

Technical Assistance Paper

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Grading Policies for Students with Disabilities

The purpose of this technical assistance paper (TAP) is to provide Florida administrators and teachers with information about identifying and implementing valid and meaningful grading strategies for students with disabilities, primarily those working on Sunshine State Standards. This TAP is intended to introduce recommended practices to assist district personnel in developing and refining grading policies. To expand these recommendations, the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services intends to fund the development of an on-line professional development module addressing grading policies for students with disabilities following the release of this TAP.

Section 1 of this document provides general information on various approaches to using assignments and assessments to assign grades; section 2 focuses on the effects of the use of these different grading approaches on students with disabilities. Clearly, grading practices have profound implications for access to the general curriculum, promotion and retention, and postsecondary options for students with disabilities and thus need to be addressed by districts, schools, and individual educational plan (IEP) teams in a thoughtful, collaborative way. For this reason, section 3 outlines recommendations in developing a grading system that effectively includes students with disabilities.

Section 1:

General Information Applicable to All Students

Definition and Evolution of Grading

Grading is best understood as a shorthand method of communicating complicated information about student learning and progress (Guskey, 2002; O'Connor, 2002). A grade, such as a grade on a report card, is a summary of a teacher's judgment of the adequacy of a student's achievement at a particular point in time (Guskey, 1996). Report card grades should reflect a student's achievement relative to the curriculum standards he or she is working toward. Report card grades should not be used to communicate a student's progress or achievement gain between baseline performance measures and summative outcome measures. Progress monitoring data, which is collected between baseline data and summative data, is best used to communicate student rate of progress through graphic visuals and portfolio records.

Grading became part of American education less than a century ago, when compulsory school attendance laws led to soaring enrollment and teachers found it convenient to use percentage grades to quickly summarize information about student achievement. Studies done in the first

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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPERS (TAPs) are produced periodically by the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services to present discussion of current topics. The TAPs may be used for inservice sessions, technical assistance visits, parent organization meetings, or interdisciplinary discussion groups. Topics are identified by state steering committees, district personnel, and individuals, or from program compliance monitoring.

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half of the 20th century exposed early concerns about the validity of grades (Guskey, 1996). These concerns continue to this day, demonstrating that no single grading system fulfills all the purposes of grading and is seen as fair for all students.

Purposes and Audiences for Grading

Teachers gather grading information for two distinct reasons: to make instructional decisions (formative assessment) and to communicate a summary of the student's achievement (summative assessment).

- Formative measures which involve ongoing assessment and grading feedback for the purpose of **instructional decision-making** is vital to teaching and learning. Teachers must assess the learning of their students frequently in order to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and plan for future instruction. This function is separate from the communication function served by report card grades.
- Summative measures are essential to report card grading, which primarily addresses the **communication** purpose of grading. Educators use report card grades to share information with parents and students and to call attention to the needs of struggling students. Report card grades also have a role in promotion and retention decisions and may be used to identify students for evaluation for special programs and services.

Parents use report card grades to obtain information about the achievement of their child and to determine whether their child needs additional help in school (Guskey, 1996). They also use grades to compare their child to other students and may use grades to determine whether to give rewards for effort or achievement.

Students use grades to evaluate their own performance and set goals for future learning (Guskey, 1996). They also use grades to compare themselves to other students. High grades may serve as a student's entry ticket for honor rolls, clubs, and universities and may be motivating for some students. However, low grades appear neither to motivate students to greater effort nor lead to improved performance; instead they may actually decrease engagement, motivation, and performance (Guskey, 1996; Hargis, 2003).

Given that grades are a significant, and sometimes sole, method of communication about student achievement, it is vital that they reflect valid and meaningful information for the teacher, student, and parent. The rest of this section focuses on the relationship between various grading approaches and the validity and meaningfulness of report card grades. The differences in grading approaches among teachers are reflected in the factors they choose to consider in the calculation of grades and to what they choose to compare the student's work. These elements are discussed separately below; however, they are closely interrelated and work in combination to form a teacher's overall grading approach.

Approaches to Grading: What Does the Grade Reflect?

Some teachers determine grades based solely on the student's academic performance; other teachers include factors not directly related to the demonstration of academic learning such as

effort, participation, homework, spelling, work habits, or behavior. McMillan (2001) found that teachers grade mostly on achievement, but that they do consider other factors, such as homework and perceived effort. Research shows that the most effective practice is to determine the academic grade based on academic performance only, for several reasons.

- To be meaningful, grades must focus on achievement. Grades that include effort or participation do not give parents or students a clear picture of the student's academic learning.
- Using academic grades to punish poor behavior or effort is not effective and does not lead to improvement (Guskey, 1996; Hargis, 2003).
- All grading approaches include an element of *subjectivity*. This inherent subjectivity is legitimate since it admits the teacher's professional judgment into the grading equation. However, *bias*, which is defined as letting nonacademic aspects such as behavior or neatness affect academic grades, negates the meaningfulness and validity of grades (Guskey, 1996; Hargis, 2003). For example, teachers tend to equate poor behaviors with lower academic achievement (Bennett, Gottesman, Rock, & Cerullo, 1993). This may lead to a grading bias against boys, whose behavior is generally viewed less favorably by teachers than is girls' behavior. It may also lead to a bias against students with disabilities, whose behavior is also more frequently viewed negatively by teachers. Similarly, allowing a bias against poor handwriting (Sweedler-Brown, 1992) to influence a student's academic grade makes the grade itself less valid as a measure of the student's mastery of the content of instruction.

Giving additional, separate grades for other elements—such as effort, participation, and behavior—keeps the focus of the academic grade on learning, while giving parents and students specific information about behavior, effort, and participation (Stiggins, Arter, Chappius, & Chappius, 2004; Hills, 1991).

Approaches to Grading: What Is Compared for the Grade?

Grades reflect either a comparison of the student's performance to the performance of other students, a comparison of the student's performance to his or her own previous performance, or a comparison to established learning criteria.

- **Comparison to the performance of other students-** This practice is commonly known as "grading on the curve." Research shows that it is ineffective.
 - It does not reflect or communicate meaningful information about learning, but only about relative standing. It does not provide feedback to learners on what they need to do to improve their performance and thus their grade. It only tells where students stand in relation to classmates, creating an artificial standard that would change every year with a new group of students.
 - It may be next to impossible for students who begin as low achievers to improve their grade, even if they have made good progress in learning. Similarly, it does not support

improvements in instruction because grading on the curve does not give teachers the incentive of seeing their effective instruction lead to increased levels of success for all their students.

- **Comparison to the student's previous performance-** Grades based on the student's individual progress take ability into account by reflecting the student's movement from a baseline performance measure. Progress monitoring is an important part of instruction for frequent measurement of learning gains. This practice can help students and parents determine whether the student's learning in particular areas is progressing in the right direction and should be included as part of the overall reporting system. This practice is particularly beneficial for reporting progress in remedial courses (e.g., intensive reading and math) designed specifically for students functioning below grade level in a specific content area. Some considerations when using this practice include:
 - It can mislead students and teachers because it does not reflect whether the student's achievement is acceptable for his or her grade level.
 - It results in an individualized grading system for each student.
- **Comparison to established learning criteria-** According to Guskey (1996), most researchers agree that the most valid, effective, and meaningful grade is based on the measurement of the student's performance according to established **learning criteria**, such as objectives, standards, or benchmarks established for an entire class or grade level. This is called criterion-referenced grading. In Florida, the learning criteria are the Sunshine State Standards and Benchmarks.
 - Comparing the student's achievement to established learning criteria puts the focus on learning rather than on the student. Like individualized progress grading, criterion-referenced grading can help the student evaluate his or her learning and progress and set goals, but it does so while focusing on the standards and more clearly communicating where the student stands in relation to grade-level expectations or what the student needs to learn to meet an academic goal.
 - This practice facilitates clearer communication. Especially if students and parents know in advance what specific learning is the target of instruction and assessment, the grade can provide meaningful information about what the student has actually learned. The teacher can develop a grading rubric that clearly indicates how and when specific knowledge and skills will be assessed as part of the final grade so that both students and parents can have this information in advance and make use of it throughout the period of instruction and assessment. It also makes it easier for the three groups to discuss the student's grade based on a common understanding of clear expectations.
 - It is the most effective way of ensuring that students with disabilities can access the general curriculum and receive accommodations to instruction and assessment without being discriminated against in grading practices.
(See section 2.)

Calculating Grades

Research highlights several important considerations related to the actual calculation of grades.

- Factor multiple sources of summative information into the grade, rather than basing a report card grade on a single source of information such as a final exam. Look for consistency across summative assessments to verify achievement and validate the grade (Stiggins, Arter, Chappius, & Chappius, 2004). If the grading rubric is based on established learning criteria, it will be easy to identify in advance multiple points at which grading information will be collected.
- Do not factor the results of assessments done for the purpose of instructional decision-making through formative measures into the calculation of summary report card grades (Stiggins, Arter, Chappius, & Chappius, 2004). Summative measures should occur and be used to determine report card grades only when the teacher is confident that students have had adequate opportunity to practice and master the targeted skill. This is especially important for low-achieving students, since their early scores are expected to be lower than when the student has had further instruction and should have mastered the learning.
- According to Guskey (2002), averaging has pitfalls, especially for lower-achieving students.
 - Using a straight average masks learning gains by giving equal weight to a student’s work during the entire duration of instruction, instead of focusing on what the student has learned once the instruction and practice has been provided.
 - Deleting the lowest score helps remove the skewing effect of an “off day” or early lower performance before instruction has been completed but does not communicate why the low score occurred.
 - Calculating the median score removes extreme scores but masks patterns of learning.

In summary, grades should be based on assignments and assessments that reflect student performance. Teachers should compare student performance against established learning criteria to determine achievement for the grading period. Information about student behavior, effort, and participation can be reported as separate grades or marks. Teachers should also use a grade calculation strategy that he or she is confident does not mask or skew actual student performance.

Section 2: Grading Considerations for Students with Disabilities

All of the issues addressed above, such as the disparate purposes of grading and the various factors that may be included in the grade calculation, contribute to the complexity of grading for students with disabilities. Fortunately, the recommendations, such as grading according to established learning criteria and making the report card an avenue for clear communication among teacher, student, and parent(s), also help make grading for students with disabilities more effective.

This section begins with a brief review of legal requirements related to grading for students with disabilities. There follows a discussion of how the various grading approaches analyzed above may affect the participation of students with disabilities in the general curriculum. Also addressed is the relationship between grading and accommodations and modifications to instruction and assessment. The final part of this TAP provides recommendations that teachers and IEP teams may implement to ensure that grading of students with disabilities is valid, meaningful, and effective.

Legal and Policy Issues in Grading for Students with Disabilities

Florida statutes define how teachers may calculate grades.

1003.33 Report cards; end-of-the-year status.—

(1) Each district school board shall establish and publish policies requiring the content and regular issuance of student report cards for all elementary school, middle school, and high school students. These report cards must clearly depict and grade:

(a) The student's academic performance in each class or course, which in grades 1 through 12 must be based upon examinations as well as written papers, class participation, and other academic performance criteria, and must include the student's performance or nonperformance at his grade level.

(b) The student's conduct and behavior.

(c) The student's attendance, including absences and tardiness.

Additionally, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 includes requirements related to privacy and nondiscrimination that must guide grading practices for students with disabilities. These requirements are summarized below, based on material presented by Gorn (2000) in *What Do I Do When...The Answer Book on Assessing, Testing and Graduating Students with Disabilities*.

Privacy—Nothing on the report card or grade transcript may identify the student as a student with a disability, except that final transcripts should specify the type of diploma earned (e.g., special diploma). Schools may include a designation that indicates use of a differentiated grading system, which in Florida applies to students working on modified Sunshine State Standards, so long as it does not identify the student as a student with a disability. For example, an indication on the report card that the student is working below grade level is permissible if it is used for *any* student working below grade level.

Nondiscrimination—Students with disabilities may not be discriminated against because of their disability in grading, reporting of progress, determining of awards, etc.

School districts should use the same report cards for all students, except in very limited cases where the standard report card would be ineffective in communicating the progress of the student.

Districts should not establish an alternative grading system for all or most students with disabilities. Likewise, teachers cannot unilaterally decide to use an individualized grading system for a student with disabilities. For example, a teacher cannot unilaterally change the

grading scale for a student with a disability to make a grade of 85 percent an “A.” This is especially important in Florida because state statutes have established the grading scale for public schools.

Schools may not arbitrarily assign lower weights to grades given in exceptional student education (ESE) courses, such as those in the exceptional student education section of the Course Code Directory. Schools may assign lower weights to ESE *and* non-ESE courses that have lower performance criteria than do higher-weighted courses so long as an individual student’s placement in those courses is determined by the IEP team and not all ESE students are placed in those courses. For example, a school may assign a lower weight to Life Skills Math: 9-12 (an ESE course) and Algebra IA (a non-ESE course) than is assigned to Algebra I Honors (a non-ESE course that has higher performance criteria). Students with disabilities may not be arbitrarily excluded from courses having higher weights, such as honors courses, if they meet the nondiscriminatory criteria for admission.

Students with disabilities cannot be excluded from honor rolls or graduation with honors on account of their disability or their participation in ESE classes per se. However, schools may set criteria that apply to all students and that some students with disabilities may never reach. For example, a school may establish a policy that only students working on grade level are eligible for the honor roll.

For more detailed information regarding legal cases relating to grading of students with disabilities and implications for school districts, readers may wish to review the Gorn (2000) reference as well as summaries of legal findings and policies from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and Office of Special Education Programs listed in the references.

The Impact of Various Grading Approaches on the Participation of Students with Disabilities in the General Curriculum

Most teachers receive little training or guidance on grading, especially as it relates to students with disabilities (Rojewski, Pollard, & Meers, 1990). They tend to base their grading practices on their own evolving experience, on the practices of their colleagues, and on what seems to make sense and be fair. All of the approaches to grading discussed previously have implications for students with disabilities that must be deliberately considered, remembering that the central purpose of grading is to summarize the teacher’s assessment of student learning.

- **Comparison of the student with a disability to other students-** The disadvantages of grading on the curve are especially evident for students with disabilities, who often begin with low achievement.
- **Basing the student with a disability’s grade on effort and/or participation-** Focusing on these behaviors rather than on learning and achievement leads to low expectations for students with disabilities and limits their access to the general curriculum (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Another problem with this practice is that there is no accurate way for a teacher to judge a student’s potential or effort. As recommended above, giving separate grades for academic learning, effort/participation, and behavior is the most effective way

to communicate in a clear and meaningful way about all these important elements. In addition, as stated earlier, Florida Statutes require these areas to be addressed.

- **Comparison to the student with a disability’s own previous performance-** Grading students with disabilities based on their individual learning progress makes it relatively easy to align grading with IEP goals and may be most appropriate in intensive remedial courses in which target skill deficits are to be addressed. However, progress grades alone do not give parents information about where their child stands relative to grade-level expectations. The validity of progress grading is also affected by the difficulty of making sure that goals are set high enough. Progress grades and IEP grading are also incompatible with the general grading system and with the process used for determinations such as honor roll participation (Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

Grading a student with a disability based on progress or attainment of IEP goals while other students are graded based on established learning criteria creates an individualized grading system that can substantially impact access to the general curriculum. This type of grading is not compatible with high expectations and effective grading for students with disabilities who do participate in the general curriculum with accommodations.

- **Comparison of the student with a disability’s achievement to established learning criteria.** This practice has the same advantages described for all students previously. It focuses on and communicates what is learned. It can support the participation of students with disabilities in the general curriculum and their achievement of high standards. However, Guskey and Bailey (2001) find that this approach tends to result in a large percentage of low grades for students with disabilities who participate in the general curriculum. To address this concern, the following conditions apply:
 - The student must be consistently provided with all needed accommodations to instruction and assessment identified on the IEP.
 - The student must not be penalized with a lower grade for using accommodations. For example, if the student receives the accommodation of additional time to complete a project or test, the student’s grade should not be lowered because of the additional time taken.
 - There must be nothing in the assessment process that makes it inherently invalid for the student with a disability. For example, if the only way the student can demonstrate the expected learning is hand-drawing a map but the student’s disability limits his or her fine motor skills, then the student does not have a fair opportunity to demonstrate the learning to be graded.
 - The teacher should be able to incorporate his or her professional judgment (but not bias) when grading all students, including students with disabilities.

Grading for Students with Disabilities Reflects Accommodations and Modifications

Decisions about grading practices for a student with disabilities should mirror the IEP team's decision about whether the student's needs can be accommodated within the general curriculum or whether the student requires a modified curriculum. *Accommodations* are changes in *how* the student is taught and tested; they do not change the learning standards for the student but allow the student to participate in and demonstrate mastery of the general curriculum. *Modifications* are changes in *what* the student is taught and tested on and mean that the student with a disability is participating in less complex learning standards than those of the general curriculum.

Accommodations

Accommodations are adjustments made to the way skills and concepts are taught and assessed but do not affect the expected outcomes in relation to the Sunshine State Standards.

If the student with a disability participates in the general curriculum with accommodations to instruction and assessment, the teacher implements the accommodations and then grades the student according to the established learning criteria. It is critical for the teacher to have a clear understanding of what he or she expects the students to learn. For example, the students in the class are expected to calculate long division problems accurately. The teacher designs a test to include 20 problems to be completed in a 50 minute class period. As an accommodation for a student who has a disability that interferes with his or her ability to respond to many problems in a limited time, the teacher may allow the student to break the test up over several sessions. Alternatively, the teacher may determine the student can demonstrate learning by completing fewer long division problems as long as they are of the same level of difficulty as those completed by other students. By adjusting instruction and assessment using accommodations needed by the student, the grade can be calculated with assurance that it reflects what the student has had an opportunity to learn.

Modifications

Modifications are changes in the way skills and concepts are taught and assessed, *and* modifications are changes in expected outcomes and curricular standards.

When students with disabilities are unable to meet the expectations of the general curriculum, the expectations are modified. Modifications to the curriculum are generally used in coordination with an assessment that is compatible with the modified expectations. Grading systems that should be used for students using curriculum modifications should reflect the student's expected level of performance based on modified Sunshine State Standards and the functional level that the student is working on. Three levels of functioning within the population of students with significant cognitive disabilities are:

- *Independent*—students who are expected to achieve independence as adults, hold a job, and often live independently;
- *Supported*—students who are expected to achieve independence with supports as adults, hold a job, and have supported living arrangements; and
- *Participatory*—students who are expected to need ongoing care as adults and may be able to participate in work and leisure activities.

For students who participate in a modified curriculum, the IEP team should determine that it is most appropriate to use grading procedures that reflect the student's expected level of performance in relation to progress toward pre-established learning criteria, which would be the modified Sunshine State Standards. In this case, it is essential that all members of the IEP team, including the student and parent(s), have a clear understanding of how the student will be graded.

Section 3: Recommendations

Grading is a report of the results of what has been learned and demonstrated through summative assessment. The most effective assessment and grading practices are those that are tied directly to instruction and that focus directly on student learning. Just as assessment should be an opportunity for students to show what they know, grading should reflect that demonstration of learning and communicate the results in clear and meaningful ways to students and parents. School districts and teachers can take meaningful steps to make grading practices more effective, given the varying needs of students, parents, and schools for grading information.

Recommendations for School Districts

1. Involve parents in the development of report card formats in order to make report card grades more clearly communicate meaningful information to parents.
2. Use a system for grade reporting that is flexible enough to allow for revisions as experience and feedback sheds light on how well the system is working (Lake & Kafka, 1996). If parents and students are not getting helpful information from the report card, change it or add to it.
3. Set a policy and provide guidance and training for teachers about grading for students with disabilities that includes district-wide procedures for past-due assignments, remediation, retesting, grades of zero, and absences.

Recommendations for Teachers

4. Become familiar with district and school policies and develop a grading approach that is aligned to those policies and that conforms to state statutes and Section 504 requirements.
5. Make conscious decisions about all elements of the grading approach.
 - Compare student performance to learning criteria. In Florida, the learning criteria should be based on the relevant Sunshine State Standards, benchmarks, and the district's curriculum guidelines.
 - Give separate grades for academic achievement and behavior, effort, and participation.
 - Be clear about the distinct purposes of formative and summative assessments.

6. Communicate learning expectations and grading procedures clearly and in writing to students and parents. Be explicit both at the beginning of the grading period and when report card grades are given about which assessments and products are included in the report card grade and how the grade is calculated.
 - Consider enhancing communication with students and parents by supplementing the letter grade with a narrative that provides specific information about the student's mastery of learning criteria.
 - Develop a comprehensive communication system, which may include parent conferences, newsletters, informal contacts, checklists, and/or progress reports, that does not rely solely on the report card.
7. Review the student's current performance in the curriculum and any accommodations or modifications that the IEP team has identified for the student to meet his or her needs.
8. Compare your grading practices with the student's accommodations or modifications to identify any areas that need to be addressed.
9. Inform parents and students of grading and reporting policies through the Student Progression Plan. Consider additional methods of further explaining to the student and parent grading and reporting policies for students on standard curriculum and modified curriculum, as appropriate.
10. Communicate to parents that progress on annual goals identified on the IEP is important and is reported, but that progress on annual goals is different from academic grades.
11. Implement the district grading policy consistently.
 - Apply the accommodations or modifications as indicated on the IEP, and grade the student based on the standards on which the student is working.
 - Grade students based on their performance on summative evaluations after the accommodations have been made, and do not indicate accommodations on the report card.
 - Remember that appropriate accommodations allow students with disabilities, often characterized by significant reading deficits, to access the general education curriculum and achieve the course objectives to an equal degree as their non-disabled peers. Therefore, they should be graded according to their mastery of the Sunshine State Standards.

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