

PRAISE FOR GRADING FOR EQUITY

We don't usually think of grading when talking about equity, but in Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms, Joe Feldman helps us see why grading is an integral part of an equity agenda. He shows us how we can use grading to help students become the leaders of their own learning and lift the veil on how to succeed. He reminds us that authentic assessment and transparent grading are essential parts of a culturally responsive classroom. This must-have book will help teachers learn to implement improved, equity-focused grading for impact.

—**Zaretta Hammond**, Education Consultant
Author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain*

This book will stop educators who want to improve their practices with underserved students right in their tracks. Feldman offers an insightful invitation to teachers who dare change the ways in which we have been taught to grade students' products. He demonstrates how our grading practices are grossly understudied and too often unquestioned, and he challenges educators to build equitable assessment tools and mechanisms to support learning and development of all students. Grading for Equity penetrates macro-level grading policies to transform micro-level teaching practices that embrace the cultural and the contextual. A must read for justice-centered educators.

—**Rich Milner**, Co-author of *These Kids are Out of Control*
Past President of the American Educational Research Association
Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair and Professor of Education
Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Wow, wow, wow!!! This book hooked me as a not-to-be-missed read right from the Prologue. Joe Feldman makes a strong case for shared grading practices to overcome the inequity of traditional grading, with solid reasoning, well-chosen research evidence, and perhaps most significantly, the powerful and frequent use of teacher voice. The chapters' organizing structure encourages thoughtful and reflective reading and will be particularly beneficial for book study within PLCs. . . . The main message of the book for me is summed up in this quote: "We teachers cannot continue to sacrifice the integrity and reliability of our grades at the altar of professional autonomy."

—**Ken O'Connor**, Author and Consultant
How to Grade for Learning

There is growing awareness within the industry of education that traditional grading practices have become a barrier to meaningful student learning. One dilemma is that there is a lack of resources to support educators who want to adopt new grading practices that are both accurate and equitable. Joe Feldman addresses this need with his book, Grading for Equity. Joe skillfully makes a compelling argument for change and offers specific ways educators can make profound differences to their grading practices. Students become intrinsically motivated to learn when their grades accurately measure where they are in the learning process. Students who typically give up any hope of success can now approach learning with a positive growth mindset. Grading for Equity will provide clarity and tools for an individual instructor or as a book study for an entire organization.

—**Dr. Jeffrey Tooker**, Superintendent
Placer Union High School District

Joe Feldman peels back the curtain and shows the many flaws of our traditional grading system. His arguments are convincing, and the alternatives he proposes are both practical and powerful. Reading this book will make you rethink the way you assess students and will inspire you to enact a system that encourages revision and redemption instead of compliance and corruption.

—**Denise Pope**, Senior Lecturer
Stanford Graduate School of Education
and Co-founder, Challenge Success

Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms offers extensive research, practical examples, and a clear, compelling narrative about the flaws in traditional and ubiquitous grading practices and how educators, administrators, and policymakers can change them without compromising high standards, rigor, and academic integrity. Indeed, Feldman demonstrates how equitable grading practices raise standards for all students by mitigating biases, eliminating irrelevant “extra credit” points, and leveling the playing field such that what students actually know shines more brightly than metallic markers, expensive poster boards, and other trappings unavailable to all students. As a call to action for public and private schools alike, this book encourages a long-overdue conversation about the role of grading in shaping teaching and learning, student experiences and outcomes, and addressing systemic barriers to educational equity, some of which have existed for generations.

—**Caroline G. Blackwell**, Vice President,
Equity and Justice, National Association
of Independent Schools

The deep explanations of “why” in this book demonstrate how equitable grading practices can work in college and university classrooms. Grading for Equity is the seismic change we need in higher education to help us serve more students in a more meaningful way.

—**Evan Variano**, Professor and Former Dean of Students
College of Engineering, University of California, Berkeley

At the height of COVID-19, we leaned on Joe’s expertise and his book Grading for Equity. Now as we rebound from the pandemic, this second edition will equip postsecondary faculty with the theories and practices of equitable grading to prevent us from subjecting another generation of college students to the harms of traditional grading and transform both the faculty and student experience.

—**Fatima Alleyne**, Director of Community Engagement
and Inclusive Practices
College of Engineering, UC Berkeley

Feldman is the nation’s leading expert on equitable grading. It is an honor to feature him and his insights in ACUE certification courses. The proven approaches he recommends are as relevant to professors as they are to any educator committed to grading as a tool for deeper learning.

—**Jonathan Gyurko**, PhD, President and Co-founder
Association of College and University Educators (ACUE)

Grading for Equity

Second Edition

*This book is dedicated to Nikole, Olivia, and Ellis,
for their love, courage, and joy.*

Grading for Equity

What It Is, Why It Matters,
and How It Can Transform
Schools and Classrooms

Second Edition

Joe Feldman

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About the Author



Joe Feldman has worked in education at the local and national levels for over twenty years in both charter and district school contexts and as a teacher, principal, and district administrator. He began his career as a high school English and American history teacher in Atlanta Public Schools and was the founding principal of a charter high school in Washington, DC. He has been the director of charter schools for the New York City Department of Education; the director of K–12 instruction in Union City, California; and was a Fellow to the chief of staff for Richard Riley, U.S. secretary

of education. Joe is currently CEO of Crescendo Education Group (crescendoedgroup.org), a consulting organization that partners with schools and districts to help teachers use improved and more equitable grading and assessment practices. Joe graduated from Stanford University, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and NYU Law School. He is the author of several articles on grading, assessment, and equity, and *Teaching Without Bells: What We Can Learn from Powerful Practice in Small Schools* (Paradigm). He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and two children.

Preface to the Second Edition

When I submitted my final manuscript of *Grading for Equity* to my publisher in the summer of 2018, I felt like I was throwing a bottle with a message into the ocean and wasn't sure anyone would find it. I had spent the previous five years, after two decades of work in schools and districts, working with teachers in about two dozen schools and districts to improve their grading practices to be more accurate, bias-resistant, and intrinsically motivating. The book captured everything I had learned, all the critiques I could counter, all the research I could find to make the case for more equitable grading unassailable, and the need to act unavoidable. Although there had been several great books published on grading, and many excellent books available to support equity in schools, there hadn't yet been an integration of the two fields. I had no reason to believe that there was any real appetite for these ideas.

And then came the Spring of 2020. It would be impossible for me to attempt to capture all the trauma and pain over the next two-and-a-half years. We educators navigated, pivoted, and withstood the immense challenges in our schools, and I wanted to turn the spotlight on how we learned (or arguably, relearned) two very hard lessons: When something harms everyone, it acutely harms the most vulnerable; and when the most vulnerable are harmed by something, it's actually harming everyone. And nowhere were these lessons more pronounced than in our grading.

LESSON #1: WHEN SOMETHING HARMS EVERYONE, IT ACUTELY HARMS THE MOST VULNERABLE

The pandemic created an urgency for schools to make radical, rapid change to almost everything. Most significantly, schools shifted to remote instruction, with teachers using a spectrum of approaches: conducting traditional teacher-centered classes to the Zoom two-dimensional grid of silent faces; using app interfaces to generate student engagement; posting teacher-created videos that taught content with student-generated videos that demonstrated understanding; and shifting

entire pedagogies through “flipped classrooms” that blended asynchronous and synchronous learning.

Yet despite teachers’ creativity and miraculous perseverance, school-age children were profoundly affected by the pandemic in ways we are still discovering. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), more than a third (37 percent) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and nearly half (44 percent) reported they felt persistently sad or hopeless. Over half (55 percent) reported they experienced emotional abuse by an adult in the home. Suicide rates increased, particularly for adolescent girls, and nearly 20 percent of teens said they considered suicide. Many students did not consistently or meaningfully attend school during the pandemic; according to one analysis, an estimated 230,000 public school students across twenty-one states simply “disappeared” from school enrollments (Toness & Lurye, 2023). Unsurprisingly, students’ learning stalled—the percentage of students meeting standards in ELA and math declined, in some cases precipitously (see, e.g., Hough & Chavez, 2022). It was unsurprising, but still shocking, that results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022) showed that a majority of states saw scores decline for fourth- and eighth-graders in mathematics and reading between 2019 and 2022, and the national average score declines in mathematics for fourth- and eighth-graders were the largest ever recorded in that subject.

Even though schools were closed, as a result of the shift to online instruction and the ubiquitous use of computer cameras for virtual classes, we suddenly could witness, sometimes to our discomfort, our students’ and families’ lives in all their rawness and saw how students across all economic categories, neighborhoods, and backgrounds struggled. Students were without support or supervision when their parents’ occupations—across all educational levels and salaries—required them to be away from the house (health professionals to emergency responders and from single-income proprietors to public utilities employees). All students regardless of their home’s size or technology sophistication stretched their finite bandwidth.

Those students fortunate to have more resources—two-parent families, a larger house to allow more quiet learning spaces, caregivers with a higher education background and who had flexibility in their jobs to be available to support their students’ learning—were able to soften the constant blows of the pandemic. We saw that those students who had a weaker safety net—often students of color, with special needs, from families with lower income, or whose first language is not English—the impact of the pandemic was exponentially worse for their learning. Students who did not have sufficient access to technology because of a lack of computers or internet access were simply unable to attend classes. Many students struggled every day to simply find a space quiet and distraction-free (or embarrassment-free) to attend an online class. Students in families who experienced instability in their housing, food, or employment had greater concerns than signing onto a Zoom meeting and would simply disappear from a school’s enrollment. Those with special needs had no way to

access the critically important (and legally provisioned) supports to learn, and students with mental health needs were unable to access counseling. Rarely in the history of our country did a student's learning become so dependent on home resources—a situation that exposed glaring inequities in which those students who were more vulnerable before the pandemic suffered even more during it. And our traditional approaches to grading were only making things worse.

LESSON #2: WHEN THE MOST VULNERABLE ARE HARMED BY SOMETHING, IT'S ACTUALLY HARMING EVERYONE

The other enormous disruption during the spring of 2020 was the momentum and power of the Black Lives Movement. The recordings of killings of Black people ricocheted throughout social media platforms and showed incontrovertible evidence of the state-sanctioned violence Black people had experienced for generations, but which white people had refused to believe, or perhaps believed but ignored. An estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States, making it one of the largest movements in our country's history (Buchanan et al., 2020). The movement forced a deeply reflective and challenging moment for so many white people (including myself), who were challenged to identify how, in their daily lives, in their conversations, in their behaviors and policies, and in their ignorance, avoidance, and inaction, they have perpetuated harm toward Black people.

In schools and districts that were serving students of color, the impact of police violence may have been familiar, but schools and districts regardless of their student population had to recognize the imperative of the BLM movement. We educators were obligated to critically examine how our schools have been accessories, and perhaps active contributors, to the trauma of Black students and to reflect on our agency, endorsement, and complicity. We took a closer look at our disciplinary policies and sought to amplify and respond to the voices of Black students and their families to share their perspectives about how classrooms and school cultures exacted harm in ways subtle and overt. What we realized is that their experiences in schools—their disproportionate punishment by discipline policies, their higher failure rates, their alienation from the curriculum—wasn't something about them; it was a reaction to how we and the structures of our schools were harming them. We couldn't ignore that our common grading practices might be another example of structural inequities. Seeing how school structures and some educators' behavior patterns dehumanized and hurt Black students gave us insight into how those same structures were negatively affecting other historically marginalized groups—Latinx, Indigenous students, LGBTQI+, students with special needs, and students from lower-income families—and in fact might be systemically harming all students. Black students were just the most susceptible to that harm—the canaries in the coal mine.

GRADING DURING THE PANDEMIC

These two reciprocal ideas—that the harms to everyone disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, and the harms to the vulnerable reflect harms that are being done to everyone—were exemplified in the spotlight that the pandemic and the BLM shone on grading. It’s as if suddenly, finally, educators found an urgency and moral imperative to examine our common grading practices. My book acted as a resource and catalyst for policymakers, principals and superintendents, teachers, journalists, parent and caregiver associations, college faculty and administrators, and nonprofit advocacy organizations—anyone who had a stake in how our grading affects our students’ education, mental health, and life opportunities. And that’s everyone. Improving our grading to be more accurate, bias-resistant, and intrinsically motivating was not just necessary, but it was doable—a concrete and immediate way for individual teachers as well as entire districts to improve learning when so much seemed out of our control and overwhelming.

Beginning in the spring of 2020 and through the 2020–21 school year, education institutions, whether serving kindergarteners, middle and high school students, or undergraduates, changed how they graded—how they measured, described, and reported student achievement. Some changes were granular, such as not deducting points from a grade if students were unable to join the class virtually or if work was submitted late, and some were broader—prohibiting students from failing a class, and assigning an incomplete instead of a zero (0 percent) until the student could fulfill the requirements. Our traditional grading practices seemed inadequate, inappropriate, and plain foolish. It made no sense to award points to students for turning on their computer camera during math class when revealing their kitchen had nothing to do with the quadratic formula, and it seemed plainly unfair when some students had less bandwidth or their parent wasn’t around to help them because they were doing a second straight shift at the hospital. It seemed ridiculous during a global pandemic to subtract points for submitting an assignment a day late when they were responsible for taking care of ill relatives or supporting younger siblings with their Zoom classes, or when on the day it was due the student had to work to backfill the lost wages of a parent’s sudden unemployment. When every student faced emotional, economic, technological, and logistical challenges to some extent, it became self-evident that a student’s grade should not reflect circumstances over which they had no control. It became silly to believe that the threat of points or the threat to take them away would motivate students whose lives were in turmoil and were experiencing significant mental health issues. Traditional and common ways of grading—such as including a student’s nonacademic behaviors in the grade or using practices that make the grade reflective of a student’s background or environment—used in our schools for over a century were completely out of touch from modern reality. More importantly, grading in these ways demotivated so many students and warped the accuracy of so many of their grades. We realized that the ways in which these traditional grading practices were impacting all students were exactly the ways

that these practices had **always** been inapplicable, detached from reality, and harmful to the students who were historically underserved and most vulnerable.

Plus, we gained a stronger awareness of the ways in which our traditional grading specifically harmed and dehumanized Black students. We saw that when we use grading categories of “Participation” or “Effort,” we invite our implicit biases into our grading, awarding or subtracting points based on how well students can conform to a particular archetype of a student, an archetype that reflects our own ways of learning and being or that reflect the dominant/white culture’s. Using grading as a classroom management or assimilation strategy seemed at best inappropriate and at worst dehumanizing. Plus, because our grades traditionally combine academic performance with behavioral compliance, when Black students are judged with biased lenses, they would have less valid and lower grades. Additionally, because Black students have been denied access to educational opportunities over generations, when we average performance over time, particularly on the 0–100 scale, we make it disproportionately harder for them to succeed. This awareness helped us realize that our traditional grading practices, while exacting a particular harm on Black students, was inappropriate and harmful to all students to some extent. As a response, many educators decided to stop including behaviors in the grade and to use the 0–4 scale instead of the 0–100 scale. If these practices were wrong for Black students, why would we use them to grade *any* student?

These changes to grading caused reactions that varied from relief and appreciation to skepticism and resentment, but this is unsurprising. Grades are one of a teacher’s primary responsibilities, and they increase schools’ power and legitimacy. They are also the main criteria for so many major decisions that affect students’ lives—inside and outside school, and in the short and long term. Like I said a few paragraphs ago, everyone has a stake in the integrity of grading. Some criticized these shifts during the pandemic as a watering down of expectations, of sacrificing opportunities of the successful to accommodate the struggling, of conceding accommodations rather than letting students “tough it out.” Others praised the humanity of educators for considering the trauma and challenges of students and for addressing rather than perpetuating harms. Everyone, though, viewed the pivots as temporary—adjustments because of the current emergency conditions—and left open what changes to grading would endure postpandemic.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Now, as the memory of the pandemic begins to fade, we begin to build Mooallem’s (2023) “rickety bridges to some other, slightly more stable place”:

[S]ociety confronted a new source of suffering that seemed intolerable, and then, day by day, beat it back just enough to be tolerated. Over time, we simply stirred the virus in with all the other forms of disorder and

dysfunction we live with—problems that appear to be acceptable because they merely inconvenience some large portion of people, even as they devastate others. If this makes you uneasy, as an ending to our pandemic story, maybe it’s only because, with Covid, we are still able to see the indecency of that arrangement clearly. We haven’t yet made it invisible to ourselves. Right now, we’re still struggling to stretch some feeling of normalcy, like a heavy tarp, over the top. (para. 8)

Each of us, in ways personal and professional, in relationships with loved ones and with colleagues, are trying to find, or create, a “normalcy.” We are all processing the trauma and either seeking to preserve, or run away from, what we experienced and learned during the pandemic and in the stark visibility of anti-Blackness. We who work in educational systems are not only figuring out what the past five years has meant to us but also what we want to be different in our own lives and what, if anything, should be different for our students’ learning. This new edition of *Grading for Equity* is an attempt to provide one small support for this effort. It is a nudge toward remembering how the last five years taught us both about the fragility of students and ourselves, the resilience and creativity that we’re all capable of, and how grading is one of the most powerful elements of the educational system, with the power to devastate and injure, as well as the power to uplift and dignify. We became more acutely aware of how the traditional grading system isn’t just inapplicable, but that it harms so many students because it is biased, demotivating, and often inaccurate. Importantly, our inherited grading practices have always hurt our historically underserved students harshly; it was just that now more students (specifically white, from higher income families, or with stronger supports) were affected.

Two teachers—one who teaches high school and another at the college level—were quoted in a recent article about what they learned about grading from what happened during the pandemic:

In our district, we’ve all realized that there have been inequities, but they have never been clearer. . . . That’s kind of a struggle, because you don’t want to fail this student who you know is capable and would do the stuff if she didn’t have these other circumstances. (high school teacher)

I have been thinking a lot about what kind of grading system would be even remotely fair under these kinds of conditions or other conditions. . . . It’s making me think more deeply about what grades are for and why we assign them and why we have the system that we have in place for them.” (associate professor; Simonetti, 2020)

To adapt an idea from author Arundhati Roy (2020), the pandemic brought the engine of education to a “juddering halt . . . temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment, and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.” We can’t unsee what the pandemic showed

us about our common grading practices. We have the opportunity, license, and the ethical demand to resist reverting to prepandemic practices—to remember how traditional grading has harmed students for too long—and to build a better grading engine that is more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE SECOND EDITION

The second edition of *Grading for Equity* reflects new understandings—of our country, our schools, and our teachers. It also reflects my new understandings. Since I started working with teachers in 2014, I have tried to synthesize the academic research and teachers' experiences with more equitable grading practices, culminating in the 2018 publication. Five additional years of stress-testing equitable grading practices have allowed thousands more teachers to engage in this journey and translate these equitable grading practices into their classrooms, and these teachers have generously provided much feedback and insight. Their work, and the work of my colleagues at my fledgling organization, Crescendo Education Group, have opened my eyes to potential weaknesses in these practices and possible misinterpretations and incomplete applications of the ideas. **This edition reflects my new learning, with amendments and clarifications to more effectively communicate equitable grading practices and equip teachers to apply them successfully.** Among the updates, I have reframed how, beyond the technical solution of basing a grade on a student's "most recent performance," we should ensure that our grades reflect the most valid evidence of student understanding at the end of their learning (Chapter 8), and I have improved my explanation of proficiency scales to more effectively counteract institutional biases (Chapter 12).

Five years have also deepened the reservoir of positive evidence—both qualitative and quantitative—about the benefits of more equitable grading for students—particularly those historically underserved as well as those historically quite successful. When teachers access the content of this book, and get support to implement the practices, things shift.

After professional development with equitable grading:¹

- Teachers are **19 times LESS** likely to include in the grade tardiness, attendance, or adherence to class rules
- Teachers are **9 times LESS** likely to provide extra credit opportunities
- Teachers are **7 times LESS** likely to reduce points for work submitted late

¹Pre- and post-PD surveys administered to over 650 teachers across eleven schools or districts from 2014 to 2022, after participating in a series of workshops and coaching led by my organization, Crescendo Education Group. Data analyzed by Elite Research.

- Teachers are **5 times LESS** likely to include homework performance in the grade
- Teachers are **3 times LESS** likely to assign zeros for missing assignments
- Teachers are **3 times LESS** likely to include participation, effort, or growth in the grade
- Teachers are **1.5 times LESS** likely to average performance over time
- Teachers are **5 times MORE** likely to offer redos/retakes without penalty
- Teachers are **5 times MORE** likely to agree that group scores should never be included in the grades of individual students
- Teachers are **3 times MORE** likely to agree that “students understand how their grade is determined and therefore how specifically they can improve their grade”

Five years after the first edition have given time to deepen the evidence base and strengthen the effectiveness of equitable grading and the durability of the pillars of accuracy, bias-resistance, and intrinsic motivation as supports for the practices. Teachers at the elementary level have shown me how proficiency scales build student agency for the youngest learners, and community college and university faculty have shown me how more of this work applies to them and their students than I had ever imagined. Schools and districts who engage in this work empower their teachers by honoring their creativity and curiosity and by respecting and listening to their classroom data and experiences.

As equitable grading has gathered momentum across the K–16 landscape, I’ve also seen the skeptical and passionate pushback, even more so because the term “equity” has become so misunderstood and political. We need to improve grading specifically to address the generations of educational harm to Black students and students of color, as well as to students from lower-income families, whose first language is not English, and who have special needs. And at the same time, what I’ve found with groups who have not been as historically underserved in our schools is that our traditional grading practices hurt all students, including those who have succeeded or whose parents have succeeded. I understand how people who have been successful at a game don’t want the rules changed, but the “success” within traditional grading systems has often been at a cost: grades that are inaccurate and misleading, that reward or punish students based on criteria unrelated to course content, and that add stress and deprive students of building self-regulation. Traditional grading policies harm everyone, even those who succeed.

Perhaps most importantly, the past five years have shown even more clearly how traditional grading practices reduce the humanity in our classrooms—of both teachers and students—by incentivizing teaching and learning to be a transactional relationship bound within a capitalistic framework of points given and points taken away. No teacher went into teaching to control students through the manipulative power of grades. We entered teaching to prepare our students to be thoughtful, curious, caring, self-actualizing, skilled, knowledgeable, critical-thinking humans who can set goals, have the tools to reach them and find the resources to support them, and who can make the world better. Hopefully this new edition helps promote a conversation about how more equitable grading can move each of us and our students closer to that kind of teaching.

THE NEW CHAPTER: EQUITABLE GRADING SYSTEMWIDE

For those worried that “We can make grading more equitable in our own classroom/school/district/university, but what about everyone else?” the good news is that there has never been more movement across the K–16 system to improve grading, and the change is accelerating. Grading for so long has been a solitary task by each teacher, indifferent to, even avoiding, any cross-classroom coherence or consistency. As a result, systemwide grading policies usually have been vague, weak compromises, or if they are specific, more honored in their breach than in their observance. Over the last five years, my organization has partnered and supported dozens of schools and districts to move toward systemwide change. Based on our learnings, **this second edition includes a new chapter: how to effect equitable grading not only in individual classrooms but also throughout a system (Chapter 15)**. Whether you are looking to implement more equitable grading throughout a department, grade level, school, district, university, or state, there are unique challenges. We’ve identified common successful strategies, and pitfalls, for those leading systemwide change to ultimately develop more equitable grading policies and a coherent implementation of those policies.

I hope that this second edition refines and improves the conversation about this work. I wrote in the first edition that this book is a conversation between you and me about equitable grading. Perhaps this second edition is really a collaboration that includes you, me, the practices, and the system where you educate (or where your students learn). This book should be a guide for reflection and explanation of what equitable grading is, what it isn’t, and a tool to invite both those who are excited about improving grading and those who are skeptical, even hostile, to the idea. Making our grading practices more accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational is absolutely critical to improving our schools, for each and every student, particularly those we’ve often harmed over generations. And it can make our work as educators more fulfilling. At a moment when there is a real crisis in retaining

teachers, we've found that **teachers who learn to grade more equitably express a greater likelihood to stay in their current school or district.**² Equitable grading improves the school experience not just of students but also of their teachers.

This work has never been more important now that the pandemic is receding while harms to Black people and those historically underserved persist. I'll conclude this Preface with another insight by Arundhati Roy (2020):

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (p. 45)

Let us imagine that equitable grading is one tiny but significant part of this new world. And let's be ready to fight for it.

²Elite Research synthesis of pre- to post-PD data, 2014–2022.

A Note About Language and Terminology

Language constantly evolves to reflect and to influence how we engage with the world and the people in it. At times, changes to language can be controversial. I have chosen in this second edition to use the pronouns “they” and “their” and the racial categories of “Black,” “Latinx,” “Asian,” and “white.” When I quote authors or speakers, I leave their words exactly as they wrote or said them.

Prologue

Mallory's Dilemma

The data couldn't be possible. Actually, it *shouldn't* be possible.

Mallory had just completed her first year as principal of Centennial College Prep Middle School, a new public charter school in Huntington Park, California. As a young, white woman leading a school that served nearly all Latinx students, many living below the poverty line, Mallory had approached her job humbly, not immediately pushing initiatives and changing policies to align to her own personal vision (what she called the “new sheriff in town approach”). Instead, her priority was to first understand her school community: its context, history, strengths, and needs. She had watched, listened, and built relationships with her faculty, students, and families. She had visited classrooms, reviewed teachers' lesson plans, and studied the school's statistics: attendance percentages, disciplinary referrals, and test scores.

Whether the data she reviewed was “hard” data like test scores or “soft” data like her observations of teacher-student dynamics in classrooms, Mallory kept a sharp lookout for how the school could be made more equitable. Mallory's vision was that students should have equal opportunities for success regardless of their ethnicity, first language, gender, income, or special needs. She paid attention to patterns of unequal achievement or opportunity in her school. For example, were boys being referred more frequently to the office? Were poorer students showing a common weakness on a strand of skills on the writing assessment? Did students who received special education services have a higher rate of absenteeism?

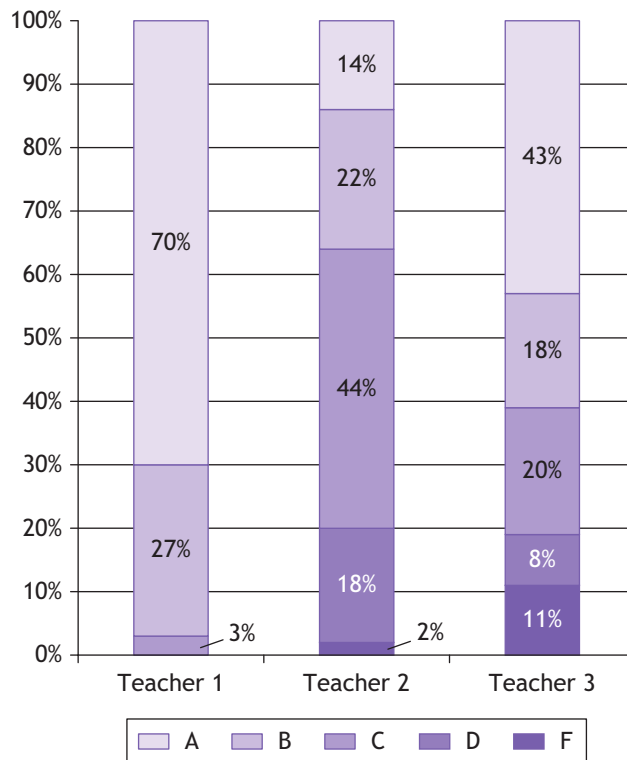
But that wasn't all. To Mallory, one of the most important indications of a high-quality, equitable school is that students are successful regardless of their teacher. One teacher's students shouldn't learn different material or be less prepared for the next grade than another teacher's students. Fortunately, based on her classroom visits

and other data, Mallory found that although teachers approached their work in ways that reflected their individual backgrounds and personalities, students' learning experiences were generally consistent across classrooms. Students in the same course taught by two different teachers—such as Ms. Thompson's and Ms. Richardson's sixth-grade English classes—were learning the same skills, reading the same books and essays, getting the same homework, receiving similar support, and taking the same tests. Mallory was confident that regardless of their sixth-grade teacher, students would be similarly prepared for seventh-grade English.

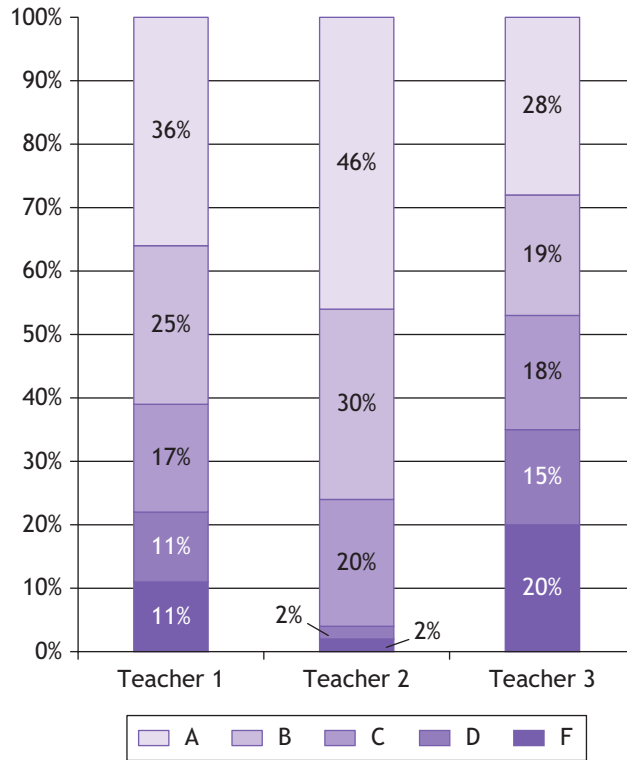
Since teachers were aligned with what and how they were teaching, and because the school didn't track students or create unbalanced classes where one sixth-grade English class would be stronger than the others, Mallory reasoned that by all accounts the performance of students should be comparable across teachers of the same course. In other words, the rate of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs in any course should be relatively similar for each teacher of that course. But that wasn't happening. Strange things were showing up in the data.

Take, for example, her school's sixth-grade math and English classes, each taught by three different teachers (Prologue Images 1 and 2):

PROLOGUE IMAGE 1 Math 6 Teachers' Grade Distribution



PROLOGUE IMAGE 2 English 6 Teachers' Grade Distribution



If you were a student in two of the three teachers' math classes, you had about a 20 percent chance of getting a D or F, but if you were in the third teacher's math class, you had 0 percent chance of getting a D or F. In the English classes, taught by three different teachers, including Ms. Richardson and Ms. Thompson, the range of D and F rates—4 percent, 22 percent, and 35 percent—was even more dramatic. Mallory double-checked the grade data, then double-checked that students in the classes weren't significantly different—in other words, one teacher's students as a group didn't have lower standardized test scores or higher rates of absences. No, the groups of students were similar; the only difference among the classes seemed to be the chances of receiving a particular grade.

Mallory put on her detective hat and considered, investigated, and then rejected several explanations: No substantive differences in instruction. Teachers were using the same curriculum with the same tests and even scored those tests as a team to ensure fairness and uniform evaluation. Mallory scoured students' previous test scores and grades, with no indication of drastically different profiles of the classes as a whole. No substantive difference in the classroom physically—it wasn't as if

one classroom had a broken thermostat or was closer to a noisy playground. What was even odder was that students with identical standardized test scores received different grades depending on their teacher. This data seemed unexplainable, impossible, and grossly inequitable.

On a lark, Mallory looked at the syllabus for each class—each teacher of a course had created their own personalized version—and it shocked her. Each teacher’s syllabus began with a similar introduction to the course content and description of important materials for the class, but then it was as if each teacher was in an entirely different school:

- One teacher accepted no homework after the attendance bell rang, some deducted points if homework was late (although the amount deducted ranged from a few points to two letter grades’ worth), and another accepted work beyond the due date up to the end of the quarter, with no penalty.
- One teacher gave each daily homework assignment a grade of 10 percent or 100 percent based on how much of the homework was completed and correct and allowed students who had received 10 percent up to one week to correct mistakes. Another gave full credit for an assignment if the student showed effort to complete it, regardless of whether answers were correct.
- One teacher reduced points on an assignment if the student didn’t completely and correctly write their first and last name, along with the title of the assignment. Another subtracted points if an assignment was submitted on notebook paper that had ripped holes or ripped edges.
- Most teachers organized their grade book by grouping types of assignments into categories (Homework, Classwork, Tests, etc.) and weighted each category to denote its importance (Homework = 30 percent of the grade; Tests = 70 percent). However, no teacher had the same weightings for any categories. For example, the weight of tests ranged from 40 percent to 70 percent of a student’s grade.
- Some teachers had only three categories of assignments (Tests, Classwork, and Homework), while others included categories that seemed more subjective, such as Citizenship, Participation, and Effort. There was no explanation in the syllabus of how these subjective categories were calculated or on what they were based.
- Other teachers didn’t use percentage weights at all, but assigned different point values to different assignments. For example, homework assignments might be 5 to 10 points each, with tests worth 100 points, resulting in upwards of 2,000 points possible in a semester.

Teachers' different grading policies made it possible for two students with the same academic performance to receive different grades. What particularly confused and concerned Mallory was that some teachers were grading students on criteria that seemed to have nothing to do with their academic achievement—such as whether their paper had intact holes or had the proper heading—and others were basing parts of students' grades entirely on subjective criteria, such as effort, that were susceptible to teachers' implicit biases. This grade data that couldn't be possible suddenly was.

A few days later, something happened that changed Mallory's confusion to concern. Maria, a shy but earnest eighth grader, came to her office nearly in tears. Last year as a seventh grader, she had received a B in math, her most challenging subject, but this year was barely passing with a D. What was really frustrating Maria was that even though she often handed in homework assignments late or incomplete—she had after-school responsibilities at home in addition to dance class three times a week—she consistently performed well on every exam. She obviously had learned the math and had shown it when it mattered most, and though last year this type of performance had earned her a B, her teacher this year gave zeros for late or incomplete homework, resulting in her D. Maria was feeling a crisis of confidence: Other students copied to get their homework in on time for the homework points, which Maria had resisted, but would she have no other choice? Had last year's teacher lied to her about her math skills? Was she not as good at math as she thought? Or was this year's teacher out to get her?

To Mallory, no longer were her teachers' inconsistent policies a theoretical dilemma. The school had spent months of planning and coordination to make sure teachers in the math department were using sequenced curriculum and that each teacher was preparing students to be ready for the next year—called *vertical alignment*. Yet teachers' different approaches to grading were undermining it all, sending confusing messages about learning and impacting students' grades and promotion rates, their beliefs about school, and even their self-image.

Mallory had to talk to her teachers about what was happening. The prior year, she had broached many conversations—some quite difficult and uncomfortable—with her teachers about curriculum, teaching strategies, job responsibilities, and even their own performance evaluation. Surely, she assumed, they would be as astonished as she was when they saw the data and they would reconsider how they graded.

But now came her second shock: When she began a discussion of grades with her teachers, it was like poking a hornet's nest. Nothing prepared her for the volatility of conversations about teachers' grading practices. Many of her teachers, previously open to exploring new ideas about nearly every aspect of their work, reacted with defensiveness and adamant justification. Teachers with higher failure rates argued proudly that their grading reflected higher standards, that they were the “real” teachers. A teacher with low failure rates explained that he was the only teacher who cared enough to give students retakes and second chances. One teacher

simply refused to discuss the topic, citing her state’s Education Code that protected teachers from administrators’ pressure to change or overwrite grades. One teacher began to cry, confessing that she had never received any training or support on how to grade and feared that she was grading students unfairly. Conversations about grading weren’t like conversations about classroom management or assessment design, which teachers approached with openness and in deference to research. Instead, teachers talked about grading in a language of morals about the “real world” and their beliefs about their students; grading seemed to tap directly into the deepest sense of who teachers were in their classroom.

When she talked about these grading problems with principals of other schools, Mallory was surprised and dismayed to learn that grading varied by teacher in *every* school. This phenomenon was widespread, even the norm. Teachers thoughtfully and intentionally were creating policies that they believed, in their most professional judgment, would promote learning. Yet they were doing so independently, often contradicting each other, yielding in each school a patchwork of well-intentioned but ultimately idiosyncratic approaches to evaluating and reporting student performance. Even when a department or a group of teachers made agreements—for example, to have homework count for no more than 40 percent of a grade—teachers’ other unique policies and practices, such as whether homework would be accepted after the due date, made their attempts at consistency seem half-hearted and ineffectual.

What’s more, even though every principal had the same problems and frustrations with inconsistent grading, no one had any success in addressing it. Other principals had tried to raise the topic of grading and had met the same kind of resistance Mallory had experienced, sometimes even with vitriol and formal allegations of attempted infringement on teachers’ academic freedom.

Mallory wondered: Was inconsistent grading an unavoidable part of schools, like the annoying bells between classes, the complaints about cafeteria food, the awkward physical education outfits, and weak turnout at Open House? Was it an inevitable side effect of teacher creativity, ownership, and initiative? Were teachers’ different ways of evaluating and reporting student performance a hallmark of teachers’ professionalism or an undermining of that professionalism? And did principals’ avoidance of addressing the variance and inconsistency of grading represent support of their teachers, a *détente* between teachers and administrators, or an unspoken compromise that ignored the damaging impact on students, particularly those who are most vulnerable?

MY OWN JOURNEY: FRUSTRATIONS AND HOPE

In over twenty years of working in schools as a teacher, principal, and district administrator, I’ve known lots of “Mallory”s. In fact, as a principal I was a “Mallory.” Grading among my teachers—my professional, awesome, hardworking, ethical, deeply committed, and emotionally invested teachers—was inconsistent. As a

professional learning community of educators, we tackled the challenging topics of relevant curriculum design, high-quality instructional practices, writing across the curriculum, our racial disparities in achievement and discipline, and occasionally, our obligation to stand against the historically and culturally hegemonic function of American schools, but we couldn't mention grading. Earlier in my career as a teacher, I spent an inordinate amount of time pursuing the perfect grade alchemy, constantly tweaking my grading calculations, adjusting my percentage weights, refining how many points to offer for each assignment and how to award points for the assignment, culminating in an end-of-semester gut check of whether I agreed with the software, followed by subsequent further adjustments. We only spoke about grading in vague language and with a tacit agreement not to get too specific for fear of irreconcilable conflict, as if grading were politics at a Thanksgiving dinner. Years later, as a district administrator responsible for supporting and coaching principals, I could never convince my principals, much less equip them, to find the language, strategies, or courage to address teachers' grading practices.

I could not agree more with Erickson (2010) who calls grading the "third rail" of schools. On one hand, like a subway train's third rail, grades provide power and legitimacy to teaching and learning. Grades are the main criteria in nearly every decision schools make about students. Here are some examples:

- Course assignment (eligibility for advanced, honors, or AP classes)
- Graduation (completion of course requirements)
- Academic awards (valedictorian, summa cum laude)
- Extracurricular activities (athletics, clubs)
- Promotion (able to progress to next grade level or sequenced course)
- Retention (repeating a course or grade level)
- Additional supports (mandatory tutoring or remediation)
- Additional opportunities (special field trips, internships)
- Post-secondary opportunities and access (scholarships, college admission)
- College admission

Grades inform decisions outside the educational world as well. Potential employers consider grades when hiring, and GPAs are often required for youth work permits and reductions in car insurance, which means students' grades can affect family income and expenses. And those are just the decisions made by institutions. Caregivers and families often provide rewards and privileges (including praise) or enforce punishments and restrictions (including shame) based on grades.

But like a train's third rail, grades are so powerful and important to classrooms and schools that no one dares touch them. As Mallory experienced, the questioning of grading practices by administrators, caregivers, students, and even teachers can

invoke anxiety, insecurity, pride, obstinacy, and conflict. And so most of us avoid the topic altogether.

To help my school principals, I started exploring: What was the research on grading? It wasn't until I read a few articles—including “The Case Against the Zero” by Reeves (2004), “The Case Against Percentage Grades” by Guskey (2013), and *A Repair Kit for Grading* by O'Connor (2010)—that I began to see that one reason why grading is so challenging is that, for starters, teachers use grading for many different, and contradictory, purposes:

1. To communicate the achievement status of students to parents or guardians and others
2. To provide information that students can use for self-evaluation
3. To select, identify, or group students for certain educational paths or programs
4. To provide incentives for students to learn
5. To inform instructional decisions
6. To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility

No wonder grading practices vary so widely. The teacher who grades to sort students into programs will use grading practices incompatible with the teacher who grades to incentivize students to learn.

And beyond the variation in grading among teachers, I found that many grading practices themselves had deep flaws. For example, I learned that the calculations we commonly use to derive grades—and that often are embedded in our grading software—are mathematically unsound.

Second, I learned that many of us evaluate students on criteria that are nonacademic and highly susceptible to bias. For example, a teacher who evaluates a student's effort as part of a grade likely applies a narrow definition of what “effort” looks like, informed by how they were as a student or their imagined archetype of a successful student—how that archetypical student learns, how they behave, how they engage in a classroom—and compares students to that archetype.

Third, teachers often use grades for behavior modification, offering the reward or punishment of points. Teachers may use (or threaten to use) the zero or F to motivate students even though the “motivational F” is largely a myth; research is clear that low grades, or the threat of low grades, do nothing for the student who has low confidence in their academic abilities or limited experience with academic success—the majority of students who receive Fs.

I also learned that our grading often creates collateral consequences that contradict our intentions. For example, we lament our students' rampant cheating and copying

of homework. Yet when we take a no-excuses approach to late work in the name of preparing students for real-world skills and subtract points or even refuse to accept the work, we incentivize students to complete work on time by hook or by crook and disincentivize real learning. Some common grading practices encourage the very behaviors we want to stop.

As I continued to research and learn more, I realized that the inaccuracy of grades seemed to be only a symptom of a deeper problem. Although I had previously attributed schools' achievement and opportunity gaps of race and income entirely to unaddressed needs in our instruction and curriculum, limited cultural understanding, or a weakness in resolve, I came to realize that our common grading practices make us active accomplices in perpetuating these gaps. The ways we grade disproportionately favor students with privilege and harm students with less privilege: students of color, from low-income families, who receive special education services, and English learners. For example, we teachers often assign students a zero in the grade book if homework isn't handed in by the deadline. However, we don't account for all the reasons a student wouldn't turn something in on time. One reason, of course, might be laziness or disinterest—certainly not legitimate reasons. Perhaps a student has after-school classes or sports, which could make it harder to turn in work on time, but arguably this is a self-inflicted wound. But what if a student's circumstances are beyond their control? What if there isn't a space at home that is quiet enough, or well-lit enough, or not distraction-free enough for a student to complete homework? What if a student's caregiver is away at a job (or second job, or third job) so that she isn't around to provide support? What if the parent or caregiver isn't formally educated enough or doesn't speak enough English to help the student complete the homework? What if the student has home responsibilities (caring for an older relative or younger siblings) or has their own job to contribute to the family income? What if the student who has few supports simply doesn't know the answers to the homework? What option is there but to submit the work incomplete or late? Clearly, we don't want to grade students based on their environment or situations beyond their control, but unfortunately, when we use grading practices such as penalizing students for late work, that is often what we do.

I realized that as a teacher I had used many grading practices that research clearly showed were ineffective at best and harmed my students at worst. It was a very depressing and discouraging awakening.

To my relief, I also learned that grading, if done differently, can be accurate, not infected with bias, and can intrinsically motivate students to learn. Grades can clearly and more objectively describe what students know and can do. Grading practices can encourage students not to cheat but to learn, to persevere when they fail and not lose hope, and to take more ownership and agency for their achievement. And the power of these approaches can be especially transformative for struggling students—the students who have been beaten down year after year by a punishing grading system of negative feedback and unredeemable failure.

Yet despite my own research and revelations, knowing how to make grading more accurate and equitable was only the very first step. The real challenge was to understand how teachers could learn, understand, and then implement improved grading. I had to not only touch and even embrace the third rail of grading, but I also had to get others to embrace it with me.

It didn't work out so well at first. When I discussed these practices with teachers, I was constantly met with the same arguments: Our current grading system prepares students for the real world, and if we alter it, we're doing our students a disservice; "smart" students can handle changes to grading and can be internally motivated but "remedial" or "regular" students need external motivation; these changes just inflate grades; students will just game the system. Conversations were intellectual jousts that didn't really change what teachers believed or did. Grading was so deeply intertwined with teachers' belief systems and their daily practices that it wasn't as simple as just explaining and justifying the practices. I realized that for teachers to become convinced of the effectiveness and the equitable impact of different grading practices, they had to try them out. Through a combination of persuasion, promises, and appeals, I found some teachers willing to test out these new grading practices.

Amazingly, they worked.

Teachers who tried these grading practices were surprised and sometimes shocked by the results. The practices seemed to do the impossible: decrease student failures, reduce grade inflation, and reduce achievement gaps—all at the *same time*. Here were the results in one high school:

PROLOGUE TABLE 1

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER COHORT: PERCENTAGE OF D OR F GRADES AWARDED 2015-2016 (BEFORE GRADING INITIATIVE) VS. 2016-2017 (FIRST YEAR OF GRADING INITIATIVE) ¹				
	2015-2016 SEM. 2	2016-2017 SEM. 2	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE DIFFERENCE
Percentage of D or F Grades Awarded	23%	17%	-6	26% decrease

¹These results were generated by Leading Edge Advisors, an independent evaluation firm.

In the 2015–2016 school year, 23 percent of the second semester grades the teachers assigned were Ds or Fs, and in 2016–2017, after implementing more equitable grading practices, Ds and Fs fell by over one-quarter, to 17 percent of the grades. Although this decrease may seem small (and is still too high), because these high school teachers had student loads of 125 to 150 each and assigned thousands of grades every semester, this decrease in D and F grades represents *hundreds* of fewer failed grades, meaning fewer remedial “seats” and therefore less money needed for remedial classes, to say nothing of the long-term impact on graduation rates. What was even more energizing was that the grading practices had a greater (and statistically significant) impact on groups who had been historically underserved in schools. From the same high school:

PROLOGUE TABLE 2

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER COHORT: PERCENTAGE OF D OR F GRADES AWARDED 2015-2016 (BEFORE GRADING INITIATIVE) VS. 2016-2017 (FIRST YEAR OF GRADING INITIATIVE)				
	2015-2016 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP	2016-2017 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP
FRPL*	27%	8 percentage points	19%	3 percentage points
Non-FRPL Students	19%		16%	

*Free and Reduced Price Lunch

With these more equitable practices, the rate of Ds and Fs the teachers assigned to students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low-income, decreased from 27 percent to 19 percent, while the percentage of Ds and Fs assigned to students who came from higher income families (who therefore did not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch) decreased much less, from 19 percent to 16 percent. The rate of Ds and Fs decreased more sharply for low-income students, meaning that the school decreased their D and F achievement gap between these groups of students from 8 percent to 3 percent.

Here are results at a middle school, where teachers' changes reduced grade inflation *and* failing grades and narrowed the achievement gaps of income and race:

PROLOGUE TABLE 3

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER COHORT 2015-2016 (BEFORE GRADING INITIATIVE) VS. 2016-2017 (FIRST YEAR OF GRADING INITIATIVE)				
PERCENTAGE OF A GRADES AWARDED				
	2015-2016 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP	2016-2017 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP
FRPL Students	36%	14 percentage points	31%	9 percentage points
Non-FRPL Students	50%		40%	

PERCENTAGE OF D OR F GRADES AWARDED				
	2015-2016 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP	2016-2017 SEM. 2	ACHIEVEMENT GAP
Black Students	25%	8 percentage points	14%	1 percentage point
White Students	17%		13%	

When teachers used these more equitable grading practices, the disparity in the percentage of As assigned to students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch compared to the percentage of As assigned to students who did not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch decreased by over one-third, and the disparity in the percent of Ds and Fs assigned to Black students compared to white students, which had been eight percentage points, was virtually eliminated.

Of course, it is notoriously difficult to tie changes in student achievement to a specific change in a teacher's practice; student performance and teacher effectiveness are influenced by so many variables inside and outside the school. When teachers at this middle school confidently explained that a primary cause of these changes in student achievement was their improvements to grading and assessment, I wasn't satisfied. I first asked what might be *incorrect* explanations others might give if they saw this data. They quickly responded: "That we lowered our standards; that we were too soft; that we were pressured to give passing grades." One teacher added, almost adamantly, "Actually, we *raised* our standards. Students no longer can get good grades with fluff assignments."

I believed the teachers but still wasn't entirely convinced. I was worried that the practices might yield grades that were higher, or "inflated," but weren't more *valid*. To determine whether the grades were more valid—that they more accurately and consistently described student achievement—we compared teachers' classroom grades to students' standardized test scores. We found that teachers' grades had an increased correlation to standardized test scores. Not only were grades less inflated or deflated, they were also more *accurate*:

PROLOGUE TABLE 4

STATE TEST SCORE RESULTS VS. SEM. 2 GRADES ASSIGNED SPRING 2016 (BEFORE GRADING INITIATIVE) VS. SPRING 2017 (FIRST YEAR OF GRADING INITIATIVE)				
	SPRING 2016 SEM. 2	SPRING 2017 SEM. 2	PERCENTAGE POINT CHANGE	PERCENTAGE DIFFERENCE
Percentage of Students for Whom State Exam ELA Score MATCHES Teacher-Assigned English Sem. 2 Grade	34%	48%	+14	41% Increase
Percentage of Students for Whom State Exam Math Score MATCHES Teacher-Assigned Math Sem. 2 Grade	21%	38%	+17	80% Increase

Although in spring 2016, before teachers used more equitable grading practices, only about one-third of Semester 2 English grades matched standardized test scores in English; after teachers used the practices in 2017, nearly half of teachers' English grades matched the test scores, and the percentage of Semester 2 math grades that matched standardized test scores in math nearly doubled. And even though there are plenty of reasons to be skeptical of standardized tests, we'd generally prefer teachers' grades to be more correlated with external test results than less correlated.

Beyond the quantitative data, the impact of these more equitable grading practices on the day-to-day work of teachers and students was even more transformational.

Students were less stressed and were grateful to not have everything count in their grade, to have flexibility to turn in assignments after a deadline, and to be allowed to retake exams. Classrooms felt less stressful, and students reported less anxiety. Teachers felt the emphasis in their classrooms had shifted from meeting due dates and earning points to *learning*. Students completed assignments because they found that doing so improved their performance on assessments, not because of the homework or classwork points they could earn or lose. As one high school student explained:

“There have been classes where teachers don’t dock points off if you turn in something late. I really appreciate that, because there have been some instances where I’ve not done my homework in one of these classes and my friends have offered if I would like to copy off of them and I’ve refused saying that if I’m not getting any penalties for late work, then I might as well do it myself on my own time and learn the actual content.”

What’s more, teachers felt empowered by this work. Prior to this work, the ways their students behaved—what motivated them, whether they cheated or not, how much they understood or cared about their grade—had seemed to the teachers to be fixed and often chalked up to “that’s how kids are these days.” But the teachers who tried these practices found that they could actually change students’ attitudes and behaviors. Students who had seemed unmotivated and even resistant to learning became more engaged. Relationships between students and teachers—which had been based on compliance and a system of extrinsic threats and rewards—were now partnerships based on trust, transparency, and perhaps most importantly, hope. Students persevered when they struggled, took initiative, stopped cheating, and wanted to learn even after the test—all because of changes to how teachers graded. After using these new more equitable practices, these once skeptical teachers had the passion of religious converts. Cathy, a middle school history and English teacher, was typical in her reaction:

“I have a different outlook now on how I want to grade. Last year it was almost punishment: ‘Oh, you didn’t do the work, now you have a bad grade.’ Doing this work really changed my perspective. This helped me realize that the main purpose of grading is to see how much the students know, to assess their learning instead of assessing their efforts; do they really understand the work, as opposed to did they do all of the assignments.”

Most powerfully, teachers learned that by changing how they graded, their students—whether elementary children, middle school tweens, or high school teenagers, and whether overachieving or struggling and resistant—would take

ownership and responsibility over their learning, would be intrinsically motivated to succeed, and would be excited about learning and their own progress. Plus, this work to improve grading didn't just change how teachers graded. It changed their beliefs about themselves, about teaching and learning, and about their students. They discovered that they didn't need to give points for assignments to make students value and complete the work. They found that they were just as respected, and more trusted and appreciated, by their students when they changed their grading.

Over the past several years, we have seen these benefits of equitable grading in many school types and environments: at large comprehensive district-run schools, charter schools, and independent schools; at schools with only white students and those with only students of color; at schools nestled in urban centers and located in suburbs; and at schools with students who enter with skills far below grade level and at Phillips Andover Academy, one of the most elite boarding schools in the country. But regardless of the school's context or its student population, this work was hard. Examining our grading practices can challenge our deepest beliefs about what we know (or think we know) about our teaching, our students, and ourselves. Lucy, an eighteen-year veteran high school English teacher, best expressed the difficulty of considering changes to longstanding grading practices, and why the experience can be so transformational:

“This challenges what I’ve learned to do as a teacher in terms of what I think students need to know, what they need to show back to me, and how to grade them. This feels really important, messy, and really uncomfortable. It is ‘Oh my gosh, look what I’ve been doing!’ I don’t blame myself because I didn’t know any better. I did what was done to me. But now I’m in a place that I feel really strongly that I can’t do that anymore. I can’t use grading as a way to discipline kids anymore. I look at what I have been doing and I have to do things differently.”

Lucy's description captures it all: Examining grading is “important, messy, and uncomfortable.” It can be difficult to amass the energy and resolve, particularly with all the mandates and sky-high expectations placed on teachers, to make grading more accurate and equitable. But it is some of the most important and rewarding work we can do. We know that students' family income, whether they have a stable, safe home (or even a home at all), their caregivers' education background, their race, and other elements outside teachers' control all have a huge influence on achievement, but at the end of the day, it's their grades—our description of students' academic performance—that opens doors or closes them. We can learn a new curriculum or a new instructional strategy, but if our grading doesn't change, nothing for our students, particularly those most vulnerable, will really change, and the achievement and opportunity gaps will remain.

It's time to embrace the third rail.

Foundations

“The reliability of the school’s estimate of the accomplishment and progress of pupils is of large practical importance. For, after all, the marks or grades attached to a pupil’s work are the tangible measure of the result of his attainments and constitute the chief basis for the determination of essential administrative problems of the school, such as transfer promotion, retardation, elimination and admission to higher institutions; to say nothing of the problem of the influence of these marks or grades upon the moral attitude of the pupil toward the school, education, and even life.”

(Starch & Elliott, 1912, p. 442)

What Makes Grading So Difficult to Talk About (and Even Harder to Change)?

In this chapter, we answer the following questions:

1. *What are common struggles for principals and teachers regarding grading?*
2. *What makes it hard for us to critically examine traditional grading practices?*
3. *How can educators and noneducators benefit from this book, and what is the best way to approach its content and organization?*

We teachers deeply love our work, love our students (at least, most of them), and love working with our colleagues (at least, most of them). What fulfills us are the relationships we build with our students and the profound impact and influence we have on them. Any given day we may provide a learning experience that fundamentally alters a student's life trajectory: an intellectual awakening, a deeper understanding of who they are and what they can become, a kindling of a passion, a realization of their voice.

And yet, teaching has never been so challenging and so embattled. Our students, who are increasingly diverse, with greater percentages of students whose first language is not English and whose families live below the poverty line, need us to occupy so many roles beyond teacher: nurse, mentor, social worker, therapist, parent, cheerleader, tutor, and college advisor. We are responsible to adhere to regulations, laws, and directives under layers of bureaucracies. We often feel buffeted by ever-shifting political winds, pawns in complex political games in which people outside our schools argue over competing values and philosophies that affect what we do inside our classrooms: how and whether to teach certain topics (the perspectives of the Civil War, the genocide of Native Americans, evolution, global warming), read certain authors (J. D. Salinger, Toni Morrison), prepare for standardized

exams (SBAC, PARCC, state graduation or end-of-course tests), and use certain materials (state-adopted textbooks, iPads and apps, laptops, smart boards). Solidarity and organizing among us seem less possible because of the waning influence and presence of teacher unions and the fragmentation of how we are trained: alternative certification programs, residencies, university programs, and fast-track programs that even threaten the very concept of teaching as a profession. Even the idea of a school system seems to be shifting beneath our feet into a “system of schools,” where cities agnostically support a portfolio of traditional public schools, charter schools, home schools, distance learning centers, and even private schools via vouchers and “educational savings accounts.” Teachers’ salaries are rising but are still well below those of other professionals and often are insufficient to support a family. Too many of us work within schools and communities where violence is a fact of life, adding to our own stress as well as our students’. We are guinea pigs in experiments testing how best to evaluate and motivate us, and we are judged by criteria that suggests ignorance—or worse, dismissal—of the challenges of our students and the complexity of our work. It is no surprise that as many as one out of three teachers report experiencing high levels of occupational stress (Brackett et al., 2013). An obvious result is high turnover, a revolving door of teachers, particularly in schools that serve low-income communities, where teachers stay just long enough to hone their skills before leaving and being replaced by brand new teachers.

Postpandemic, it seems as if the demands on teachers and schools have only increased. We must navigate (and often, negotiate) how we talk about issues of race, gender, and sexuality in a more politically charged environment. The threat of gun violence is more present, with lockdown and active shooter drills unfortunately becoming necessary and normalized. The percentage of students whose families are enduring housing or financial instability is increasing, as is, unsurprisingly, the percentage of students experiencing strains on their mental health.

Amid all these pressures and expectations, with administrators and policymakers defining nearly every aspect of a teacher’s practice, we have one remaining island of autonomy: our grades. Grades are entirely within our control—the declaration of our professional judgment of student performance and the most concrete symbol of our professional authority and expertise.

The teacher’s authorship over the grade has even been enshrined into a number of states’ education codes and regulations, ensuring that the grade a teacher assigns may not be overwritten by an administrator (e.g., Maine §4708, Texas §28.0214) and even protecting the teacher from external pressures to change the grade. Take, for example, Georgia’s Grade Integrity Act (§ 20-2-989.20), which states

No classroom teacher shall be required, coerced, intimidated, or disciplined in any manner by the local board of education, superintendent, or any local school administrator to change the grade of a student.

And even when the sanctity of a teacher's grade is not so formally codified, administrators know that they tread on thin ice when they talk to teachers about their grading, potentially inviting formal complaints, union grievances, and even lawsuits. Grading is arguably the only aspect of schools in which the power dynamic between the teacher and their supervisor is inverted.

The topic of grading is so hallowed that it inhibits conversations even among colleagues. Only after much tiptoeing and reassurances that there will be no compromise to professional autonomy, teachers of the same grade or subject may manage to agree on broad common agreements: The final exam in every course will be worth 10 percent of the grade, or homework can be worth no more than 50 percent of a student's total grade. Rarely, though, are there honest conversations where grading is examined, researched, and deliberated. As a result of having virtually no safe forum to discuss grading practices, each teacher remains in their own echo chamber, validated by little except inertia and the vague sense that students seem to be getting the grade they deserve.

The irony in our vigorous defense of our grading is that most teachers detest the act of grading. It's unpleasant, time consuming, and anxiety provoking (Thorndike, 2005, as cited by Randall & Engelhard, 2010, p. 1376). In each marking period, teachers on average assess dozens of assignments per student and spend approximately twenty hours per week on "non-instructional school activities of which evaluating student work is a large part" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, as cited by Brackett et al., 2013). Teachers often agonize over what grade to assign, are uncomfortable with how much grades matter, and face constant arguments, bargaining, and pleading by students and caregivers over grades. The grading and reporting of student progress, according to Linn and Miller (2005) is "one of the more frustrating aspects of teaching" (as cited in Randall & Engelhard, 2010, p. 1376). If grading is so important to our work, whether we like it or not, why is the topic so avoided, so threatening, so intimidating?

GRADING AS IDENTITY

Maybe we struggle with discussing grading because we have very little experience doing so. Grading and measurement are rarely if ever included in teacher preparation programs or in-school professional development. As a result, the majority of teachers are left on their own to decide how to grade and why, unaware of the research on effective grading practices. Daniele, a middle school education specialist of eight years, confessed, "I couldn't even tell you exactly what I thought about grading. I just had undefined notions of what grading is and what it should be like, and held on to that." It's completely understandable that most teachers replicate the grading systems they experienced as students or follow the grading practices of their school colleagues (Guskey, 2009).

Yet despite this complete lack of training and support with how to grade, teachers' grading policies and practices aren't arbitrary. Each of us applies our professional expertise and experiences and carefully deliberates over what assignments and behaviors we include in the grade and what we exclude, the relative weight of those assignments and behaviors, and the magnitude of consequences, rewards, incentives, and disincentives. And yet each teacher makes very different choices. Because each teacher's grading system is virtually unregulated and unconstrained, a teacher's grading policies and practices reveal their beliefs about what students are capable of, how they define and envision their relationship with students, what best prepares students for success, and even their self-concept about who they are as a teacher. If we choose to award points to students for being on time, raising their hands to contribute ideas, for working collaboratively, or for turning in work by the deadline, we believe that these skills are important in life and that a grade should reflect performance in these skills. If we instead prioritize that students learn the academic content, perhaps we deemphasize or exclude those "soft skills" from the grade. If we want students to learn responsibility, we allocate a large portion of the grade to students' homework. If we believe that our grades are an important way to distinguish the top students, we grade on a curve. Teachers can even disagree on what makes a grade fair. Most teachers believe that students who try should not fail regardless of whether they actually learn (Brookhart et al., 2016), but other teachers believe the opposite: that fairness is honestly reporting academic performance regardless of effort. Challenges to our grading practices don't just offend our professional judgment; they can invoke an emotional and psychological threat.

If the grading practices in this book are, in fact, more equitable and effective than what most of us currently do, the implications are profound and disturbing: We may have perpetuated inequities in our classrooms and schools for years without realizing it. Our use of inaccurate and inequitable grading may have barred students from getting into the college they wanted, kept them out of honors classes, and prevented them from graduating. Jillian, a thirteen-year math and science middle school teacher, courageously shared with me, "As I'm learning these improved grading practices, I'm thinking about how many students I may have hurt in the past, and I don't want to go there."

As I researched and learned more about the equitable practices in this book, I had the same experience as Jillian: feelings of guilt, shame, and anger. How could I have not seen the faults in our traditional system, the ways many of our current grading and assessment practices harm the most vulnerable students? Throughout my teaching career, I created the best curriculum I could and built the most positive relationships with students possible, but were my efforts compromised, or even undermined, when I graded? That can't be, can it?

Though grades are so much a part of schools, they are never included in analyses of education inequity, much less included in strategies to address the inequities. Can something so prominent in our schools be so innocent in the promulgation of

disparate achievement? Are we, by using, supporting, and not interrogating traditional grading practices, accessories to the inequities in our schools? Do we really believe that, despite initiative after initiative, our faulty grading system isn't somehow contributing to the intractability of the achievement and opportunity gaps over multiple generations? How can we, as professionals, caregivers, and moral citizens, continue to avoid a critical examination of our legacy of grading?

GRADING AND OUR “WEB OF BELIEF”

I want to offer one more explanation for why it can be so difficult to examine grading.

Think about the hostile reaction to Galileo's assertion of a universe with the sun at the center instead of the Earth, the fierce debate over global warming, or the intense doubt that women had the capacity to vote. Why can it be so difficult to encounter evidence and ideas that contradict what we already know, or think we know? Why do we, like Jillian, when confronted with clear and convincing evidence that contradicts our current understanding, not “want to go there”?

Almost half a century ago, the philosophers Quine and Ullian (1978) explained that we each have a “web of belief”—a complex system of what we hold to be true in the world based on our experiences and prior understanding, with interconnected and mutually supportive ideas. Each of us has a web of belief about students and grading. For example, when I believe that it is a good practice to include extra credit in a grade, that belief is connected to my beliefs about whether extra credit makes a grade more accurate (“It does because it reflects a student's engagement and effort”), how students are best motivated (“Students will do more work and learn more if extra credit is offered”), and whether extra credit makes a grade more equitable (“Extra credit provides multiple ways for students to succeed”).

According to Quine (1978), when we learn information and evidence that contradicts part of our belief system—that extra credit actually makes grades less accurate, less motivational, and more inequitable (see chapter 9)—we are faced with two options: dismiss the evidence or accept it. We can dismiss the new information by disqualifying the speaker's credibility (“Joe Feldman is, at best, naïve, and, at worst, a buffoon”), by ignoring it (“Skip chapter 9 or close this book and return it to the shelf”), or by finding the evidence incongruent with our own experiences (“I have used extra credit, and I am fully confident that there is no better system despite any contradictory evidence”). If we can find a way to dismiss the new information, our web of belief remains intact and undisturbed.

If, on the other hand, we accept the new information as true, Quine (1978) claims that we will adjust our web of belief as little as possible, preserving all our other related beliefs. If the evidence against offering extra credit convinces us, we

might constrain the disruptive influence of that evidence on our web of belief by limiting the circumstances in which the new evidence holds true. Maybe we make a small concession: that extra credit is inappropriate for already motivated students, but for struggling students it is still effective, or we concede that extra credit points don't motivate students during high-stakes assessments, so we continue utilizing it with daily participation and homework. We tweak our belief about extra credit just a little but keep intact our overall belief about extra credit being beneficial. We do not have to adjust our other beliefs connected to our belief about extra credit, such as what motivates students generally or what makes a grading practice equitable. We maintain the inertia of our belief—that extra credit is good; it's just not helpful in a specific circumstance. The web is adjusted only slightly.

With each new piece of evidence and information that contradicts a belief, we have to make more significant changes to our expanded web of belief, each time rejecting the new information or accepting it while limiting its validity so that it impacts our web as little as possible. Quine (1978) describes this dynamic as the “conservatism” of our web of belief:

Conservatism is rather effortless on the whole, having inertia in its favor. But it is sound strategy too, since at each step it sacrifices as little as possible of the evidential support, whatever that may have been, that our overall system of beliefs has hitherto been enjoying. The truth may indeed be radically remote from our present system of beliefs, so that we may need a long series of conservative steps to attain what might have been attained in one rash leap. The longer the leap, however, the more serious an angular error in the direction. For a leap in the dark the likelihood of a happy landing is severely limited. Conservatism holds out the advantages of limited liability and a maximum of live options for each next move.
(pp. 67–68)

As you progress through this book, be aware of how you are reacting to new information. In the face of persuasive and nearly incontrovertible evidence that our current grading practices are harmful and ineffective and that other practices are more accurate, equitable, and motivational, you may dismiss or marginalize that evidence. It will not be easy to concede that what we have believed to be true may actually not be true. As Quine (1978) predicts, it may not be a “happy landing,” but as teachers we must always be open to new ideas, knowing that we can always improve, that we can always do better by our students. Maybe that is enough for us to take a “leap in the dark.”

When the concepts in this book challenge you in uncomfortable ways, stay open to new evidence and possibilities, imagine what could be, and be less conservative in

your web of belief. Consider equitable approaches to grading that you may have previously believed were impossible:

“I can’t believe that!” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one can’t believe impossible things.”

“I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” (Carroll, 2011, Ch. 5)

What you are doing may seem like Alice’s challenge, but actually, you are not being asked to believe in impossible things. The practices in this book are supported by research, and perhaps more convincingly, they have been used by teachers all over the country across a broad range of students. To change one’s grading practices is not simple, psychologically or logistically, for teachers or for their students. But these changes lead to higher academic achievement and less stressful classrooms, and they support all students, particularly those who have languished and failed in our current system. These practices give us, and them, hope.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

First and foremost, this book is for teachers. They are the professionals most responsible and most intimately involved with grading our students, and therefore are in the most powerful position to make grading practices more equitable. As a former (and therefore, lifelong) teacher, I know that most of our work as teachers in a school is isolated—we work in separate rooms, teach different courses, rarely share the same groups of students, and have very different daily teaching schedules (and prep periods)—which means very few opportunities to chat with each other, much less to engage each other in deep pedagogical discourse. I write this book to support a critically important conversation that helps teachers be more informed and conscious of the impact of our traditional grading practices and prepares them with the understanding and strategies to implement more equitable practices.

This book is also for those accountable for the grades students receive—school and district administrators, board members, and other officials. This book will give you a clearer sense of the urgency to improve traditional grading and can inform your vision about how more equitable grading will improve passing rates, reduce grade

inflation, strengthen instruction, and even save money. Improved grading can be a lever for systemwide efforts to promote more equitable opportunities and outcomes for students, particularly those most historically disadvantaged. In your nonteaching role, you can encourage, normalize, support, and facilitate a critical conversation about grades, and you can provide the inspiration, the incentives, the resources, and the “cover” to those who are part of that conversation. Considering the amount of professional development we provide teachers for curriculum design and instructional planning, how can we not invest resources in improving how teachers grade that curriculum and instruction?

For parents and caregivers, conversations about their children’s grades are so important and yet often intimidating. By strengthening your understanding of grading, you become more qualified to be true partners in your child’s education. Perhaps you can apply some gentle pressure on schools, and then partner with them, to improve their grading. This book also can be informative and empowering to students and their advocates, to pull back the curtain on a system that directly and profoundly affects them. Rather than be only the recipients of grades, students can be active in a community-wide discussion about more equitable grading.

Ultimately, no matter your role, background, or viewpoint, I write this book as a dialogue between you and me. You come to this book with a set of expectations, skepticism, pressures, experiences, and hopes, as do I. This work of examining and reimaging grading is personal and interpersonal, so my tone in this book is more familiar than formal, more curious than prescriptive, more suggestive than demanding, more forgiving than accusatory. I do this not only to make the ideas in the book less threatening but also to model the stance that I’ve found most helpful when discussing these ideas. In addition, to help you navigate the content, I begin each chapter with a preview of the main concepts and close each chapter with a summary of key points and reflective questions. These questions will help you construct meaning from these new ideas, to reflect on your own beliefs and experiences, and to imagine doing things differently.

BLENDING THE TECHNICAL AND THEORETICAL

This book addresses both the technical *how* of grading practices and the theoretical *why* behind those practices—the concrete steps teachers can use immediately as well as the underlying ideas to create and tailor grading practices that fit unique classrooms and contexts.

THE TECHNICAL GUIDE

- What are more equitable grading practices, and how are they specifically implemented in a classroom?

- What changes do more equitable grading practices require regarding time, messaging, assessment design, and grade book software?
- What are successful, concrete examples of those practices?
- What are teachers' common struggles and successes when they implement the more equitable grading practices?

THE THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

- What is the history and evolution of our current grading practices, what were their purposes, and how does their continued use thwart high-quality instruction and perpetuate inequities?
- How does our current research-based understanding of equity, motivation, adolescent psychology, and teaching and learning inform more equitable grading practices?
- What messages do our current grading practices send to our students, and how could more equitable grading send messages that are more aligned to what we believe about teaching, learning, and the potential of our students, particularly for those who have struggled in our schools?
- How do more equitable grading practices improve our assessments, curriculum design, and instructional decisions, ultimately increasing student learning and shaping students' beliefs about their capacity to learn?

A risk of blending theory and practice is that I will satisfy no one: To those readers who simply want to be told the *how*, they may become impatient with the theory and research citations, and for those who desire research and theory, they may find the description of practices to be insufficiently substantiated. Perhaps, though, this reflects the complexity of teaching—we always want more examples, and we always want more research—and yet our students are there right now, in front of us, waiting.

HOW IS THIS BOOK ORGANIZED?

This book has three overarching sections. Part I, “Foundations,” lays out the context for addressing the inequities of traditional grading. Part II, “The Case for Change,” is an examination of our inherited grading practices and how, in the present day, their continued use undermines our contemporary teaching and learning practices and beliefs. By continuing to use these grading practices, we inadvertently perpetuate debunked ideas and inequities of the early twentieth century. Part II also proposes an alternate, more equitable, vision for grading.

Part III, “Equitable Grading Practices,” describes the five sets of practices that can lead us to this vision:

1. **Practices That Are Accurate and Mathematically Sound:** Using algorithms that allow and support student growth rather than consigning students to failure. Examples: Using a 0–4 instead of a 0–100 point scale; not giving zeros.
2. **Practices That Value Knowledge, Not Environment or Behavior:** Evaluating students only on their level of content mastery. Examples: Not grading subjectively interpreted behaviors such as a student’s “effort”; not grading the completion or accuracy of homework; grading students’ knowledge of content based on multiple sources.
3. **Practices That Support Hope and a Growth Mindset:** Encouraging mistakes as part of the learning process. Examples: Allowing test or project retakes; replacing previous scores with current scores (rather than averaging).
4. **Practices That Lift the Veil on How to Succeed:** Making grades simpler and more transparent. Examples: Creating rubrics; using simplified grade calculations.
5. **Practices That Build “Soft Skills” and Motivate Students Without Grading Them:** Supporting intrinsic motivation and self-regulation rather than relying on an extrinsic point system. Examples: Using peer- or self-evaluation and reflection; employing a more expansive menu of feedback strategies.

But because our traditional and inequitable system of grading has been hardwired into our conception of schools, and because of the conservatism of our web of belief, in this book I do everything I can to help you feel more confident disturbing your web: research studies, emotional appeals, analogies to the worlds outside of schools, teacher and student perspectives, moral demands, and specific models and tools. Each set of practices includes supporting research and successful examples from teachers that are either included in this book or available at www.gradingforequity.org, along with how to address common concerns—instructional, philosophical, and technological—so that you can implement the practices more confidently and successfully. In addition, throughout this book are the voices of researchers, teachers, administrators, and students whose experiences or ideas provide important perspective and embolden us to challenge traditional grading, to not feel so alone in our risk-taking. All teachers’ voices include first names and subject area, and the students’ voices are cited using pseudonyms.

This book is best read from beginning to end because each chapter builds somewhat on previously addressed ideas, but I invite the reader to jump around based

on your interests or needs. Like our students, each of us enters new content from a slightly different perspective with a different learning trajectory. Perhaps you're most interested in how we came to have this particular grading system and why it's so inequitable, or maybe you've already tried some of the practices and want to learn some additional approaches. In Part III in particular, you may find yourself jumping from practice to practice, because even though the practices are categorized into different elements of equitable grading, they overlap and implicate each other. For example, when you consider using summative assessments as the primary consideration of a grade, you'll need to consider offering retakes, which means that you'll rethink the design of your assessments, which means that you may want to score them on a 0–4 instead of a 0–100 scale. You may even find that you need to search out other books and articles on grading or related topics—assessment, for example—so I have cited supporting research and publications throughout the text and included a full bibliography.

A FINAL WORD

As we prepare for our journey, let's be ready to suspend what we think we know about grading, teaching, learning, and even students. As we'll learn in chapter 2, we have been brought up in a grading system that is virtually unchanged in over a century and was premised on turn-of-the-twentieth-century beliefs about the role of schools and who they're for, how to motivate people, and what effective teaching and learning look like. We have been unwitting victims of this system as students, and unwitting promoters of this system as teachers (and even as caregivers). For many of us, the system worked just fine, or at least we believe that it did, but in fact the traditional system of evaluating students and reporting information about them has been part of the inequities, unfairness, and injustices built into our schools. When this book challenges you, try to put aside your devil's advocate stance—why these practices can't possibly work—and try an *angel's advocate* stance: Envision the possibilities and potential for teachers and students if we were to grade differently—more fairly, accurately, and equitably. As radical and revolutionary as some of these ideas might seem, they really aren't; they're based on research, common sense, and most importantly, successful implementation in classrooms. In fact, the more you critically examine how we commonly grade, the stranger, more counterproductive, and more absurd our current practices reveal themselves to be. As we learn new ideas, let us be open, humble, honest, and forgive ourselves if we weren't aware that things could be different. Perhaps we've never had a reason, an opportunity, or a mechanism to question grading. Now is our chance.

Jessica, a middle school math teacher who changed her grading to be more equitable and accurate after ten years of using traditional grading practices, described what many teachers experience when they examine their grading:

“My grading practices had pretty much been the same over time. I knew something needed to change, but I didn’t have an idea of where to start or what needed to be changed. I was seeing that a lot of my students who I knew were strong in content—I could tell they knew what they were doing—had grades that weren’t necessarily reflective of their abilities. I was surprised at their grades; how was this possible?”

“Then I started learning more about grading, and I started to feel really bad for my previous students. What if by giving them Fs I have totally ruined things for them and they think they don’t have any ability . . .? I had known all these years that I needed to do something differently but just didn’t know how and I didn’t know what. I appreciate that I had the chance to change. I feel bad that it happened 10 years after I started teaching, but I am glad that it happened now.”

Finally, with the stubborn persistence of the achievement gap, we can no longer implement equitable practices in some areas of our schools—responsive and culturally sustaining classrooms, alternative disciplinary procedures, diverse curriculum—but preserve our inequitable grading. Although a handful of authors have addressed grading, there hasn’t been discussion of grading through an equity lens—how grading is a critical element to affirmatively promote equity, to stop rewarding students because of their wealth, privilege, environment, or caregivers’ education, and to prevent us from punishing students for their poverty, gaps in education, or environment. Improved grading practices promote objective assessment of academic mastery, transparent expectations, growth mindsets, a focus on learning instead of points, and student agency—all key ingredients to serve diverse learners and create culturally responsive classrooms.

I’m not sure if seeing the inequities in our 100-year-old grading practices is like Plato coming out of the cave or ingesting *The Matrix* blue pill instead of the red one, but I guarantee you will think differently after you read this book. You will also likely feel the range of emotions Jessica felt—confusion, guilt, relief, optimism. At its core, this book will help you examine your experiences and learn how to approach grading with greater hope, empathy, and belief in the capacity of students, *all* of them. That’s what grading for equity is all about.

Summary of Concepts

1. Grading is not only a critically important element of schooling, but it is also so challenging to discuss because it is so interwoven with teachers' conceptions of learning, motivation, and themselves.
2. We have never had the opportunity, resources, and support to examine our traditional grading practices, and so we must forgive ourselves for inadvertently perpetuating outdated and even harmful practices.
3. When we learn new, more effective, and more equitable grading practices, it will challenge what Quine (1978) calls our "web of belief."
4. This book offers both the theory and the practices of improved, equitable grading, and while its content is particularly focused on K–16 faculty, it equips school and district administrators, parents or caregivers, students, and their advocates to be more informed policymakers and school community members.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some deep beliefs you have about teenagers? What motivates and demotivates them? Are they more concerned with learning or their grade? Why might this be?
2. What is your vision for grading? What do you wish grading could be for students, particularly for the most vulnerable and historically underserved populations? What do you wish grading could be for you? In which ways do current grading practices meet those expectations, and in which ways do they not?
3. What brings you to this book? What are your goals for reading it? How will the way you read it help or hinder you from realizing those goals?
4. It's helpful to have someone with whom you can discuss the ideas in this book. Who would be the right person or group to read this with you? How will you construct meaning from what you read, either alone or with others?
5. For teachers: Which of your grading practices do you believe best support learning? Why? Which of your grading practices are you most open to reconsidering? Why?

