

## **Ungrading to prioritize learning during a pandemic**

We are midway through the school year and over half of our students are failing at least one class. Many of them are failing multiple classes. At the mid-term point of the current quarter, 15% of students have a cumulative grade of zero in at least one class. It feels like the school has done everything we can to try and meet the students where they are. We have reduced workloads. We have a block schedule when the school is in online learning. We have added significant screen breaks throughout the day. We have turned every Wednesday into an asynchronous day so that students can get work done independently. We have made it simple to make appointments with teachers. We have held meetings with families and students to strategize their success. And despite all of these efforts, we are, by measure of grades, exactly where we were at the end of last spring when we had not designed and improved our system at all.

By other measures, like student motivation and engagement, which comes in the form of anecdotal reports from teachers and students, the kids are not alright. Many feel that they are not learning. Many report being disengaged in online class and too tired to get any work done in the evening. Many students feel the constant pressure of work, from both their teachers and parents, in the form of a grade at the end of each class in their online portal. We have exhausted all the tools we have in our box, and yet, our outcomes have not improved. We want our students to be successful and we want our students to be engaged. What else can we do to achieve this goal?

In one class, titled Future Issues, we are rethinking high school education. The nine students in the class have all come from highly competitive, gifted and talented programs either in middle school or high school before arriving at The Nora School. A class of seniors and juniors, these students have been reimagining the world all year. They push for radical systemic

change and have spent time researching post-capitalist economic systems, alternative, community-based justice systems, and now practical and compassionate education systems. While we are often talking about changes that will happen in the distant future, anywhere from 10 to 100 years from now, we also look at what can happen in this moment that can act as a microcosm of the big change they are hoping for. We talked about mutual aid societies growing during the pandemic as a community form of economic security. We developed a community-based justice protocol for when harm is done in our school community that can be followed for a variety of incidents. And now we are looking at improving learning outcomes by abolishing grades.

Even before schools moved online due to the pandemic, the issue of grades was a constant in our school system. Student performance is based on quantitative numbers alone, which values compliance and completion over mastery and learning. Moreover, students across the country<sup>1</sup> report that they are not motivated by grades, but threatened by them, and feel that their desire to learn is dampened by rigid grading policies. Even with the various accommodations that Nora offers, this ever present pressure of graded assignments seems to stifle the learning process. The idea of “going gradeless” is not a new one, but the movement has been growing in popularity over the last few years.<sup>2</sup> Grading itself is a centuries old practice, starting in the late 1700s and moving into the uniform A through F system we have today in the early 1900s.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this system is largely to evaluate students en masse, which makes sense given the large classroom sizes at that time that have continued today.

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<sup>1</sup> Schinske, Jeffrey, and Kimberly Tanner. “Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently).” *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2014, pp. 159–166., doi:10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054.

<sup>2</sup> Whitmell, Terry. “More Teachers Are Going Gradeless. I Asked Them Why.” *ASCD Express*, 11 July 2019, [www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol14/num31/more-teachers-are-going-gradeless-i-asked-them-why.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol14/num31/more-teachers-are-going-gradeless-i-asked-them-why.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, Brian. “How Come Schools Assign Grades of A, B, C, D, and F-but Not E?” *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 9 Aug. 2010, [slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/08/how-come-schools-assign-grades-of-a-b-c-d-and-f-but-not-e.html](http://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/08/how-come-schools-assign-grades-of-a-b-c-d-and-f-but-not-e.html).

However, in our intimate classroom of only 9 students, there is no need to grade en masse. But the question remains, is there a need to grade at all? To the question of motivation, my students responded that fear of receiving a poor grade for turning in work in late was the only way in which grades motivated them. They reported that when they learned the most from an assignment, it was not because of a desired grade outcome, but a desire to engage with the material.<sup>4</sup> Most students in class also indicated that after receiving a grade, especially a poor grade, they rarely went back and reviewed how they could have improved. This was particularly true for final drafts of papers and exams. Through discussion we developed the following goals for our remaining semester together. First, we want each student to be engaged in class and enjoy the learning process. Second, we want each student to feel less pressure and more agency in their learning and work. Third, we want each student to be able to articulate what content they have learned and skills they have gained at the end of the semester.

In order to accomplish these goals, we developed a framework together. It is important that the students were involved in the creation of these guidelines for our class. Without their voice and agency, it would have been yet another task they were asked to do by an authoritative figure, rather than something they felt ownership of.

### **The Framework**

First, gradeless does not mean workless. As the teacher, I will still give students assignments at the same pace and quality of the class before eliminating grades. Throughout the school week, students are given readings with some sort of written component to ensure they have processed the material. The written component could be notes, questions, or a reflection. Students may also be asked to answer a critical thinking question over a weekend or several

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<sup>4</sup> Whitmell, Terry. "More Teachers Are Going Gradeless. I Asked Them Why." *ASCD Express*, 11 July 2019, [www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol14/num31/more-teachers-are-going-gradeless-i-asked-them-why.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol14/num31/more-teachers-are-going-gradeless-i-asked-them-why.aspx).

weekdays so they have time to gather their thoughts in preparation for a class discussion.

Students will also have large projects, such as presentations, longer papers, or proposals that connect the reading and discussions throughout the unit.

Second, gradeless does not mean without feedback. In fact, in this system, my feedback to students is even more important. In just a few weeks, I have found that when I am not able to give a simple completion grade, I need to make comments and ask questions on the small assignments to show students I have reviewed their work. This has helped me interact more with the students and evaluate who is engaged and who needs more encouragement. Students are expected to respond to the feedback I give them as well. For small assignments, that might look like bringing up a point in our class discussion that I highlighted in a written comment or answering a question I asked on their document. For large projects, that might look like revising their work, even after the due date or after they have presented in class.

Third, gradeless does not mean without consequences for not completing the work. Our class discussed three types of consequences that students will experience for not completing their work on time. The first is the immediate consequence of not being prepared for class. Without completing the reading, a student will not be able to engage in our class discussion. Because our discussions are so lively and the class is so close, students rarely want to be left out of what is going on that day. The second consequence is short term. If a student is not completing their work, we will have a one-on-one conference to talk about what is going on. Through these discussions, I can adapt the assignment to better suit the student or provide any support they need to complete the work. The last consequence is long term. At the end of the quarter, students and I will each complete an evaluation that will result in a letter grade. If the student is not completing

their work and not conferencing with me, it is unlikely they will achieve a satisfactory quarter grade.

Fourth, gradeless does not mean the class is pass/fail. We discussed in class how pass/fail is often interpreted as a B or C level grade if you transfer high schools. As many schools have reverted to pass/fail during the pandemic, colleges may look at this differently now, but before the pandemic, a “P” on a transcript did not indicate A-level work, but rather “not failing” work. For the majority of my students, they were earning A’s before we went gradeless. It does not feel right to essentially downgrade their efforts in the name of this experiment. Instead, we agreed to a dual evaluation. In order to arrive at a letter grade, students will complete a self-evaluation and I will complete a similar evaluation for each of them. We will use class time to have individual conferences to discuss their progress and ensure we arrive at the same letter grade. According to various reports from teachers who have used this approach<sup>5</sup>, by collaborating in the assessment process, students and teachers are able to come to consensus on the final letter grade. Below is a draft of the evaluation that students will complete at the end of the quarter.

### **Future Issues Quarter Evaluation**

*(adapted from Susan D. Blum)<sup>6</sup>*

#### **Part 1: Reflection**

- 1) What do you know now that you did not know in January?
- 2) What work was challenging? What was fun? What was useful? What didn’t feel useful?

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<sup>5</sup> Chiaravalli, Arthur. “How I Go Gradeless.” *Teachers Going Gradeless*, 8 Dec. 2020, [www.teachersgoinggradeless.com/blog/how-i-go-gradeless](http://www.teachersgoinggradeless.com/blog/how-i-go-gradeless).

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Newton, Jen. “Grading an Ungraded Course.” *Teaching Is Intellectual*, 23 Dec. 2020, [teachingisintellectual.com/index.php/2019/12/21/grading-an-ungraded-course/](http://teachingisintellectual.com/index.php/2019/12/21/grading-an-ungraded-course/).

<sup>6</sup> Blum, Susan Debra, and Alfie Kohn. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020.

- 3) Did you learn anything unexpected? Was there something you expected to learn that you didn't?
- 4) Did you develop some new questions? Tell me about them.
- 5) What's one random fact you learned this quarter? Where did you learn it?

**Part 2: Feedback for me**

- 1) Did you ever talk about this content outside of class?
  - Often
  - Occasionally
  - Rarely
- 2) Were there any memorable readings?
- 3) Did you become curious about anything new?
- 4) What was your initial reaction to the lack of focus on grades? How do you feel about it now?
- 5) What do you think you'll remember in 5 years?

**Part 3: Engagement and Participation**

- 1) How engaged and mentally present were you in this course this semester?
  - There and ready to go, mostly
  - Sometimes engaged and sometimes texting or surfing or doing work for other classes
  - Pretty remote
  - Optional space to explain your answer further if none of the responses fit you exactly: \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Approximately how much of the reading did you do?
  - most-all
  - some-most
  - none-some

**Part 4: Projects & Assignments**

- 1) Approximately how many of the short assignments did you do? Feel free to check Google Classrooms to get an accurate assessment.
  - a) most-all
  - b) some-most
  - c) none-some
- 2) Reflect on your educational design project. In what ways was it comprehensive and reflective of your learning this quarter?

**Final:** Please suggest a grade for yourself and explain how you came to that conclusion.

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

Do you have any other thoughts or questions that you'd like to discuss in our conference?

The students had to sign an agreement that outlined this framework and their willingness to participate honestly. As this was a departure from our class syllabus, it was important to have the new rules on paper and to communicate this with their parents as well. While their parents did not need to agree with it, they did need to know why their child would no longer be receiving grade updates for this class. Most parents did not respond nor did they bring it up with their students. However, the two that did respond were grateful that we were trying something new to help their students during a challenging year.

The last piece of our discussion as a class was how this would prepare the students for college. As a college preparatory school for alternative thinkers and learners, it is important that our curriculum is rigorous and that our classes prepare students for the academic expectations in college. We looked through old college syllabi of mine from 10 years ago and analyzed how I was graded. While my grade was still a numerical average in those classes, it was based on three papers or tests and participation. I was never graded on completing nightly reading assignments. Instead, I needed to complete the reading in order to participate and to succeed on the larger assessments. The motivation to complete the reading did not come from earning a higher grade, but rather being able to complete the cumulative work in the class. With this in mind, we agreed that making this class gradeless would prepare them more for college than if they received nightly or weekly grades for each assignment and reading.

### **Project Example**

Going gradeless has also meant that I can be more flexible in the types of assignments and projects I assign. Our first major project since ungrading class is for students to redesign

some aspect of school that they believe needs to be changed or be added to our system. Typically, in the name of fairness, I would have specific parameters that each student needed to follow, along with a rubric that outlined clear standards they must reach in order to earn a certain grade. While this approach still allowed for some creativity on the part of students, they were largely being graded on their ability to comply with the expectations I had set for them, not their own critical thinking and analysis. However, for this project, I essentially handed them a blank canvas. Below is the assignment sheet given to students:

### **Future Issues Education Project**

Good ideas in education reform only go so far. Where these ideas fall short is often in the design and implementation. So we're going to try to design smart solutions for the problems you all have identified with education. While you might have thought we were just ranting in class, we came up with some pretty innovative solutions. Some ideas that you've talked about in class are:

- Mental health class
- Sex ed class/physical health class
- Social interaction/socialization class
- Revised school schedule
- Menu of assessment forms & reflection
- Core classes for 9 & 10th grades & more college major like system for 11th & 12th grade
- Revised standards for graduation (portfolio style)
- Outdoor classrooms
- Robust support systems for students

You're going to design ONE of these things. Your final output will be a presentation--but avoid Google Slides. Think of your presentation as a paper presentation (good prep for college). You'll write out your design, getting as detailed as possible, and then talk the class through your plan. You should be prepared to answer questions about it and take some feedback from your peers.

While you are all very unique thinkers, you're not the only ones trying to make school better! So I want to see some evidence that you've done research on what other folks have proposed or done on your chosen topic. You can talk about what you might have taken from those plans or why your plan is different from what they propose, but you need to reference some ideas that aren't coming straight from your head.



While you could write it all out in paragraph form, I'm envisioning, tables, lists, etc. In order to ensure some level of work equity, you are responsible for filling one page single-spaced with your proposal. If you're working in a group, each group member is responsible for a page--the more heads working on something, the more detail we should get.

There are a few key pieces to this assignment. First, the only parameter they have to follow is to fill up one page each. Our class has only done one kind of presentation, with Google Slides as the visual anchors. Having to present written work is a skill they will likely use in college and in their professional careers. Second, they can work alone or in a group. While the individual requirements are the same (one page), some students reported that they worked better on group projects, as they were responsible to someone else besides themselves. Others reported that they dislike group projects and enjoy working alone and getting feedback from their peers at the end of the process. Finally, each topic has different expectations and information needed. A student designing a new school day schedule should have some time tables in addition to the research and analysis he writes. Another student designing outdoor classrooms may include diagrams of the classroom setting in his proposal. Or a student creating a mental health curriculum might have a course outline, with little in paragraph form. Since their only grade on this will be in the form of self-evaluation on their learning, research, and effort, it does not matter if there is not a standard rubric for them to follow. Some students were daunted by the idea of a blank canvas, but those students were able to work in a group, collaborating on one idea, so that they did not get stuck on where to start.

## **The Results**

Within the first few weeks, our class's relationship to the work has changed. I am no longer assigning work for the sake of keeping momentum in the course. Instead, each assignment

is meaningful and designed to foster conversation during our class discussions. I have also connected more deeply with student work through the feedback process. By not grading en masse and spending time with each student's written work, I have a better understanding of where they are with the material. I can coach them more effectively and can come to class prepared to answer the questions they have.

Moreover, this has helped the students complete the work punctually and more in depth. They trust that the work I am giving them is important, not because of my authority as their teacher, but because I am taking the time to create thoughtful assignments, give them feedback, and use their work in class. Prior to this shift in grades, about half of the students completed the small assignments on time. Now, only one student is consistently missing work on the due date. We have already conferenced about this and set up strategies for her to complete the work in a way that suits her learning style.

One student in particular has benefited from our new agreement. This student suffers from a chronic pain condition, which sometimes leaves her so debilitated that she cannot attend class, even from bed. The recent changes in weather caused a significant flare up and she was in and out of the emergency room for a few weeks. While the rest of the school has been flexible with her workload and getting back on track, she is still receiving zeroes for work she was absent for, until she makes it up. This student typically earns straight A's, but is now failing several classes as she works through the backlog of assignments. In Future Issues, because there is no failing grade to bring up, she has been able to complete the assignments at her own pace when her pain has subsided enough to give it her full attention. Rather than completing the assignments as quickly as possible, she has had the breathing room to spend the time on the work that she would have before going to the hospital.

These are all signs of a promising start to a new program. The hope is to use this class as a model for how some of our classes can be run in the future. Going gradeless can be challenging for certain classes and disciplines and may not be suitable for all of our students. The freedom that comes from going gradeless may be more distressing to those who take comfort in the structure of clear rules and rubrics. Ultimately, as teachers, we are constantly striving to find ways to nurture growth and curiosity. When done with thoughtfulness, compassion, and student voice, going gradeless can be one way to foster the joy of learning in our students.