

Gimme An A
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I am a school counselor and teachers often come to me to vent their frustrations. Many complain about students who do very little work all semester and then demand extended time and extra credit at the last minute. Some teachers feel tremendous pressure to give in to these demands. In fact, the pressure comes not only from students but also from parents, coaches, and sometimes administrators. Grade inflation is a growing concern in US high schools. Teachers who give into students who demand “As” or passing grades may not realize the negative effect of their grading policy but they are in a key position to make important changes.

About Grade Inflation

Consider the following scenario. Billy has four teachers. He struggles in math and frequently disrupts class. The math teacher does not want Billy to be enrolled in her class again so she curves the grading scale so Billy can pass. Billy’s brand new English teacher wants her students to like her. She gives in to Billy’s pleas for extra credit. He receives bonus points for a monetary donation to a charity and passes English. In science, Billy has missing assignments. However, Billy is a good athlete. The science teacher is also a coach who wants Billy on the baseball team. The teacher exempts him from missing assignments. Art is Billy’s last class each day. Billy misses frequently and produces sloppy work, but the teacher gives Billy and every student in the class an A.

Billy chalks up a 3.25 grade point average. He makes the baseball team and receives a promotion to the next grade level. However, standardized test results indicate he has not mastered any core subject and will need to be scheduled in support classes the following semester. When the counselor calls to notify parents, they are upset and confused as to how this could happen since Billy had good grades on his report card.

Reasons for Inflation

Grade inflation occurs when some teachers, such as Billy’s simply hand out “As” like pieces of treat or treat candy. The inside joke in one school was about a teacher who gave every student an A except those who slept through the class. Sleepers received Bs. Thankfully, these teachers are the exception and not the rule. While elementary schools routinely separate academic grades from grades for behavior, high schools do not. High school students typically receive a single letter grade for each class. Practices, like giving automatic daily points for attendance or assigning bonus points for irrelevant tasks inflate a student’s grade.

Additional factors influence grade inflation. Educational legislation with a focus on accountability calls attention to school performance. School districts closely monitor graduation rates, dropout rates, and

annual yearly progress. Stanley and Baines (2004), note that administrators have become image-conscious and that their “efforts toward keeping everybody in class and happy are often at odds with the quest for academic excellence” (p.102). Exaggerated grades may help schools meet some accountability goals, but those grades do not always align to scores on standardized tests or college admission tests.

Relationship dynamics can be another contributor. Decades of research shows a correlation between teacher expectation and student performance. High teacher expectation can increase student performance; conversely, a low expectation fosters the belief that low quality work is acceptable and fails to provide motivational challenges. Mike McMahon, an advocate of the Teacher Expectations Student Achievement (TESA) program based on expectation theory comments, “Teachers' expectations for students-whether high or low-can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, students tend to give to teachers as much or as little as teachers expect of them” Instead of making achievement goals easier and awarding an overabundance of high grades, teachers can demonstrate care by setting high expectations for students.

Finally, the competition for funding must be considered. Money talks and sometimes it says, “Gimme an A.” Many districts and counties require student athletes to earn and maintain a 2.0 grade point average. Since sports programs generate revenue, schools want winning teams. Making a star athlete ineligible to play due to grade point average is difficult. It is equally difficult to give a low grade knowing that the grade could make a student ineligible for a desperately needed scholarship. Instead of giving in to pressures for extra credit or extended time, teachers could redirect the students to opportunities that would allow for mastery. Such opportunities might include re-taking a course in summer school, online, or in an afterschool program.

Dangers of Grade Inflation

Some teachers equate caring with liberal grading policies designed to enhance student self-esteem. However, just receiving an A for showing up in class does not increase self-esteem, nor does it increase self-efficacy. Inflated grades deny students the opportunity to learn from mistakes and make academic progress. Even worse, learning disabilities can go undetected.

Inflation distorts achievement. Parents and students are confused when a student with an A in high school pre-calculus must register for a remedial college math course. The Center for Educational Reform (2006) reports 2.4 million American students graduate from high school lacking necessary skills in reading, writing, and math and that 28 percent of all freshmen entering college in 2000 required remedial coursework in those three areas.

Finally, inflation leads to a sense of entitlement. As a counselor, I have witnessed high school students throw temper tantrums or have anxiety attacks when they receive their first B! One parent bitterly complained when her child received a B and told me with all sincerity that her daughter deserved an A because she was “special.” Another parent demanded make up work from the previous semester for her son who had approximately sixty unexcused absences. Such requests place additional stress on teachers as they not only have to gather the assignments, but also evaluate the work. One teacher

asked, “I wonder if his future employer would be so accommodating?” Another complained that the request punished the teachers who had done no wrong and rewarded the student for skipping school.

Preventing Inflation

When I began my career in education, bonus points seemed like a harmless way of helping a student. Now, many students depend on them. Although a few extra credit points for a content-related assignment can be encouraging, teachers must be cautious and set strict limits.

Teachers can take several steps to reduce inflation in their grade assignments. As some suggest, teachers can separate academic from nonacademic grades (Guskey, 2006). Teachers can utilize a variety of assessment strategies regularly to monitor student progress and take preventive steps when a student fails to demonstrate understanding. Grading policy and rubrics should be available to both students, parents, and should clearly address how grade assignments are determined. If online grading sites are available, teachers should post and update grades regularly. Finally, teachers can collaborate in professional learning communities to discuss grading policy, establish strict guidelines for credit recovery programs, and develop common assessments.

A single teacher who engages in the practice of inflation can harm an entire school in the same way as one overinflated tire leads to a bumpy ride. To create a smoother ride, teachers, counselors, and administrators can journey together to ensure that grades are an accurate and fair assessment of a student’s performance.

References

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