to overestimate their true abilities so that they will be resilient in the face of failures, the authors write. Self-efficacy is a major predictor of how much effort an individual will expend toward attaining a goal and how long the effort will be sustained. Low grades work to undermine the tendency students have to slightly overestimate their abilities.

“The assigning of minimum grades is often criticized as rewarding students where no reward has been earned, as opposed to the unstated and typically unexamined view of over-punishing students—an outcome that they have equally ‘not earned,’” the authors write.

Schools that want to consider a minimum-grade policy need to examine their own grading philosophies. Also, they should take stock of whether teachers are already using minimum grade practices. The researchers conducted a survey of a large New England high school and found that 61% of teachers indicated they sometimes or often assigned failing students a minimum grade.

*“A Critical Examination of Current Minimum Grading Policy Recommendations,” by James Carifio and Theodore Carey, The High School Journal, November-December 2009, pp. 23-36.*

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