

Making the Grade

A Systems Approach to Strengthening the Connection Between Grades and Student Learning

JULY 2025

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to transition rapidly to a model of distance learning in spring 2020, it also highlighted many aspects of student learning environments that stand in the way of academic success. One of these was the criteria by which teachers assign grades to assess student performance in their classes. Without physical access to teachers, peers, and instructional resources, new barriers to student learning emerged almost overnight. At the same time, without in-person student interactions that inform perceptions of student participation, and with typical approaches to completing homework and tests severely disrupted, teachers and students alike recognized a misalignment between student learning and the marks that might appear on student transcripts.¹ Although most school systems adopted short-term fixes to immediate challenges with respect to grading, underlying challenges that predated the pandemic remained.

A growing body of research and practical experience highlights key problems associated with traditional approaches to grading. The systems of point accumulation used in many classrooms have only loose connections to student learning. At the same time, inconsistencies in grading practices across and even within classrooms and schools raise questions about fairness. Meanwhile, outcome gaps among student groups reveal disparities in opportunities among students both inside and outside of school that have important consequences for their trajectories during and after high school.

Awareness of these problems is growing, and educators are increasingly seeking solutions that better align grading practices with goals for student learning.² A May 2024 meeting of the California Collaborative on District Reform explored some of these solutions by examining efforts underway in Sanger Unified School District (USD) and other districts around the state to fundamentally rethink the purposes and

practices of grading. Dialogue throughout the meeting emphasized that isolated pockets of progress are insufficient for addressing the underlying and widespread challenges that stand in the way of more meaningful approaches to grading. A systems approach—one in which school districts play an active role in providing guidance and support—is vital to promote consistent, appropriate, and sustainable grading practices. This brief identifies important areas for districts to address in their pursuit of conditions that honor student learning and open doors for all young people to achieve their full potential.

Understand the Problem

An effective approach to improving grading practices requires a shared understanding of the problem to be solved. Several aspects of traditional grading practice raise questions about whether all students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate their learning and whether their grades accurately reflect their academic progress.³

Challenge: Grades Reflect Student Circumstances More Than Student Learning

First, grades often reflect students' access to resources and the contexts in which they live that are loosely related to learning. Students with stable home environments and limited responsibilities outside of school may find it easier to earn the points awarded for homework completion or to pursue opportunities for extra credit. In contrast, students with jobs or childcare responsibilities or who lack dedicated space at home to complete schoolwork may struggle to do the same, regardless of the degree to which they have mastered the subject matter.

Challenge: Subjectivity and Variation Threaten Fairness

Second, variation and subjectivity in teachers' grading approaches can unfairly disadvantage both individual students and entire student groups. Two students may exhibit the exact same understanding of their course material, but they could have different teachers who employ different policies of point accumulation. For example, if one teacher allows students to retake tests to improve their grades and

The insights in this brief come from a May 2024 convening of the California Collaborative on District Reform, [Grading for Equity: Shifting Policies, Practices, and Mindsets in Sanger](https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting53), which brought together district leaders, policymakers, researchers, advocates, and support providers to explore the grading practices through which teachers document student progress and the implications for student engagement, content mastery, and academic progress. The meeting featured many practices and lessons learned from a multiyear effort to revisit grading practices in Sanger USD, which hosted California Collaborative members for the two-day discussion. Meeting dialogue also drew heavily on examples from other districts around the state and perspectives from education leaders in a variety of roles in California's K-12 education community. For additional resources from the meeting, including a set of briefing materials and a written summary of the group's dialogue, please visit <https://cacollaborative.org/meetings/meeting53>.

This is one of a pair of California Collaborative briefs focused on grading practices. For an examination of the role student voice can play in promoting positive change, please see *Making the Grade: Elevating Student Perspectives to Improve Grading Practices*.



the other does not, their transcripts might tell a very different story about their accomplishments. In addition, few district approaches to grading monitor or account for ways in which implicit bias can shape opportunities within classes.⁴ For example, a teacher who employs subjective judgments of course participation might overlook the learning of a student who knows the course content and actively engages in class but is still building confidence with the English language and therefore speaks infrequently in full-group settings.

Challenge: Grades Have a Loose Association With Content Mastery

Third, many approaches to grading lead to a problematic association between students' learning and the numerical scores awarded for their performance. For example, assigning a score of zero for missing or unfinished work can disproportionately punish a student when it comes to calculating a final course grade.⁵ Students also learn at different paces. A student who struggles with content early in a school term but masters it by the end might receive a low grade simply because they had not yet reached their learning potential at the time they were first assessed.

Challenge: Flawed Practices Lead to Disparities in Opportunity

All of these factors can result in students failing classes in which they could otherwise be successful or in teachers assigning higher or lower grades than their students' level of learning merits. The result is that postsecondary options disappear for too many students, especially those who have historically been underrepresented in higher education and parts of the workforce with high growth potential.

Opportunities to Foster Shared Understanding

Too often, calls for teachers to modify their practice come in the form of mandates from a principal or the central office. When teachers embrace change that is well designed and supported, it can lead to powerful improvements in teaching and learning. However, when schools and districts have not provided the opportunity for teachers to develop a deep understanding of what the change entails and the rationale behind it, implementation can become a mere exercise in compliance. Educators check boxes to ensure that they avoid scrutiny or criticism, but actual change in the learning environment is superficial at best and rarely outlasts the next directive for change. A frequent contributing factor to this pattern is that teachers do not see the need for change in the first place.

District leaders seeking to bring site-based educators together in a shared commitment to improving grading practices can position their school systems for success by cultivating a shared understanding of the problem to be solved. Multiple sources of evidence can help foster this kind of understanding. For example, book studies can help frame a discussion about grading by articulating the challenge and giving members of a district community common language to talk about it; this was a deliberate first step in the journey toward more productive grading practices in Sanger. Quantitative evidence about grades in the district can serve as a strong conversation starter, especially when it illuminates inconsistencies and disparities in the system. Transcript analyses can explore the grading criteria currently used in the district and highlight the most common sources of variation across classrooms and schools. Empathy interviews can create space for educators to ask students

about their experiences with grades and their connection to learning in the classroom. These data sources and others can help members of the district community understand the root causes of problematic outcomes.

Articulate a Shared Vision

Any effort to shift grading practices is more likely to take hold if members of the community have a shared vision of what the district is trying to accomplish. Having established a common understanding of the problem to be solved, a logical next step is to cultivate a common goal for the path forward.

“I need a clear message and directive for why we are doing this work.”

Educators in a district that has cultivated a vision for its grading practices should be able to articulate why the district is moving in a new direction—that is, the connection between the problem with current practice and another way of doing things that will address that problem. Grading practices can be personal and deeply embedded in an educator’s approach to teaching. If adults are to commit to changing their practice, they need to have a clear understanding of why they are doing so. According to a Sanger principal, “I find that I have to be able to communicate the ‘why’ very clearly.” A district teacher voiced a similar perspective by saying, “I need a clear message and directive for why we are doing this work.”

The desire to address glaring disparities in opportunities and outcomes might prompt district leaders to move quickly and set a direction from the central office. To be sure, a small group of people can *articulate* a vision. However, building *commitment* to that vision will require dialogue, not edicts. According to one participant at the May 2024 Collaborative meeting, “We can

overcomplicate with policy and fail to lead with values. We have to allow space for questioning.” The level of dialogue needed may focus primarily on specific efforts to change grading practices. But such discussions can also unpack more fundamental opinions about the purposes of grading in K–12 education in the first place. Because these conversations sometimes dive deeply into unconscious and potentially contradictory beliefs about key aspects of the education experience, they can be time consuming and often require a skilled facilitator. Nevertheless, taking the time early in the process to honor the beliefs, questions, and areas of confusion that emerge among teachers and leaders enables the kind of commitment needed to gain traction with new approaches.

Engage Members of the District Community

Engaging a wide range of voices from the district community in the process of revisiting grading practices can help generate buy-in and maximize the effectiveness of new approaches. If change efforts challenge deeply held expectations and beliefs about what should happen in schools, they are likely to encounter resistance from individuals and groups who feel threatened or confused by those changes. Concerted efforts to build understanding at the outset can help to alleviate and navigate such challenges. Just as importantly, people in a variety of roles in the school system can bring unique insights to the table about opportunities for improvement and possible unintended consequences. When district leaders incorporate these perspectives into the planning and implementation process, they can improve the quality of the solutions implemented and accelerate improvement. Strategic outreach and partnership with teachers, administrators, students, and families can enable changes to grading practices to take hold and achieve their desired outcomes.



Teachers

Because it is teachers who assign grades, their understanding of and commitment to any approach that a district undertakes is vital to its success. Careful messaging is an important place to begin. Teachers who are involved in the district's process of developing a shared vision can help craft language around that vision and engage their colleagues in discussion about it.

Frame Challenges as a System Problem, Not a Teacher Problem

Regardless of the stage at which an individual teacher engages with the district's work, it is important to frame the conversation in terms of what the district is trying to accomplish. It is critical that efforts to rethink grading practices not be positioned as a *teacher* problem. The widespread shortcomings of traditional grading approaches reflect decades of practices that have been established and reinforced

Revisiting Grading in Sanger

Sanger USD is engaged in a multiyear journey to revisit its grading practices and bring them into closer alignment with the district's vision for teaching and learning. The district's analysis of student performance data highlighted an increasing number of *Ds* and *Fs* in student transcripts, as well as consistent obstacles in mathematics courses and with guiding English learners to A–G completion.⁶ District leaders supplemented their analysis of quantitative data with a series of empathy interviews with students that were designed to better understand their experiences in school. Collectively, these sources of evidence revealed the wide range of grading practices across the district as a key root cause of problematic student performance trends.

To address the problems associated with grading practices, then-superintendent Adela Jones launched a book study in 2021 to build broader awareness among district leaders. In 2022–23, the district began its work with teachers. Supported through a partnership with Doug Reeves, the district began by establishing a *tight* expectation for all middle and high school teachers, charging each of the professional learning communities (PLCs) with picking one grading practice to examine for shortcomings and piloting a new practice during the school year. The district also incorporated a *loose* aspect of this requirement by giving teachers agency to select the grading practice they wanted to implement in their classrooms. At the end of the year, the district hosted a grading exhibition in which teachers shared their solutions and the lessons learned from implementing them.

In 2023–24, the district continued its exploration in PLCs, a yearlong effort that culminated once again in a grading exhibition for all middle and high school teachers. During that school year, the district also adopted a set of “grading pillars,” principles that should characterize teachers' approaches to grading in all classrooms across the district:

- Continuously explore fair and accurate grading practices
- Ensure all grades reflect student mastery of grade-level standards
- Provide grade-level standards-based instruction, tasks, and assessments with appropriate scaffolding
- Align the grading system with defined success criteria
- Coordinate and implement intervention and enrichment to take place within the instructional day
- Provide multiple means for students to demonstrate mastery
- Communicate grades consistently in a timely manner and make them actionable to promote student growth
- Respond in a timely manner to student performance to make instructional decisions

The district's work has continued in 2024–25 with an expectation that teachers use the grading pillars when creating their course syllabi to ensure that grading approaches are consistent with districtwide expectations. District leaders continue to strive toward the appropriate balance between providing space for teachers to understand and explore new approaches and establishing and holding educators accountable for consistent expectations for quality.

through lived experience, training (or lack thereof), and systems that enable wide variation to occur. Attributing shortcomings of current practices to these systems and traditions can create space for people to come together to solve a shared problem. In contrast, when a district positions a systemic problem like this as being the result of misbehavior on the part of individual teachers, it places blame for the root causes of the problem on the wrong party. Such a stance is likely to prompt a defensive reaction from classroom educators that undermines rather than facilitates a shared commitment to improvement.

“Let them see, ‘Oh, this makes sense and is best for kids.’”

Strike a Balance Between Guidance and Autonomy

As districts chart a path forward, teachers may be most likely to embrace change when they have an opportunity to experiment with unfamiliar approaches and learn from the process. Specifically, it is important to strike a balance between guidance—the clear expectations for what should be true in all learning environments—and autonomy—the opportunity for teachers to apply their own professional judgment to address the needs of their classroom. By making their own decisions within appropriate parameters for quality, teachers can engage in the necessary process of meaning-making that enables them to understand and embrace stronger approaches to grading. One teacher described this as “flexibility and not being told you have to do something, but to let them see, ‘Oh, this makes sense and is best for kids.’”

Foster a Culture of Reflection and Improvement

An environment that fosters learning and improvement creates the conditions whereby

educators can feel comfortable breaking from longstanding practices. Opportunities to learn from peers and collaborate on solutions can be especially helpful. In Sanger, the PLC structure has provided a vehicle for teachers who already engage in discussions about teaching practices to codesign and try new practices and then reflect on their results. The kinds of risk-taking in which teachers break from established routines can thrive only when teachers know they have the freedom to fail. In other words, teachers need to know that they can try something new, make mistakes, and adapt their practice without school or district leaders castigating those shortcomings or seeing them as indications of inadequacy. As one Sanger principal argued, “Teachers can’t be afraid to make mistakes.” A central office leader added, “It’s been a real selling point that teachers don’t feel alone and that leaders are in it with them.” A culture in which educators at all levels of the district expect to try new things and engage in a process of reflection and improvement that elevates promising practices and learns from challenges can help teachers embrace the discomfort of the unfamiliar.

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Creating Multiple On-Ramps for Change

As districts map their timelines for designing and implementing new approaches to grading, leaders should also offer multiple on-ramps to embracing change. Some teachers and leaders will embrace new approaches immediately. Early opportunities to learn about change efforts might resonate strongly with their experiences, and they may be eager to explore solutions to challenges that they see clearly. In contrast, other educators will need to see their



peers experience success before they are willing to take the plunge and change their own practices. As a teacher leader from another district explained, “Once people see results, it’s easier to jump on. Most of the time when people see early adopters really succeeding, the people who are waiting are more likely to be on board.” This variation in uptake is natural, and district leaders should anticipate and plan for opportunities for educators to come onboard throughout the journey.

“We have to have a certain level of autonomy in order to move this work forward.”

Administrators

Site leaders play a vital role in messaging, responding to questions and concerns, and providing support for change efforts. When central office administrators articulate new plans or expectations, teachers often turn first to their principals and leadership teams for signals about the importance of an effort and guidance for what it entails. However, changes to grading practices may be just as unfamiliar and uncomfortable for administrators as they are for teachers. Principals may not have a clear understanding of why change is needed or what it should look like, and they may not have had an opportunity to experience different approaches to grading in their own classrooms. The efforts to build understanding about the problem and share a vision for success are therefore just as critical for site leaders as they are for teachers. The same balance of guidance and flexibility that can enable teacher buy-in and learning is also important for administrators. As one Sanger principal explained, “We have to have a certain level of autonomy in order to move this work forward.”

Students

As the ultimate intended beneficiaries of changes to grading practices, students are vital to the effectiveness of any improvement effort. First and foremost, students are a valuable source of evidence about the advantages and drawbacks of existing practices. Students can also help to develop and provide feedback about possible solutions. Finally, student perspectives are vital for monitoring the process of change. Please see the companion brief *Making the Grade: Elevating Student Perspectives to Improve Grading Practices* for a more thorough exploration of student voice in the process of navigating changes to grading practices.

Families

Families represent a fourth critical constituency in navigating changes in district grading practices. Families are accustomed to a certain approach to grading and are protective of their children. They can be champions for change when they understand and agree with what a district is trying to accomplish; the most engaged parents can be allies who bring their peers up to speed and on board. Just as often, families can also lead vocal constituencies that push educators and districts to return to traditional practices. Among the challenges that are likely to emerge, educators must be mindful of concerns that schools are experimenting with children or using them as guinea pigs. Messaging should emphasize that the district’s initial efforts are a starting point, and that all members of the district community will learn from the experience and get better at refining solutions. At the same time, district leaders should recognize that although a message of continuous improvement might faithfully represent their approach to innovation and problem-solving, families might perceive initial efforts as flawed experimentation that can do real damage to their

children's prospects for postsecondary success. For these reasons, communicating with families before changes emerge in classrooms is critical. Actively engaging families in the improvement process itself, where appropriate, might also be a strategically important step to both maximize the quality of any solutions employed and to pave the road for the political sustainability of district efforts.

The Importance of Trust

Across the range of constituents with a vested interest in grading practices, cultivating trust is essential. One participant from the May 2024 California Collaborative convening was blunt: "Trust is central to reconsidering how we grade." District communities that already feature high levels of trust are likely to move at a faster pace. In contexts where trust has not yet been established, conversations about grading are an opportunity to build cultures of transparency and respect.

"Trust is central to reconsidering how we grade."

Active listening can play an instrumental role in building trust. Members of the community will have strong opinions and insights about grading, and creating space to authentically hear and respond to these perspectives can help build relationships. For a topic like grading, where the problems might be clear, but solutions sometimes feel complicated or elusive, learning side-by-side can help to build trust. The mentality in these cases may be that we do not yet know the appropriate solution for the challenges we face, but we are going to figure them out together. Districts leaders do not need to have the answers as long as they create and commit to a process for finding them that holds high expectations for rigor while honoring the voices that are critical for success.

In Sanger, stable leadership and consistency over time have created the conditions in which teachers are often willing to embrace change. Teachers know that any new initiative will benefit from the commitment and ongoing support of the district without being replaced by a new, shiny idea a year later. Teachers also know that they have the freedom to learn and explore with their colleagues, provided that they have a process in place to reflect on their success and address the flaws they discover. Similarly, principals are willing to embrace change because they know that the central office trusts them. In that vein, one Sanger principal responded to a question about what principals need to be successful by saying, "Trusting us to do the work. Trusting us to do what is best for our site."

Strategically Approach Timing and Sequencing

Because many current grading reforms seek to upend firmly rooted practices and can touch nearly all members of a district community, districts should understand that a realistic implementation timeline involves a multiyear process.

Piloting can enable people to try things, provide feedback, and adapt strategies based on that feedback. In Sanger, teacher teams had the opportunity to spend a year focusing on a single aspect of grading practices. For example, some teams explored the details of discontinuing the practice of assigning a grade of zero for unfinished work, whereas others revisited policies around retaking exams. Doing so enabled them to take on a manageable level of responsibility, spend adequate time exploring the nuances of the approach and shifting practices based on what they were learning, and share their approaches and lessons learned with peers. By embracing change on a small scale, educators throughout a district can navigate the nuances of change, then



identify and address unintended consequences of their strategies. If districts choose to work with educators who are most excited about shifting approaches to grading, doing so can create the opportunity to improve those approaches before expanding their efforts to include educators who might be more skeptical. To the extent that the piloting process generates early wins and excitement among participants, that energy can also motivate others to embrace the changes.

“Ask the angriest teacher and they will be shocked that you reached out to them. That starts to build trust. I think when they see you in the weeds with them, you are able to develop stronger relationships.”

Even if districts begin new grading approaches on a small scale, they will at some point need to transition from exploratory efforts among a coalition of the willing to consistent expectations that apply across a district. To address legitimate concerns about changes to grading practices and navigate the process of change management, it is important to include the voices of skeptics in the learning and communication processes. Another district leader observed, “Ask the angriest teacher and they will be shocked that you reached out to them. That starts to build trust. I think when they see you in the weeds with them, you are able to develop stronger relationships.”

As they sequence design and implementation activities, system leaders should consider the trade-offs between changing behavior to drive shifts in mindset and changing mindsets to drive behavior. Building widespread understanding of problems and a commitment to solving them can foster investment in new approaches to grading that smooths the process of trying and learning.

However, the time required to do this with all teachers in a district can slow the pace of actual change and stall momentum when other priorities emerge. In contrast, establishing expectations for teachers to engage in certain practices can create opportunities to see the challenges associated with current practice and, more importantly, the advantages of new approaches. Educators often understand and embrace change when they see it work. However, introducing requirements without understanding at the outset can prompt more resistance to change. Striking the right balance will shape the pace at which districts can proceed.

Design Efforts to Ensure Coherence and System Change

Too often, improvement efforts in districts flounder because they get lost in the shuffle of competing priorities, mixed messages, and fragmented approaches. Literature on district and school reform emphasizes the importance of coherence in the quality and sustainability of change.⁷ Consistent with these messages, district leaders should ensure that they design their grading reform efforts in a way that fosters system coherence.

“This is not an initiative. This is a sustained effort.”

First, district leaders should prepare for a long-term commitment. Teachers in many contexts have become accustomed to wave after wave of reform, with each new idea prompting splashy announcements and new trainings before eventually giving way to the next new thing. One Sanger teacher emphasized the importance of staying the course by saying, “This is not an initiative. This is a sustained effort.” Districts

can—and should—acknowledge that they are learning from their efforts, and even design pilots as part of a learning process. However, they need to emphasize to all members of the community that their commitment to improving grading practices is not going away.

District and school leaders should also make deliberate and explicit connections to other strategies and initiatives. Grading reforms should not be a new idea that changes the district's course on teaching and learning, but one that amplifies and reinforces other strategies and supports for high-quality instruction. In Sanger, district leaders have leveraged the PLC structure—which already has a culture and set of practices that shape teachers' approaches to their craft—to introduce new ideas and foster peer-to-peer learning.⁸ Another Sanger teacher noted that as their team began exploring changes to their practices, “Being able to reference things that were already in existence was very helpful.”

District leaders must also attend to the mounting demands on educators' time, attention, and energy. Most improvement efforts ask teachers to do *more* than they are already doing—to try something new in the classroom, to incorporate new levels of interactions with families and students, to attend new trainings, and so on. Changes to longstanding practices with respect to grading introduce a new cognitive load for teachers, and the time required to plan, collaborate, and reflect often adds more time to their daily responsibilities. If districts are to ask more of teachers, what can they take off their plate to make those demands feasible? As one Sanger principal shared, “We had to ask the question, ‘What do we continue and what do we pull back on?’” Prioritizing grading may mean letting other things go that are not serving quality teaching and learning.

Track Evidence of Effectiveness

Any improvement effort will hopefully yield progress toward learning goals while also revealing challenges and unforeseen obstacles. This is especially true for grading reforms that employ new approaches to address longstanding flaws in the calculation and assignment of grades. From the outset of their grading efforts, district leaders should employ data collection and analysis steps to track evidence of effectiveness.

Collecting and analyzing data about change efforts is a vital aspect of continuous improvement. Gathering feedback along the way through both quantitative and qualitative methods provides an outlet for constituents to share their concerns and gives the school system an opportunity to address those concerns. These data are especially important when implementation strategies intentionally incorporate variation. When teachers have a choice in what they do, consistent sources of data about their approaches and the results they yield can help identify areas of promise worthy of further support, opportunities for adaptation to improve effectiveness, and practices that should be discontinued. As educators communicate with one another and with members of the broader district community, evidence of effectiveness can help justify approaches that are on track as well as share lessons learned and the subsequent adjustments when inevitable challenges arise.

Selecting measures that will provide meaningful evidence of progress requires thoughtful attention and even a splash of creativity. Some existing quantitative metrics—for example, the number of *Ds* and *Fs* assigned in a school or district—offer easily available information about whether grading changes are opening opportunities for those students whom the system has not served well in the past. When using these kinds of measures, educators should anticipate likely patterns and be prepared to



respond. For example, grading practices that deemphasize homework and eliminate extra credit might enable more students to pass their classes. However, they might also lower the number of As assigned to students who have not necessarily mastered course content but who have historically received high grades through hard work and point accumulation. Leaders should therefore also look beyond the easily quantifiable measures already available in schools to explore the degree to which student mastery is also increasing.

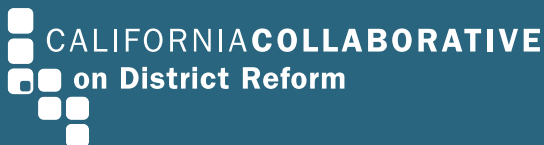
Other data sources can provide valuable evidence of changes in outcomes of interest. For example, common formative assessments, vendor assessments like iReady, and state assessments are valuable tools for capturing student mastery that might not be fully reflected in teacher-assigned grades. Other outcomes might also be important. For example, grading practices that reward learning over point accumulation, and therefore enable students to achieve success even if they stumble in the early stages of a grading period, might positively impact student engagement and motivation. If these are anticipated outcomes of a district's efforts, leaders should ensure that they have the tools to measure them. Metrics that align with different aspects of a district's graduate profile, or that track postsecondary matriculation, progression, and credential attainment might provide vital evidence of progress with grading reforms.

Conclusion

Grading practices in many districts and schools feature high levels of variation and loose connections to student learning that too often contribute to student disengagement and place obstacles in their path to postsecondary opportunities. Attention to these issues has grown in recent years, and although individual educators can make tremendous strides in improving their individual classroom practices, the fundamental issues of fairness that underly many problems with traditional grading practice can only be addressed by whole schools and school systems. Districts therefore play a vital role in creating conditions for reflection and change. By fostering a shared understanding of the problem, cultivating a shared vision for what grading should look like as part of an overall approach to teaching and learning, engaging constituents throughout the district community in crafting solutions, designing approaches to foster coherence, and collecting data to inform a process of continuous improvement, districts can help to promote the kinds of practices that open opportunity for all students. These changes can only take hold, however, in an environment in which individuals can comfortably take risks, learn from their successes and mistakes, and collectively commit to doing right on behalf of students.

ENDNOTES

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- 5 Although specific grading bands can vary by classroom and school, a 100-point scale often assigns an A for work that falls between 91 and 100 points, a B between 81 and 90 points, and so on. If a teacher awards 0 points for a missing assignment, the difference between that grade and a D (60 points) is 6 times greater than the difference between any other two letter grades. A student who receives a zero in this way, even if they receive 100 points in their next assignment, will still have a failing grade in their class because the average of those two scores (50 points) still falls below the threshold for a passing grade. See Reeves, D. B. (2004, December). The case against the zero. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(4), 324–325. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285846142_The_Case_against_the_Zero. Standards-based grading and the use of rubrics are among the approaches educators have employed to overcome these challenges.
- 6 The “A–G” course list establishes the minimum set of high school courses required for admission to the University of California and California State University systems. See <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/hsgtable.asp>.
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- 8 For additional details about the PLC structure in Sanger USD and the culture that supports it, see Talbert, J. E., & David, J. L. (2019). *Sanger Unified School District: Positive outliers case study*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Positive_Outliers_Qualitative_CS_Sanger_REPORT.pdf; and David, J. L., & Talbert, J. E. (2013). *Turning around a high-poverty district: Learning from Sanger*. S. H. Cowell Foundation. <https://shcowell.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Learning-From-Sanger.pdf>



The California Collaborative on District Reform, an initiative of the American Institutes for Research, was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

The development of this brief was supported through generous contributions from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation, the S. H. Cowell Foundation, the Silver Giving Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation. The views, findings, conclusions, and recommendations here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the viewpoint of these organizations.

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