

Fair & Accurate Grading

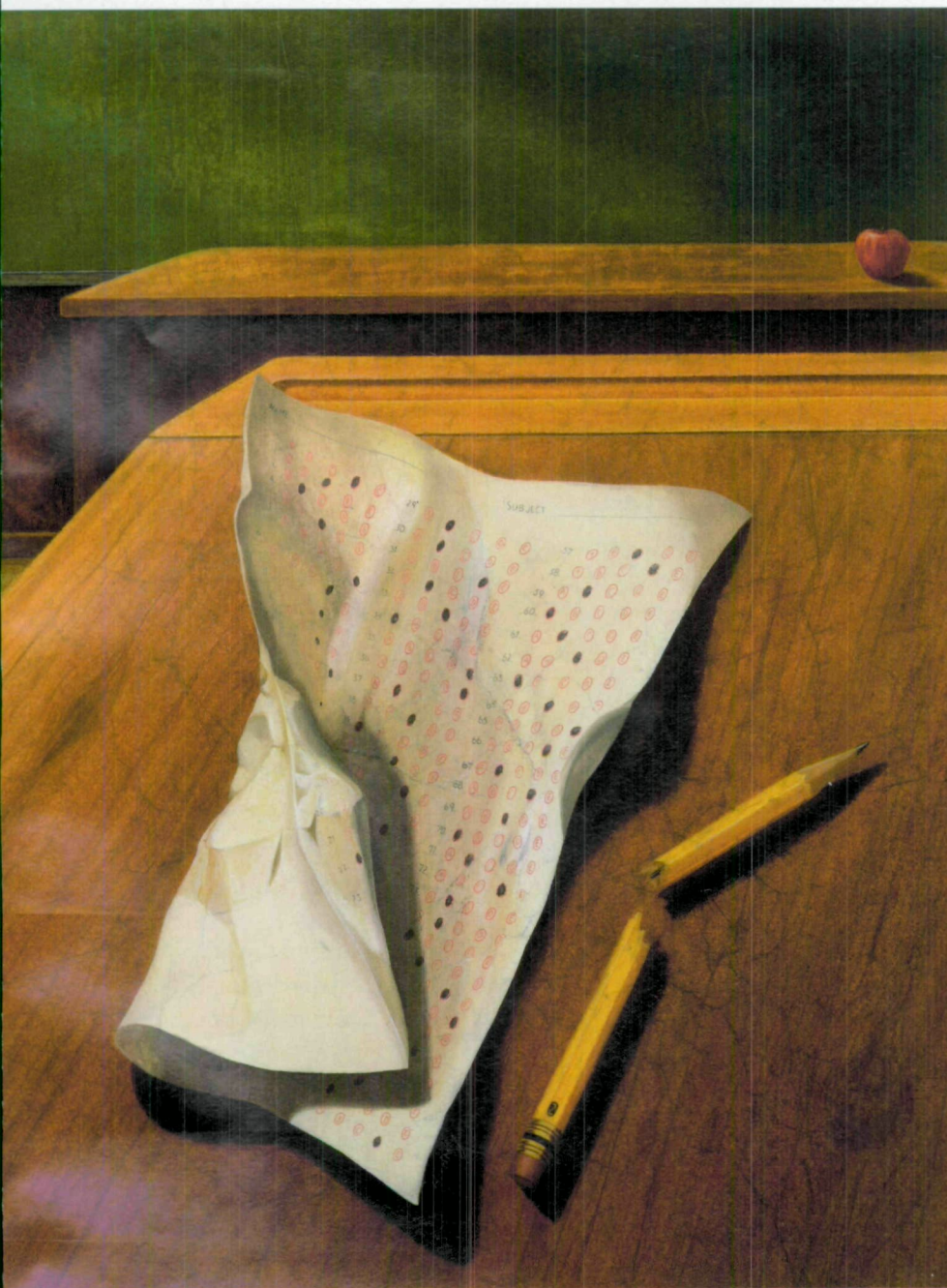
for Exceptional Learners

Despite the many changes in education over the past century, grading and reporting practices have essentially remained the same. In part, this is because few teacher preparation programs offer any guidance on sound grading practices (Brookhart, 1999; Stiggins, 2002). As a result, most current grading practices are grounded in tradition, rather than research on best practice. Teachers continue to average scores to calculate grades; combine indicators of achievement, behavior, and progress into a single grade; and grade on the curve, despite evidence showing the detrimental consequences of these practices (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2002, 2006, 2009).

In recent years, the field has turned toward standards-based approaches to teaching and learning. All students enrolled in a course are expected to demonstrate specific competencies and skills, often through state-designed, end-of-course examinations. What many schools are finding, however, is that the grades students earn in their courses often are not good predictors of how they will perform on those exams (Welch & D'Agostino, 2009; Willingham, Pullack, & Lewis, 2002). This discrepancy uncovers a long-hidden truth: historically, grades have not been reliable indicators of what students know and are able to do.

Standards-Based Grading

In an effort to develop a process that leads to accurate and meaningful grades, many schools are moving toward standards-based grading. In this approach, three types of evidence are gathered and reported separately: product, process, and progress (Guskey, 2006; Guskey & Bailey, 2010).



Standards-based grading is the most accurate method to assess students' abilities.

Exceptional learners may require modifications or accommodations to effectively determine what they have learned and can do.

How to grant credit, report grades, and ensure eligibility are also considerations when adopting equitable grading practices.

the reporting period.

After establishing explicit criteria for indicators of product, process, and progress, teachers assign separate grades to each. Teachers gather the same evidence on student learning that they always have but no longer must decide how to combine that evidence in calculating an overall grade. In this way, grades or marks for responsibility, learning skills, effort, work habits, or learning progress are kept distinct from grades that reflect achievement and performance (Guskey, 2002; Stiggins, 2008). The intent is to provide a comprehensive picture of what students accomplish in school.

Grading Exceptional Learners

Although standards-based grading corrects many of the fundamental errors of traditional grading practices, it also highlights other challenges when grading students who are unable to achieve grade-level standards. This includes not only students with diagnosed disabilities but also Eng-

Product grades come from evidence of what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time. Educators in 44 states are working to align such evidence with the Common Core State Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). Product grades may be determined from the results of students' performance on summative examinations; final products, such as

reports, projects, and exhibits; overall assessments; and other culminating demonstrations of learning.

Process grades focus on the student behaviors needed to reach achievement goals. Responsibility, effort, study skills, work habits, homework completion, participation, and punctuality are all examples of process behaviors. Progress grades summarize the change or growth in students' knowledge and skills over

lish language learners and any other students who, for reasons known or unknown, fall significantly behind their peers in mastering essential skills. Taken together, those groups of exceptional learners make up about 20% of the student population, but 100% of teachers face this challenge.

The topic of grading exceptional learners is rarely covered in teacher preparation, and few policies or regulations specifically address the issue. Nevertheless, nearly all teachers make grading adaptations for exceptional learners (Polloway et al., 1994). Teachers add points for effort, change grading scales, weight assignments differently, and grade on the basis of progress (Silva, Munk, & Bursuck, 2005). They make those adaptations in an effort to motivate students who have serious difficulty and give them a shot at success.

The result, however, is usually the opposite. When students' grades are inflated and not clearly connected to achievement on well-defined outcomes, students begin to believe that grades are not about what they do, but about who they are. Such adaptations to grades actually lead to a decrease in motivation (Ring & Reetz, 2000).

In addition, grading adaptations do not work in a standards-based environment. To assign accurate achievement grades, the question teachers must answer is no longer, *How did the student perform, behave, and progress in class?* They must be able to answer, *How well did the student demonstrate specific skills?* Questions about academic skills cannot be answered with indicators of behavior.

Inclusive Grading Model

To address the challenges in grading exceptional learners, we developed a process (Jung, 2009; Jung & Guskey,

2007, 2010, in press) that enables teachers to assign fair, legal, and accurate grades to exceptional learners. This process includes five steps. (See figure 1.)

STEP ONE: DETERMINE WHETHER EACH EXPECTATION IS ATTAINABLE

For each reporting standard, instructional teams should ask, *Can we expect the student to achieve this standard without special support or changes to the standard?* If the answer is yes, then no change in the grading process is needed, even if the student has a diagnosed disability. When an



instructional team determines that the student will not be able to achieve a particular standard without special support, they move to step two.

STEP TWO: DETERMINE THE TYPE OF ADAPTATION NEEDED

For each standard requiring support, the instructional team must determine whether an accommodation or modification is needed. Accommodations are changes that provide access: they level the playing field for exceptional learn-

ers (Freedman, 2000, 2005). Those changes and supports do not lower the grade-level expectation for the skill being measured. Just as a student would not be penalized for wearing glasses to complete an assignment, a student who requires any other accommodation would not be penalized.

To meet science standards, for example, a student may require an audiotape of lectures in science class because he or she has difficulty taking notes. In addition, the student may need to take a social studies end-of-unit assessment orally. Although the format for answering questions would be different, the content of the questions would remain the same, and his or her responses would be judged the same as all other students' responses. When accommodation is required, the student is graded as every other student with no penalty for the accommodation.

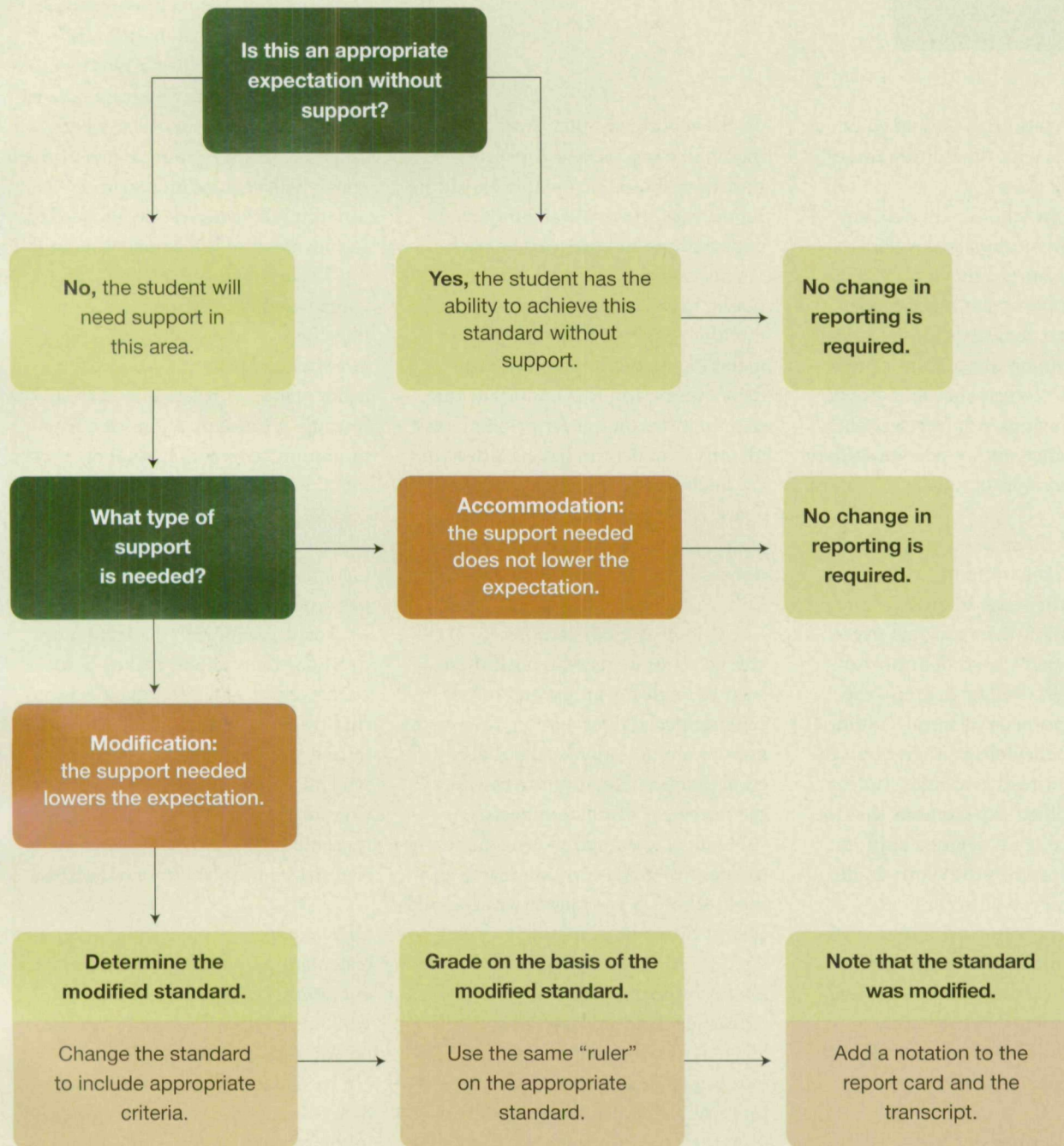
Modifications, on the other hand, change the game (Freedman, 2000, 2005). Modifications *do* alter the grade-level expectation. A ninth-grade English language learner, for example, may have strong oral communication skills but may not be ready for the grade-level standards in writing. The instructional team may provide additional support in the area of writing and expect the student to master sixth-grade writing standards for the current academic year. If modifications are necessary, the team proceeds to step three.

STEP THREE: DETERMINE THE MODIFIED EXPECTATION

For standards requiring modification, the appropriate, modified expectation is the highest criterion the instructional team believes the student could reasonably achieve during the current academic year. The team then records

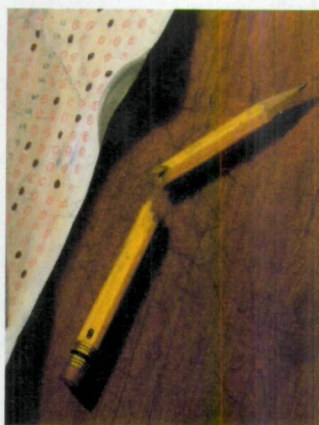
Figure 1

A Model for Grading Exceptional Learners



Sources

- Jung, L. A., & Guskey, T. R. (2007). Standards-based grading and reporting: A model for special education. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 40(2), 48–53.
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those expectations as annual goals. For students with disabilities, these become IEP goals.

A student who is experiencing difficulty in vocabulary development, for example, may not be ready to work on particular ninth-grade language arts standards for vocabulary. After examining the student's present level of performance and growth over the previous year, the team may determine that sixth-grade vocabulary standards are appropriate.

STEP FOUR: BASE GRADES ON THE MODIFIED EXPECTATIONS

It makes little sense to grade a student on an academic standard that everyone agrees that the student probably will not meet. Rather than use the common approach of simply adding points for behavior or progress, teachers should instead grade the student on the modified expectations that the instructional team deemed appropriate. For example, if the ninth-grade student achieved all sixth-grade vocabulary expectations and is working on seventh-grade vocabulary, and if an A means "exceeds the standard," then the student has earned an A, even though he or she has not met the ninth-grade standards.

STEP FIVE: COMMUNICATE THE MEANING OF THE GRADE

The final step in the process is the simplest, but it's just as important as the previous four. To communicate what was measured, teachers should include a notation beside any grade

on the report card that was based on modified expectations. A progress report then should be included with the report card to outline the modified expectations and progress on each.

For secondary school educators, noting that a grade was based on modified expectations means also including the notation on the student's transcript. It is important that the notations on transcripts in no way identify a student as having a disability. Such wording as "based on IEP goals" is not legal, but noting that a grade was based on modified expectations is legal (Freedman, 2000, 2005; Office of Civil Rights, 2008).

As long as modifications are available to all students who need them, such as English learners and others receiving special intervention, then such notions are not only legal but also good practice. Notations make clear the necessary distinction between students who earned passing grades on the basis of grade-level standards and those whose performance was assessed against different standards.

Policy Implications

Although all educators face the challenge of determining how to grade exceptional learners, secondary educators also face policy issues involving such things as course credit, GPA, and athletic eligibility. The key to success and legality in addressing those issues rests in determining policies that are communicated clearly to students and families and then implemented consistently.

COURSE CREDIT

Secondary schools must first make decisions about course credit when implementing the inclusive grading model. The essential question is, To what extent can expectations be modified and a student still receive credit for the course? For some students, only one, relatively minor area of the course will require modification. For others, modifications may be needed for nearly all of the course standards.

The heart of the question about course credit is where to draw the line. Some schools may decide that if any standard is modified, course credit is not granted. Others may craft a formula for modifications or a list of minimum criteria that students must meet. Still others may develop a process for considering students individually. And some schools may decide to grant course credit only when students pass end-of-course exams.

For students with disabilities, the decisions that schools make about course credit will affect the decisions that students and their families make during IEP meetings. For example, a student who is entitled to modifications might attempt to pass course requirements if it affects whether he or she earns course credit or a diploma.

GPA

Calculating GPA is the second major decision secondary school leaders will face. How will a student's GPA be determined when some grades are based on modified expectations? Schools may decide not to include in the calculation any grades that are based on modifications. Or schools may include all grades but place an asterisk or other mark by the GPA to indicate that some grades were based on modifications. Still another option is to reduce the amount of credit

given for grades that were based on modifications. Clearly, every option has advantages and disadvantages, and decisions about GPAs will have long-term practical and legal implications.

ATHLETIC ELIGIBILITY

Another related issue is athletic eligibility. Students who must spend additional time on academics to catch up may be hampered in their progress if they devote many hours to a sport. On the other hand, a school certainly does not want to deny English language learners or students with disabilities access to participation in athletics.

Although athletic eligibility may not hold the same political visibility or high-stakes implications as GPAs or course credit, it may be just as important. Participation in athletics might be the only time at school that some students do not feel the effects of a disability. Participation in athletics also can foster stronger school affiliation. No matter what strategy is chosen for determining GPAs, the academic requirements for athletic eligibility should be based on students' performance on standards that are considered appropriate for their level.

Conclusion

Although it may seem like this process for grading exceptional learners opens the door to new challenges, in reality all of these challenges exist now. Implementing the grading process we described results in more-transparent grading procedures and thus reveals the urgency of making purposeful and thoughtful policy decisions for exceptional learners. By implementing this grading process in a standards-based environment, school leaders can ensure that grades for all students are fair, legal, and clear to teachers,

students, their families, employers, and institutes of higher education. **PL**

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