

Book Review

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On Your Mark: Challenging the Conventions of Grading and Reporting is the latest book by Thomas R. Guskey, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky. Guskey has written prolifically about educational measurement, assessment, and grading. This book challenges the traditional grading policies in place at the vast majority of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. While much of what Guskey advocates for may seem radical, it is important for school leaders, professors, teachers, school board members, and even parents to understand his ideas. Because of the high stakes associated with grades (honor roll status, enrollment in AP classes, college admission, etc.), it is vital that all stakeholders be aware of the variability and unreliability of traditional grading methods.

Guskey opens the book with a clear outline of three beginning steps for successful change in grading and reporting: 1) clarify the purpose of grades, 2) align all policies and practices with the stated purpose, and 3) ensure proposed changes are supported by research evidence. He emphasizes that to change traditional policies and practices, educators must be bold and work through the challenges. Chapter 1 focuses completely on that first step ("Define the Purpose of Grades"). By establishing this foundation, teachers can more effectively resolve issues that may arise when analyzing grading practices and moving toward reliable and equitable grading.

The subsequent chapters of the book each call for a challenge of traditional grading practices. Chapter 2 is "Challenge the Use of Percentage Grades" and Chapter 3 is "Challenge Plus and Minus and Half Grade Increments." Both of these practices are common at all levels of schooling, and Guskey insists they be questioned because they give the *illusion* of precision while they actually make grading more subjective and unreliable. The key point to understanding both chapters is that "the accuracy of grades comes from the precision of the instruments used to measure learning" (p. 28). Unfortunately, the 100-point scale many educators use only gives the illusion of precision. Guskey explains this contradiction through the example of a competitor running the 100-meter dash. The runner's performance can be measured very accurately with a stopwatch that gives precise measurements. A 100-point grading scale, however, includes no such precise instrument of measurement. There are 100 gradations to the measurement scale, which means there is much room for interpretation. Guskey argues that reducing the gradations to four (instead of 100) will yield more reliable measurements of student learning. For example, a student is much more likely to be "misclassified as performing at the 85 percent level when his true achievement is at the 90 percent level than he is of being misclassified at scoring at a *Satisfactory* level when his true achievement is at an *Excellent* level" (p. 29). This argument against excessive gradations continues throughout Chapter 3, as the use of pluses and minuses (and the correlating grade points for each) only increases variability.

In Chapter 4, Guskey asks us to "Challenge Bell-Shaped Grade Distributions" because in educational institutions where the purpose is for students to learn, grading should always be based on students' performance on specific learning criteria. Normative criteria and grading on a curve do *not* show how well individual students have learned or mastered a skill; they do, however, promote unhealthy competition and can reduce student motivation. Simply stated, teachers should be clear about what they want students to know and be able to do and then base their grading solely on those standards.

Guskey says that educators must ask themselves one simple question about their purpose: Am I here to *select* talent or to *develop* talent? This question is the focus of Chapter 5: "Challenge the Computation of Class Rank." Those who believe the focus should be to select talent must work to determine the differences between students; those who want to focus on developing talent must decide what students should learn and be able to do, then work toward ensuring that they do. Class rank is used solely to select talent, which is incongruous to the stated purpose of most K-12 schools. Recognizing excellence in a learning community is important, but it can be done without using norm-based criteria. Like many postsecondary schools, high schools could acknowledge excellence with the Latin honors system of *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude*. This "spreads the wealth" so to speak.

In Chapter 6: "Challenge the Use of a Single Grade," Guskey argues that one reason why grades are unreliable is because there are myriad factors and sources of evidence that teachers include when they determine grades. These range from summative evidence like major exams, projects, and portfolios to behaviors such as effort, attendance, and neatness. Many teachers combine all of these factors,

resulting in “hodgepodge grading.” The variation has two causes: a lack of purpose in grading and the format of grading itself. Guskey recommends distinguishing between product criteria (which focus on what students know and are able to do) and process criteria (which includes nonacademic factors like class participation, homework completion, and effort) so that grades are more reliable and meaningful. The final two chapters of the book ask the reader to “Challenge the Use of Mathematical Algorithms” (Chapter 7) and “Challenge Practices that Confound the Meaning of Grades” (Chapter 8). In each of these, Guskey reinforces the idea that once an institution has a clear and meaningful purpose for grading, educators are less likely to use practices like algorithms, averaging, and basing grades on student behavior (as punishment or as a reward for non-academic behaviors). He emphasizes again that “grading requires careful planning, thoughtful judgement, a clear focus on purpose, excellent communication skills, and an overriding concern for the well-being of students” (p. 95).

On Your Mark is written with remarkable clarity. Guskey takes what could be perplexing material and breaks it down into well-organized chapters written in a logical sequence. Additionally, he uses practical examples to help illustrate his points. He even throws in the occasional metaphor in order to help the reader grasp the information. Guskey does *not* address the multitude of challenges that would come with changing grading practices or asking educators to make such a dramatic paradigm shift; however, that is, perhaps, a topic for another book. He does provide the reader with a clear outline of how to begin change and take a first step toward more equitable and reliable grading practices.