Grades as a lever to support every student's learning

One school's attempt to rethink traditional grading

CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

Abstract

Over the past few years, leaders and educators at East Hartford High School in East Hartford, Connecticut, have sought out and tested ways to ensure that each of their 1,700 students have opportunities to form meaningful relationships with adults, engage in rigorous instruction, and receive tailored support. They have prioritized initiatives aimed at closing persistent opportunity and achievement gaps along the lines of race and socioeconomic status. In 2020, after the state of Connecticut issued guidance that allowed districts to reform grading practices to better accommodate student needs during the pandemic and remote instruction, East Hartford closely examined its own grading policies. They found that their traditional approach, similar to what many schools across the country use, disproportionately favored students with greater access to resources, demotivated students who performed poorly on early-semester assignments, and was susceptible to bias. The high school launched "Grading for Equity," an initiative aimed at more accurately assessing students' knowledge while reducing bias and supporting student motivation. This case study describes the initiative's implementation, including educators' focus on maintaining high standards and ensuring students graduate career- and college-ready. It concludes with important questions for school leaders and design teams who seek to test out innovative approaches to grading.

Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of a series of teaching cases featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), part of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.

- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the document. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high school education.

- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

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KEYWORDS

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Introduction

A few years ago, East Hartford students who failed to complete homework on time often received a zero for the assignment, whether the reason stemmed from disinterest, forgetfulness, or the burdens of family life or other obstacles outside their control. Many of these students became discouraged and disengaged from class discussions, or skipped class altogether.

When the state of Connecticut called on school districts to devise less punitive grading approaches during the Covid-19 pandemic, East Hartford examined its own practices and sought out approaches that would better meet the needs of their students.

For the 2022-23 school year, East Hartford teachers are using a new grading approach. This redesigned grading system gives students who are unable to hand in assignments on time due to circumstances beyond their control the flexibility to make up assignments–and encourages them to stick with the course and strive for success. Under the school's new Grading for Equity initiative, teachers can no longer assign zeros, and students can hand in assignments past the due date without penalty.

The initiative builds on the work of Joe Feldman, a California-based former teacher and administrator who authored the 2018 book *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. His work gained traction at schools nationwide as the pandemic worsened, school closures dragged on, and leaders realized that some students were experiencing more severe disruptions to their learning than others.[1]

At East Hartford, the leadership team has wrestled with how to re-engage students who fall behind in their coursework. The pandemic brought new sources of stress and economic hardship for students. Many students picked up jobs to help their families, which increased school absences. Those developments highlighted the need to re-examine how teachers were supporting students, particularly those who are historically underserved, to master grade-level content and build skills needed for long-term success.

As part of the district's equity work, the high school and district leadership teams discussed how current grading practices could be modified to better support all students, especially those performing below grade level, while maintaining high expectations.

> "I think we're really trying to say, what does a grade mean? How does a grade engage kids? How does a grade tell a student a narrative about themselves?... If your grading system is explicitly setting up... an unachievable process for our kids that doesn't speak to their instructional needs, abilities, and interests, then you should talk about that." - *Administrator*

Following school-wide professional learning sessions focused on the three Grading for Equity pillars of accuracy, bias resistance, and student motivation, each instructional data team met at the end of the 2020-21 school year to identify and make a plan for new grading practices.

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1   Feldman's 2018 report, "School Grading Policies Are Failing Children: A Call to Action for Equitable Grading," examined two districts before and after they implemented equitable grading practices. The report's data from external evaluators shows the practice helped narrow achievement gaps between white and non-white students and between students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Skeptics of grading for equity, however, assert that there is insufficient research showing that the approach works at scale. See "Time to Pull the Plug on Traditional Grading?" for more discussion.

While many educators, students, and families applaud the new grading changes, others have raised tough questions: how can teachers and administrators ensure that students still receive actionable feedback and develop habits and skills valued in college and the workplace? Is there a risk that the policy inadvertently maintains or widens existing inequities across communities?

The context: East Hartford High School

East Hartford High School is a public high school in East Hartford, CT, that serves approximately 1,700 students. The student population is diverse: 52% Hispanic/Latino, 32% Black, 9% White, 4% Asian, and 3% multiracial. Approximately 15% of students are multilingual learners while 63% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Like schools across the state and the country, East Hartford High School has experienced persistent opportunity and achievement gaps. For the 2021-22 school year, 49.5% of White students, 36% of Black students, and 29.7% of Hispanic/Latino students at East Hartford High School demonstrated proficiency on the state's English Language Arts exam. On the state math exam, 37% of the school's White students demonstrated proficiency compared to 21.4% of Black students and 19.9% of Hispanic/Latino students.

School administrators and teachers have sought to close these gaps through a variety of strategies aimed at helping students build and sustain meaningful relationships. They rolled out an advisory program, created an induction program to welcome and support students who transfer to the school mid-year, and scheduled student-teacher conferences to review student data and set and discuss goals.

Beyond grading: Other strategies for engaging students at East Hartford High School

Through East Hartford High School's weekly **advisory program** called "Connections," each 9th grader is placed in a Connections group that is supervised by a teacher or other staff member. The small group and its advisor stay together for all four years of high school. Once a week, the group meets to engage in activities that build skills like teamwork, creativity, self-efficacy, and leadership. Juniors and seniors help lead programming for freshmen and sophomores. "I love my Connections class…I think it's just a good way to build bonds with people," one student said. Another student explained that the dedicated time enables them and their classmates to open up about successes and challenges. "In Connections, we talk freely," the student said. "Connections is one of the great things they have added to the school."

After noticing that many students who transferred to East Hartford in the middle of a school year struggled to perform at grade level, the school launched a "**Hornet Induction Program**" to welcome new students into the school community. Induction ceremonies take place monthly for new transfer students. Students receive a welcome pin, learn from peers and staff about how to get involved in the school community, and are assigned a peer mentor who can help them connect with other students, navigate the school building, and access resources.

All students also participate in "**Scholar Hour**," an opportunity to meet one-on-one with a teacher or administrator a few times a year to review their "Hornet Report," which includes data on attendance, academic performance, behavior, and community service, and to set ambitious yet attainable goals. Several students said that setting goals helped motivate them to "get into shape" and apply themselves more in their classes. Teachers noted that Scholar Hour is especially important because they "can't always give [students] the one-on-one conference time that they deserve" during regular class time.

District and school leaders recognized a need to transform their grading practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. As at many schools across the region and country, grades at East Hartford High School served several key functions: teachers used them to assess students' understanding of content and their on-track status, provide students with feedback on their areas of growth, motivate students to put in more effort, and communicate student achievement to external audiences (e.g., families and colleges).

In April 2020, the Connecticut State Department of Education issued new guidance to districts regarding pandemic-era grading practices intended to ensure that students were not penalized for public health emergency-related factors beyond their control. This guidance offered districts an option to develop a local grading approach that promoted equity while also assessing achievement. East Hartford took that option and developed a new grading approach during remote learning that prohibited teachers from assigning grades lower than a 50%.[2] The new approach also included a universal rubric designed to assess students in two categories: "commitment to learning" (i.e., effort) and "content accuracy" (i.e., mastery of the material).

These pandemic-era shifts led to a growing community-wide interest in examining the school's traditional grading policy. Some teachers said that pre-pandemic grading practices disproportionately favored students with greater access to resources, often failed to account for reasons that a student may miss a deadline that are outside that student's control, and often served to de-motivate students who received a "zero" because many could not see a path to success beyond that grade.

The mismatch between the racial diversity of the school's students and the racial composition of the teaching force magnified these concerns. Black and Hispanic/Latino students made up 84% of East Hartford's student population during the 2022-23 school year. But only 13% of the school's educators identify as Black or Hispanic/Latino, even as research has found that Black and Hispanic/Latino students' access to same-race educators improves student outcomes both in the short term (e.g., test scores and suspensions) and the long term (e.g., high school graduation and college aspirations).

Recent studies have found that teachers are just as likely to have racial biases as non-teachers, and these biases can influence teachers' expectations for their students, the opportunities they afford students, and their approaches to discipline. These findings are prompting school leaders nationwide to explore policies that can prevent those biases from harming students.

At East Hartford, the pandemic, its resulting disruptions to student learning, and the flexibility to pilot new ideas during remote learning catalyzed administrators to explore new grading strategies grounded in the "Grading for Equity'' concept set forth in Joe Feldman's book of the same name. Each of Grading for Equity's three pillars–accuracy, bias resistance, and student motivation–contain corresponding strategies, as depicted in Appendix A.[3]

Today at East Hartford, in addition to a prohibition on the assignment of zeros, all teachers must adhere to the "70/30 split," meaning 70% of a student's grade is based on performance (e.g., tests, quizzes, projects, or essays) and 30% is based on practice (e.g., homework or

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2   Using a "50" as the grading floor makes the gradations of the letter scale more proportionate by requiring the same degree of improvement to move from "F" to "D" as from "B" to "A".

3   To ensure accuracy, Feldman recommends avoiding giving students a zero and instead weighting recent performance to represent students' learning progression over time. Strategies to support bias-resistance include basing grades on student work and not whether they met a deadline or actively participated in class. Feldman's research found that both late penalties and class participation can disproportionately hurt traditionally under-resourced students who face more barriers to homework completion and class attendance. Finally, to promote student motivation, Feldman advises schools to allow students to redo assignments to give them multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning and growth, and to transparently use rubrics to help students better understand the rationale underlying specific grades.

classwork). "This way, we are measuring knowledge or what the student has mastered," one administrator said.

Each academic department was allowed to select the strategies within each of Feldman's Grading for Equity pillars that they considered feasible to implement. The strategies for the 2022-23 school year include[4]:

Department Grading Strategies

Subject	Pillar 1: Accuracy	Pillar 2: Bias-Resistant	Pillar 3: Motivate
CTE	No Zero	Not Grading Homework	Retakes and Redos
English	Minimum Grading	Not Grading Participation and Effort	Retakes and Redos
FPA: Art & Music	Minimum Grading	Not Penalizing Late Work	Retakes and Redos
Health/PE	Minimum Grading	Not Grading Homework	Retakes and Redos
Math	Minimum Grading	Not Grading Particiation and Effort	Retakes and Redos
Science	Minimum Grading	Not Grading Homework	Retakes and Redos
Special Education	Minimum Grading	Not Penalizing Late Work	Retakes and Redos
Social Studies	0-4 Scale	Basing Grades on Summatives	Retakes and redos
World Language/ESL	Minimum Grading	Not Grading Participation and Effort	Retakes and Redos

In practice, these strategies mean that students have more opportunities to master content and demonstrate their learning to their teachers. "So, if a student turns in an essay and they earn a D, they have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, redo the essay and make those corrections, [and] turn it back in without penalty," one teacher said.

The challenge: Leveraging more equitable grading practices while maintaining a commitment to postsecondary readiness

Many students, families, teachers, and school leaders said they were excited about the changes. Several students said the grading changes helped them and their classmates stay motivated, especially when they were struggling in a class and falling behind early in the school year.

> "[W]hen you see the 50, you would [want to] work harder to get a higher grade [because] the 50 doesn't really look that good. But when [teachers] give the zero, some of the kids just give up and just say 'It is what it is.' Yeah, I know from experience [because] I've been there. I got a zero and just gave up. But the 50, I felt like if I work harder, the 50 can move…" - *Student*

Teachers at East Hartford High School began to notice improvements in students' attitudes as well.

> "I am so looking forward to this shift as a teacher…[Students] are more focused on improving, which is something I didn't see in my first year." - *Teacher*

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4   "EHHS Grading Framework," East Hartford High School, 2023, https://cdnsm5-ss10.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_19402419/File/EHHS%20Grading%20Framework%202022-2023.pdf.

The changes to East Hartford's grading policy aim to provide students flexibility when circumstances outside students' control impact their ability to meet deadlines. Several students noted that the new policy is especially helpful for high schoolers who are responsible for taking care of younger siblings at home or who have a part-time job to help with family expenses.

One parent noted that she supports the prohibition on "zero" scores because, "it can help some students who are in need of that break."

Finally, the new grading policy also seeks to ensure grading consistency across teachers within a single department. In prior years, "everybody's gradebook was set up differently," a teacher said. "So, there was no equity from class to class…it was all over." Additionally, other teachers noted that grading used to cause them anxiety because of the lack of guidance or guardrails. The new approach reduces teacher stress and allows them to focus more of their energy on meeting their students' instructional needs.

Still, some teachers and parents have questions about the new policy. Teachers hesitant to embrace the changes wonder how the school can ensure that the new policy does not impede students' development of the skills and mindsets needed for postsecondary success.

> "When our kids go to college, this isn't how college goes. You have to beg for an extension and then you may or may not be granted one. I worry that our attempts to support our students can leave them unprepared for success after they leave our school. So the question is, how do we ensure there's an understanding of rigorous expectations and also second chances when they are needed?"
> - Teacher

Some parents raised similar doubts. "Sometimes I think it's a detriment to our children to allow late work, especially if there's not an extenuating circumstance," one mother said. "Because now you are letting [students] believe [that is how it works] in the real world. You can't come to work late every day. You can't hand in your report to your boss late every day."

Teachers and administrators also emphasized that postsecondary readiness is especially important for students who will be the first in their families to graduate from high school and so might not have a deep understanding of expectations in college and careers. They pointed out that most of the wealthier suburbs in the state have not implemented Grading for Equity initiatives, which makes them "a bit nervous" and causes them to "listen carefully for dropping standards," which would be an immediate red flag.

Some teachers also shared concerns that the different grading priorities held by different academic departments could be affecting students' class work priorities. "My department decided to accept late work so students put my work on the backburner," one teacher said. Another teacher noted that when students deprioritize a class, it can have far-reaching consequences–not only can it prevent the student from receiving actionable feedback throughout the semester, but it also can impact the "robustness" of other students' learning opportunities if a significant number of students in the class are unprepared for in-class discussions.

Administrators emphasized that the school's current implementation of Grading for Equity is a "pilot" and that meeting the needs of every student will require continued refinements at both the school- and department-level.

Discussion

On East Hartford High School

1. How can the East Hartford leadership team ensure that new teachers understand, embrace, and can contribute to the ongoing refinement of its Grading for Equity work? What role might current teachers and students play in new teacher onboarding?

2. Consider what you know about evidence-based strategies to support students who have become disengaged in coursework. What additional ideas would you encourage East Hartford to explore to help re-engage these students? What are some barriers to consider?

3. In what ways might concerns about Grading for Equity's impact on postsecondary readiness reflect a narrow view of the skills needed for college and career success? How might East Hartford's new grading approach and its focus on mastery ultimately support student success in 21st century jobs?

4. How might East Hartford High School assess the impact of its Grading for Equity work, including whether it is affecting students' postsecondary readiness? What data would the school leadership team need to collect and analyze? Who would need to participate in the data collection and analysis process?

On high schools in general

5. How would you assess the fairness of your school's current grading strategy from the perspectives of teachers, students, and families?

6. Are there ways to improve your school's grading strategy to ensure that students who face obstacles that make it harder to complete work on time still have equitable opportunities to excel in their classes?

7. What are the barriers to making those school-wide improvements? How might you address them as a leadership team?

8. How will your school balance the need for flexibility with the need to support every student to build the skills, habits, and mindsets necessary for postsecondary and workplace success?

Additional Reading

- Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. Corwin, 2018.

- Feldman, Joe. "Teachers' Examples of Equitable Grading." 2023. https://gradingforequity.org/resources/teacher-examples-of-equitable-grading.

- Randazzo, Sarah. (2023). "Schools Are Ditching Homework, Deadlines in Favor of 'Equitable Grading'." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2023. https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-are-ditching-homework-deadlines-in-favor-of-equitable-grading-dcef7c3e.

Pillar	Strategy
Accurate	• Avoiding zeros • Minimum grading • 0-4 scale • Weighting recent performance
Bias-Resistant	• Based on required content • Based on student work, not the timing • Alternative consequences • Excluding participation • Based entirely on summative assessment
Motivational	• Renaming grades • Retakes and redos • Rubrics • Student trackers • Standards-based gradebooks

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5   Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms.* Corwin, 2018.