February 2006 • Volume 9 • Number 3 • Pages 12-15 "Teaching in the Middle" by *Rick Wormeli*

Turning Zeroes to 60s

A student does not turn in his project. You record a zero in the grade book. When it comes time to determine the student's end of the grading period mark, you have to make a decision: Do you keep the zero or turn it into a 50, 60, or 70 to make the grading scale fair?

Few aspects of grading cause as much consternation among middle school teachers as this one. If you convert the zero to a 60, it seems as if the student could literally sit on his rear end and do nothing for an entire grading period and still earn 60s. It's wrong, we think, to give students points when they didn't do anything. This is an understandable conclusion, but it's wrong.

The Power of Zeroes

When we turn students' zeroes into 60s in our grade books, we are not giving students something for doing nothing. We're adjusting the grade intervals so that any averaging we do is mathematically justified. More important, in the overall pattern of grades, it presents a more accurate picture of the students' ability.

A zero has an undeserved and devastating effect on students and their grades—so much so that no matter what the student does, the grade distorts the final grade as a true indicator of mastery. Mathematically and ethically this is unacceptable. Just look at the example below to see the negative impact of a zero in the 100-point grading scale.

Test Scores for Six Tests	Average	Grade
0, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100	83%	C+
60, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100	93%	B+

Should we use an F grade near the top of the F range, such as 60 in this case, or should we use the bottom, most hurtful and distorting of F grades—a zero—as the indicator of failure? What purpose does it serve to use a zero to indicate a student failed to demonstrate mastery?

Does a string of perfect papers for a grading period combined with one paper not submitted, as illustrated above, equate to a C+ level of mastery? No, that's two whole grade levels below an A. The B+ is a more accurate rendering of what the student knows and is able to do.

Also, if the zero was earned in the first half of the grading period or even just once in a consistent string of other grades and we are grading on a trend because we want to be current in our evaluation of the student's status, we might even drop that one score and use the majority and most recent grades to indicate mastery, earning the student an A for the grading period.

In the June 29 issue of *The Virginian-Pilot*, Virginia Beach School Board member Emma L. Davis compares the practice of giving zeroes to taking temperature readings over time:

"Consider trying to find the average temperature over five days and recording 85, 82, 83 and 86, then forgetting a day and recording 0. The average temperature would be 67, a figure that does not accurately show the weather from that week. If those temperatures were grades, a student would fail after consistently earning Bs and Cs."

Being Accurate

In a middle school classroom, we avoid any practice that compromises a grade's accuracy. But the 4.0 grading scale is an inaccuracy. Instead of 100s in the example above, put in 4.0s, and put a 1.0 in place of

the 60. The result is the same: a zero drops the final grade by two letter grades, a 1.0 drops it by only one letter grade.

To reconcile this, we have to declare 1.0—not a zero—as the failing and/or unscorable level on a 4.0 rubric. A 1.0 is what we record if a student doesn't do his work or fails the test. If we use 1.0 as the bottom score of a 4.0 grading scale, the resulting average is more in line with our goals of not penalizing a student's grade average beyond repair based on one incomplete assignment or failed test.

Remember, too, that effective middle school teachers determine grades using the median and mode, not the mean. This means we don't average all of a student's grades to determine his or her final grade. We look instead at the most consistent level of performance, not all the performances. This is a far more accurate rendering of proficiency.

Proficiency improves as the year progresses. Middle school students are very different people in June than they were in September, and we don't hold their earlier digressions against them. For example, if a student earned a D, A, A, and A for his four quarters with me, he'd earn an A for the year.

With such a policy, some of us might be afraid that students who earn a zero that has been adjusted up to a 60 can brag about how they can get 60 points without lifting a finger. But think about that for a moment: The 60 is still an F. What sense does it make for the student to claim to classmates, "Hey, check it out everyone: I didn't do the project, and I still got an F"? The correlation between hard work, learning, and achieving success is still clear: If we act irresponsibly or don't learn, we get a failing grade.

Assessing for Learning

At this year's NMSA conference in Philadelphia, assessment expert Rick Stiggins made the point with his insightful reminder that we should assess *for* learning, not just do assessments of learning. It's not enough to measure and report students' mastery of standards. We have to use assessment data in ways that motivate students to learn and grow.

We can jump up and down, calling for higher standards and rigid accountability while presenting overwhelming data on individual students, but it all means nothing unless the failing student understands the meaning of assessments and that we are there to extend a ladder to him to help him crawl from his hole. Regardless of whether he failed because of his immaturity or cognitive readiness level, great teachers still provide the ladder.

Remember, too, that an F is not a label. It does not mean the student has failed at learning, only that he has not yet demonstrated mastery. An F on an assessment is not justification to declare a student incapable, immature, irresponsible or defiant. Effective teachers investigate the reasons for the failure and then address them. So much negative emotional baggage is associated with receiving an F that we must extend an emotional bridge to each student who fails, in order to bring him back to personal investment in the class and his own future. The task becomes even more important with students who received a string of failing grades.

Adjusting zeroes to 60 is not giving students something for having done nothing. It's adjusting the grading scale so that each grade has an appropriate amount of influence on the student's summative evaluation and each grade provides information for effective decision making.

Distorted and inaccurate grades that offer little more than harsh punishment with no hope for parole make middle school students throw down the ball and go home. They see no reason to play. Grades that mitigate the negative effects of an imperfect grading system keep students in the game.

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