



VPI Information Brief 2

Grading in an Inclusive Classroom

CLASSROOM SCENARIO

Mrs. Cub, an 8th grade social studies teacher, and Mr. Gold, a special education teacher, recently began to work together in an inclusive setting. They had spent considerable time and effort collaborating on the design and delivery of instruction for all students in the class. Then it came time to determine grades for report cards. Mrs. Cub felt it was her responsibility to grade all the students. She felt that students' grades should be based only on tests because ultimately all students have to pass the LEAP to be promoted to high school. Mrs. Cub also felt that it was only fair to grade all students in the same manner. Mr. Gold, meanwhile, wanted to collaborate with Mrs. Cub in grading the students. His preference was for grades to be based on multiple assessment measures, which he believed better reflected students' abilities and progress. How can Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold resolve their differences?

Assigning grades for student work and/or effort can be challenging for teachers of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Why the struggles? Wood (2002) suggests that issues such as fairness and objectivity must be grappled with by teachers such as Mrs. Cub, Mr. Gold, and those of you who find yourselves in co-teaching arrangements.

Where can we go for guidance on grading matters? There is some legislation that provides input. While IDEA does not address grading specifically, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act which are under the legal authority of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) contain language related to principles of disparate treatment and impact. *"Disparate treatment refers to treating students differently because of their characteristics or membership in a particular group, whereas disparate impact examines whether the similar treatment of students has different outcomes for certain groups of students"* (Salend & Duhaney, 2002, p. 10). The experimental literature provides little guidance. Based on our reading of what has been written in this area, we suggest the following: (a) review your district policies for guidance; (b) agree on a purpose for grading; and (c) develop an acceptable list of grading alternatives.

Because district policies may differ across LEAs in Louisiana, it is critical that school professionals start by reviewing their own policies prior to making classroom-level decisions. These policies – if there are any – will provide Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold a first level of guidance. In the best of circumstances, existing policies may address their areas of difference. In the worst of circumstances, such a review may

lead to district-level activity to address the policy deficiencies.

Second, it is important for collaborating teachers to be in agreement on the purpose of their grading. This factor seems to be at the heart of the difficulties evident in our scenario. In this case, the general education teacher (Mrs. Cub) has one grading purpose in mind, whereas the special education teacher (Mr. Gold) has another objective. Different purposes may even be held by parents and students (Munk & Bursuck, 2004). What are the purposes of grading? Salend and Duhaney (2002) identified the following for classroom teachers:

- Achievement – to certify and measure mastery of curricular goals and specific skills.
- Communication – to provide feedback to students, families, and others.
- Comparison – to compare students in terms of their competence, progress, and effort.
- Educational and Career Planning – to aid students, families, and school districts in determining the courses and educational services needed by students, placing students who enter the school district from another school district, and planning for the future.
- Effort – to acknowledge and indicate the effort a student puts forth in learning.
- Instructional Planning – to identify students' learning strengths and needs, and to group students for instruction
- Motivation – to motivate students to learn, to reward learning, and to promote self-esteem.
- Progress – to indicate progress in learning over a specific period of time.

The third consideration for Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold are potential grading alternatives. Wood (2002) provides the following suggestions:

- Pass / Fail – broad based criteria are established for passing or failing.
- IEP grading – competency levels on student's IEP are translated into the school district's performance standards.
- Contracting – the student and teacher agree on specific activities required for a certain grade.
- Shared grading – two or more teachers determine a student's grade.
- Portfolio evaluation – a cumulative portfolio is maintained of each student's work, demonstrating achievement in key skill areas from kindergarten through 12th grade.
- Point system – points are assigned to activities or assignments that add up to the term grade.
- Mastery or criterion-level grading – content is divided into subcomponents. Students earn credit when their mastery of a certain skill reaches an acceptable level.
- Multiple grading – the student is assessed and graded in several areas, such as ability, effort, and achievement.
- Student self-comparison – students evaluate themselves on an individual basis.

So what can Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold do to reconcile their differences? What can you do when in similar circumstances to systematically and effectively build grading adaptations into your schooling process? If pressed for time, Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold (and you) could agree on a grading purpose and choose from the suggested grading alternatives, communicating your plans to principals, parents, and students so that all might be informed and / or have input. Over the long term, Mrs. Cub and Mr. Gold could direct the principal to lead a school-wide effort to develop consistent procedures by following the three steps we have described: (a) review district policies if they exist; (b) agree on a purpose or multiple purposes for grading; and (c) develop a list of grading alternatives that are acceptable and understood. The activity could become a school improvement and / or professional development focus. Principals might consider developing packets for new teachers so that they can be made aware of the

school-wide grading policy from the beginning of their employment.

And as we conclude this Information Brief on grading, be sure that you build an evaluation piece into the classroom or school-wide grading program. With the empirical literature on effective grading procedures so limited, it makes sense to pay close and ongoing attention to what is implemented to ensure that actions accomplish the desired goals. Periodically ask yourselves if the grading purposes are appropriate for the types of students you have. Also, ask yourselves if the grading alternatives chosen are effective tools to reach your assessment purposes. Teach well!

References:

- Munk, D. D., & Bursuck, W. D. (2004). Personalized grading plans: A systematic approach to making grades of included students more accurate and meaningful. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 36(9), 1-11.
- Salend, S. J., & Duhaney, L. M. (2002). Grading students in inclusive settings. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(3), 8-15.
- Wood, J. W. (2002). *Adapting instruction to accommodate students in inclusive settings* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Questions for Reflection

1. What guidelines does your school district provide for adapting grades?
2. How might grading alternatives compromise / enhance standards and reduce course integrity?
3. Make a case for or against the following statement: Grades for all students in general education classrooms should be assigned by the general education teacher.
4. Do parents understand how grades are determined and what they reflect?

Discussion Board Link:

<http://www.validatedpractices.com/flexiforums/login.cfm?fid=0>