

# Grading Students With Disabilities

Dennis D. Munk and William D. Bursuck

*Research tells us what kinds of grading adaptations can produce fair and meaningful grades for all students.*

Despite decades of research and advice, grading remains a controversial topic for educators. In a story entitled, “Should They Get an A for Effort?” (2003), the *Chicago Tribune* reported that after parents, teachers, and administrators in a nearby suburb labored for four years to come up with a new system for report card grades, the school board rejected their proposal. Critics described aspects of the proposed system as “befuddling,” or “wishy-washy.” The fact that such controversy could surround a grading system designed by a collaborative effort of parents and educators is testimony to the complexity of grading-related issues.

The literature confirms that grading students in general presents difficult issues for schools (Azwell & Schmar, 1995; Durm, 1993; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000). Teachers sometimes view the task of assigning grades as time-consuming and unrelated to actual teaching. Problems often arise when teachers apply inconsistent standards and use subjective judgments to arrive at grades. Students and parents usually know little about the grading system used at their school and may have no clear, shared understanding of the purpose of grades. In fact, grades hold different meanings for each of us.

Grading students with disabilities poses additional dilemmas. Grading systems used in general education classes are usually ill-equipped for individualization to meet the needs of a particular student, and research has documented that special education students in general education classes are at risk of receiving low or failing grades (Donohoe & Zigmond, 1990). General and special educators often fail to collaborate effectively to coordinate the general grading system with the accommodations and modifications required under a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Even when a classroom teacher wants to individualize a grading system for a student with a disability, the teacher often lacks knowledge of how to do it. Thus, many students with disabilities receive inaccurate and unfair grades that provide little meaningful information about their achievement.

For the past several years, we have conducted research on strategies for improving the accuracy, fairness, and meaningfulness of grading for students with disabilities—without adding excessive responsibilities for teachers. At present, we are conducting grant-funded research on personalized grading systems for students with disabilities within general education classes. This work has taught us several important lessons about grading issues and their solutions.

## Start With a Purpose in Mind

To establish a grading system that students, parents, and teachers find acceptable and helpful, school leaders must first realize that people have different ideas about the purposes of grades. Figure 1 shows the parent version of a survey that we developed to help schools assess the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers. The process of completing the survey and discussing similarities and differences in perceptions yields important information for developing grading policies, designing systems for entire schools, or making adaptations for individual students. Because no ideal purpose for grading exists, this process does not usually produce consensus, but it often does lead to an agreement to respect and consider one another’s views.

In one case from our research, a team consisting of a 6th grade student, his parents, a special educator, and a general educator completed the survey. The ensuing discussion revealed that the student’s mother thought that his grades should reflect how hard he tried, whereas his father thought that they should reflect only mastery of the curriculum. Both parents realized that they had never talked about the purpose of their son’s grades before, and each found it helpful to hear the other’s views. Together with the special and general educators, they identified grading adaptations that would acknowledge their son’s effort but maintain high expectations for his learning.

We surveyed parents of high-achieving, average-achieving, and low-achieving students without disabilities and parents of students with disabilities to find out whether these groups differed in their

## Grading Students With Disabilities *(continued)*

Figure 1

<b>Survey of Parents' Perceptions of Purposes for Grades</b> <b>Instructions:</b> Rank the 13 purposes in order of importance by writing a number 1–13 next to each purpose (1 = most important, 13 = least important). Use each number only once.	
1. Tell me whether my child has improved in his/her classes.	Rank _____
2. Tell me how to help my child plan for his/her future.	Rank _____
3. Tell me how hard my child is trying.	Rank _____
4. Help me plan for what my child will do after high school.	Rank _____
5. Tell me what my child needs to improve on to keep a good grade.	Rank _____
6. Tell me how well my child works with classmates.	Rank _____
7. Tell me what my child is good at and not so good at.	Rank _____
8. Tell colleges and employers what my child is good at.	Rank _____
9. Tell me how much my child can do on his/her own.	Rank _____
10. Tell me how my child's performance compares to other children's.	Rank _____
11. Tell me how to help my child improve.	Rank _____
12. Tell me what classes my child should take in high school.	Rank _____
13. Motivate my child to try harder.	Rank _____
<i>Source:</i> Adapted from Munk, D. D. (2003). <i>Solving the Grading Puzzle for Students With Disabilities</i> . Whitefish Bay, WI: Knowledge by Design. Used with permission.	Rank _____

## Grading Students With Disabilities (*continued*)

perceptions of the purposes for grades (Munk & Bursuck, 2001b). We also asked parents to indicate how effectively report cards met each purpose. Although results indicated few significant differences between the groups, a few predictable differences cropped up. Parents of students without disabilities assigned more importance to the purpose of conveying achievement to postsecondary schools or employers. Parents of students with disabilities were more likely to indicate that grades should communicate their children's strengths and needs and provide feedback on how to improve, and they desired grades that were sensitive to individual progress.

Parents expressed skepticism about how effectively grades currently met any of these purposes, with just two exceptions. Perhaps not surprisingly, parents of high-achieving students perceived grades to be effective at communicating students' abilities to postsecondary schools and employers. In addition, parents of both high- and low-achieving students perceived grades to be effective at communicating effort and work habits. We cannot explain this last finding. Perhaps parents of high- and low-achieving students are attuned to the grading systems for their children and therefore notice when a grade seems to reflect effort. Or perhaps parents of low-achieving students are more aware of the informal adaptations that teachers make for struggling students.

Clearly, schools need to build awareness of the multiple purposes for grades, particularly when developing and communicating a grading policy or when collaborating with parents to support a student with low or failing grades.

### Implement Grading Adaptations That Work

During our research on grading adaptations, we have received valuable feedback from students, parents, teachers, and administrators about the potential benefits and limitations of specific grading adaptations (Munk, 2003; Munk & Bursuck, 2001a). The professional literature and our own research have identified the following menu of effective grading adaptations from which teachers, working with parents and students, can choose.

- *Prioritize content and related assignments* (Drucker & Hansen, 1982; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Zobroski, 1981).

Example: If you believe that the three experiments in your science class will cover the most important content, then the student will spend more time and receive more support on these assignments, and these assignments will count more toward his or her grade.

- *Base part of grade on the processes that the student uses to complete work or the effort that the student puts forth* (Carpenter, 1985; Friedman & Truog, 1999; Frierson, 1975; Gersten, Vaughn, & Brengelman, 1996; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Hendrickson & Gable, 1997; Horowitz, 1982; Munk & Bursuck, 2001a).

Example 1: Base part of the grade for an essay on how well the student completed the planning organizer and edited the first draft.

Example 2: Base 15 of the 100 points for a research paper on how proficiently the student used the editing functions in the word processing program, such as the spelling and grammar checker, thesaurus, and tools for making tables or graphics.

Example 3: Assign 10 of the 100 points for a math word problem worksheet to the number of problems that the student attempted, with a criterion of 10 problems completed to earn 10 points.

- *Incorporate progress on IEP objectives into the student's grade* (Cohen, 1983; Frierson, 1975).

Example: If one of the student's IEP objectives is to use a specific strategy to solve word problems 85 percent of the time, assign an A for a worksheet if the student uses the strategy to complete 17 of 20 problems (85 percent).

- *Incorporate improvement measures into the student's grade* (Bradley & Calvin, 1998; Frierson, 1975; Munk & Bursuck, 2001a; Slavin, 1980).

Example 1: Base 20 percent of the student's grade in social studies on the following objective: "Tom will improve his reading comprehension by summarizing and retelling what he has read after each paragraph or section of his textbook." Each time the teachers have

## Grading Students With Disabilities (*continued*)

Tom summarize and retell, they assign a score of 1 to 3 based on his accuracy. Then these points are added up to compute 20 percent of his report card grade.

Example 2: Make an agreement that if Mary can raise her average quiz score from 60 percent to 75 percent, you will add 5 percent to allow her to earn a B.

Example 3: Give 5 bonus points for each correct paragraph that the student writes beyond the three paragraphs required as part of the modified assignment. For example, if the student earned 75 points on the assignment but wrote a fourth paragraph, add 5 points to raise the score to 80 points.

- *Change scales or weights* (Drucker & Hansen, 1982; Munk & Bursuck, 2001a).

Example 1: Change the grading scale so that a student must earn 90 out of 100 points to earn an A, rather than the 93 points indicated in the schoolwide grading policy.

Example 2: Change the weights assigned to tests and homework to reduce the penalty for a student who struggles with tests but performs well on homework. For example, reduce the weight of tests from 60 percent to 40 percent of the grade, and increase the weight of homework from 10 percent to 30 percent.

This menu reflects a growing interest in grading adaptations that promote access to and success with the general curriculum. The list does not include several strategies cited in some literature that our research has identified as having limitations—for example, those that involve changes or alternatives to letter and number grades, such as adding written comments or work products from a portfolio or using pass-fail grades or competency checklists. Supplementing letter or number grades with additional information may be helpful for students and parents, but doing so does not necessarily mean that a grading system has been individualized for a student. Regarding such alternatives as pass-fail grades or checklists, students, parents, and teachers have sent a clear message that they are wary of such systems because they do not provide information that would help the student gain access to postsecondary education or training (Chandler, 1983). As a result, we

caution school teams to consider the long-term impact of alternatives to letter or number grades.

## Streamline the Process for Individualizing Grading

Many teachers do not view grading as a useful or enjoyable aspect of teaching. Before we ask them to put in the extra effort needed to individualize a grading system, we need to convince them that the potential benefits of grades that stakeholders perceive as more accurate, fair, and meaningful warrant the time spent. In addition, we must give teachers an efficient process to develop individualization strategies.

Since 2000, we have conducted research on a model for developing Personalized Grading Plans (PGPs) for students with disabilities (Munk, 2003; Munk & Bursuck, 2001a).<sup>1</sup> The PGP model guides teams composed of a student, parents, special educator, and general educator through a series of exercises that lead to decisions about the types of grade adaptation to implement for that student. The team

- Pinpoints the specific expectations in reading, writing, math, and survival skills for the general education classrooms that pose the greatest challenges for the student;
- Clarifies what purpose grades serve for members of the team;
- Reviews the potential benefits of each type of grading adaptation and fits the adaptation to the student's needs;
- Develops a written plan that describes the grading adaptations to be implemented and roles for each team member; and
- Develops a procedure for monitoring the student's achievement with the grading plan.

Feedback from participating teachers has indicated a streamlined and efficient process that fits into the system for reviewing a student's Individualized Education Program.

## Grading Students With Disabilities *(continued)*

### The Future of Grading Adaptations

Grading is a complex, historically difficult issue because it intertwines with the larger questions of the purpose of education and the content that students should learn in school. Our research and that of others suggest that grading adaptations have a place in the supports for students with disabilities who attend general education classes.

Effective grading adaptations help schools implement those provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act that call for maximum access to the regular curriculum for students with disabilities. Adaptations that involve grading of prioritized content and assignments, processes used to complete work, and progress on IEP goals can help focus instruction and support on challenging aspects of the regular curriculum. We can expose students with disabilities to the rigors and challenges of the regular curriculum with the advantage of a grading system that will accurately reflect their individual progress.

The steps for implementing grading adaptations improve communication and trust among the student, parents, special educators, and classroom teachers who participate in developing student Personalized Grading Plans. Pursuing answers to grading-related issues in a systematic fashion allows team members to get past their emotional and philosophical responses to grading and begin to work together toward a more effective grading system.

The purpose of grading adaptations is not to make it easier for students to get higher grades, but to produce accurate, meaningful, and fair grades. To date, approximately 70 percent of the students in our research projects have received higher report card grades when their teachers implemented a Personalized Grading Plan. However, teachers and parents have indicated increased satisfaction with grades and the grading system even when a student's grades have stayed the same or fallen. Parents and teachers clearly view grading adaptations not as a gimmick for raising grades, but rather as an efficient practice that meets the needs of individual students. We hope that future research will continue to streamline the process for

making grading adaptations and will identify schoolwide grading policies that support all students.

### About the Author

*Dennis D. Munk (815-753-8443; dmunk@niu.edu) is an associate professor and William D. Bursuck is a professor in the Department of Teaching & Learning at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL 60115.*

### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> For details regarding the procedures and outcomes of research on the PGP model, see Munk (2003) and Munk & Bursuck (2001a).

### References

- Azwell, T., and Schmar, E. (1995). *Report Card on Report Cards: Alternatives to Consider*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bradley, D. F., and Calvin, M. P. (1998). Grading Modified Assignments: Equity or Compromise. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 21, 24–29.
- Carpenter, D. C. (1985). Grading Handicapped Pupils: Review and Position Statement. *Remedial and Special Education*, 6, 54–59.
- Chandler, H. N. (1983). Making the Grade. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 16, 241–242.
- Cohen, S. B. (1983). Assigning Report Card Grades to the Mainstreamed Child. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 15, 86–89.
- Donohoe, K., and Zigmond, N. (1990). Academic Grades of Ninth-Grade Urban Learning Disabled Students and Low-Achieving Peers. *Exceptionality*, 1, 17–27.
- Drucker, H., and Hansen, B. C. (1982). Grading the Mainstreamed Handicapped: Issues and Suggestions for the Regular Social Studies Classroom Teacher. *The Social Studies*, 73, 250–251.
- Durm, M. W. (1993). An A Is Not an A Is Not an A: A History of Grading. *The Educational Forum*, 57, 294–297.

## Grading Students With Disabilities *(continued)*

- Friedman, S. J., and Truog, A. L. (1999, Summer). Evaluation of High School Teachers' Written Grading Policies. *ERS Spectrum*, 17 (3), 34–42.
- Frierson, E. C. (1975). *Grading Without Judgment: A Classroom Guide to Grades and Individual Evaluation*. Nashville, TN: EDCOA Publications.
- Gersten, R., Vaughn, S., and Brengelman, S. V. (1996). Grading and Academic Feedback for Special Education Students With Learning Difficulties. In T. R. Guskey (Ed.), *Communicating Student Learning: 1996 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* (pp. 147–157). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Guskey, T. R., and Bailey, J. M. (2001). *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Hendrickson, J., and Gable, R. A. (1997). Collaborative Assessment of Students With Diverse Needs: Equitable, Accountable, and Effective Grading. *Preventing School Failure*, 41, 159–163.
- Horowitz, S. (1982). Developing a Junior High School or Middle School Resource Program. In J. H. Cohen (Ed.), *Handbook of Resource Room Teaching* (pp. 139–168). Rockville, MD: Aspen Systems.
- Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Transforming Classroom Grading*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Munk, D. D. (2003). *Solving the Grading Puzzle for Students with Disabilities*. Whitefish Bay, WI: Knowledge by Design.
- Munk, D. D., and Bursuck, W. D. (2001a). Preliminary Findings of Personalized Grading Plans for Middle School Students With Disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67, 211–234.
- Munk, D. D., and Bursuck, W. D. (2001b). What Report Card Grades Should and Do Communicate: Perceptions of Parents of Secondary Students With and Without Disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 22, 280–286.
- Should They Get an A for Effort? (2003, May 11). *Chicago Tribune*, p. 2.
- Slavin, R. E. (1980). Effects of Individual Learning Expectations on Student Achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72, 520–524.
- Zobroski, J. (1981). Planning for and Grading LD Students. *Academic Therapy*, 16(4), 463–473.