

CHAPTER 15

Thirty-Six Tips to Support Colleagues as They Move Toward Successful Practices for Differentiated Classrooms

There are times when I doubt the sanity of my colleagues. They must have been on another planet when we discussed our grading policy last month; their comments seem so alien to what we agreed to do.

As soon as I think this, I realize they're thinking the same thing, and I'm one of the aliens.

It can be a humbling experience to talk with colleagues about grading and assessment: What if our grading approach isn't the most effective, responsive, fair, or accurate? What if my colleague doesn't like the way I do my grades—is this really her business? What if I disagree with my colleague and we can't come to a compromise? What if the principal makes me do something with my grades that I don't want to do? What if we find out we've been doing it all wrong? And in our more absurd yet plaintive moments, we ponder: Is there any way to gather all the students I've taught all these years together and teach them again but, this time, correctly?

In addition, we sometimes find ourselves in situations in which we have to motivate colleagues to examine new ideas and/or do something they'd rather not do. Teachers' hesitations with new or different approaches stem from any number of factors, including complacency, cynicism, ignorance, fear, distrust, unclear outcomes, perceived increase in workload; or because they are in survival mode and cannot extend any more of themselves for any new cause or concept. The school's mission progresses despite these misgivings, however, and we generally find ways to convince colleagues to give something a try.

Despite the potential for discomfort, talking with colleagues about grading and assessment is a non-negotiable. It has to be done. There is no one way to grade and assess, but there are lots of commonsense measures that can be taken, and just as many ideas worth exploring together. The good news is that it doesn't have to be a horrible experience. In fact, it can be liberating and insightful, and it can bring a staff closer together.

Tips for Talking with Colleagues

First, when disagreeing with a colleague over grading and assessment issues, assume you're on the same side. It's easy to see the other person as irrational, or worse, the enemy, when he or she doesn't see your side of things. We can quickly get judgmental and extrapolate our negative perception of the person into other areas. This isn't helpful to anyone. You both are teachers, both have worthy ideas, and both deserve to be heard. A person isn't a lesser teacher because his or her opinion is different from our own.

Second, follow Stephen Covey's advice: Seek first to understand, then to be understood (2004). Take steps to fully understand the other person's side of a grading or assessment issue, even paraphrasing back to the person so you are both sure you each heard correctly before forming your response. Such respect goes a long way to engendering respect for your own ideas when it's your turn to share.

One way to express interest in a colleague's ideas even though we may not be sure we agree is to lean toward the colleague and say, "Tell me more about that." This is body and verbal language indicating interest in the person's ideas. When we do this, one or more things happen: the person rethinks his or her position, perhaps becoming even more compelled by it; the person sees the errors of the thinking and corrects himself or herself; and/or we gain clarity and appreciate the person's rationale. Whatever happens, we come across as welcoming of the conversation, not blocking it.

Third, remember that if you're feeling a little stress with a colleague over a grading or assessment issue, chances are your colleague is, too. By breaking the silence and approaching him or her about the issue, you initiate relief on both sides, not disdain.

Fourth, with your colleagues, frequently reflect on the big questions that get circumnavigated in our daily attempts to put out fires. We don't want to be forever focusing on the urgent while the important escapes our grasp. Responding to the big questions re-centers us, helps us identify where to spend our energy and resources, and also helps us make stronger commitments to one another and our school's programs. The big questions include:

- Why do we have schools in America?
- Why do we try to teach everyone rather than just those easiest to teach?
- Why do we grade students?
- What does a grade mean?
- Does the current grading scale best serve students?
- How do we communicate grades and grading to parents?
- How does assessment inform our practice?
- Is what we're doing fair and developmentally appropriate?
- How can we counter the negative impact of poverty on our students' learning?
- How can we provide feedback to students most effectively and efficiently?
- Do our assessments provide us with the information for which we are searching? If not, why not, and how can we change them so that they do?
- What role does practice play in mastery?
- What is mastery for each curriculum we teach?
- What is homework, and how much should it count in the overall grade?
- How are our current structures limiting us?
- Whose voice is not heard in our deliberations?
- What evidence of mastery will we accept?
- What do we know about differentiated practices and the latest in assessment thinking and how are those aspects manifest in our classrooms? If they are not, why not?
- Are we mired in complacency?
- Are we doing things just to perpetuate what has always been done?
- Are we open to others' points of view—why or why not?
- Does our report card format express what we're doing in the classroom?
- How does my grading approach get in the way or support students' learning?
- How are classrooms different from classrooms thirty years ago?
- What will our grading and assessment practices look like fifteen years from now?
- To what extent do we allow state and provincial exams to influence our classroom practices?

Fifth, if a majority of folks are embracing a new grading and assessment approach but a minority are not, concentrate your energy on the majority who are. Lift them up; let them experience your can-do leadership. Most of the others will come along or they will get uncomfortable enough to transfer

to other schools. Instead of knocking your head against the wall and draining your finite, personal energy trying to convince the immovable, hold your head high and provide all the resources and energy you can to those who are willing to give the new grading and assessment ideas a go. Students and the school will be better for it in the long run.

The following three dozen ideas provide ample avenues to pursue discussions and training for responsive grading and assessment practices. Although these staff development ideas are appropriate for other topics, such as differentiated instruction, cognitive theory, preparing students for the state exams, meeting the needs of learning disabled children, reading across the curriculum, and teaching in extended-class periods, they are particularly helpful with topics that push people's emotional buttons, like grading. Each description is meant to be a nugget of an idea that you can use as is or as the first step toward something that better meets the needs of your staff. One of these strategies will have little impact, but three, four, or more done at the same time will have great impact.

Culture of Expectancy

Create an atmosphere in which teachers feel a little peer pressure to at least examine the grading and assessing ideas. This means the faculty is immersed in the concept. If it's in sight, it's in mind, so put it in sight. Post, and frequently update, grading and assessment bulletin boards on the wall behind the photocopier so while teachers make copies, they can read about the topics. Post flyers about grading and assessing on the back of the teacher bathroom stall doors, next to the mirror, or above the urinals. Our business in the washroom makes us a captive audience.

In the weekly (or monthly) principal's letter to staff, devote a corner or column to the topics, asking different teachers, departments, grade levels to submit examples of ideas in practice or how they resolved issues with them. Make reference to grading and assessing in every faculty gathering. During principal walk-throughs, ask teachers to share one example of their exploration or use of a new grading or assessing idea they've used in the last few days.

Culture refers to our way of doing things around here, so make exploring grading and assessing ideas an expected element of everyday life in the school. If almost everyone is talking about and experimenting with them, it's difficult for those who aren't doing so to keep their toes dry.

Faculty Meetings

Open each meeting with a different group sharing their experiences with grading and assessing ideas for five to ten minutes. Rotate different departments and grade levels through the presentation duty.

Department Meetings

Request that every department meeting include discussion of an aspect of new grading and/or assessing ideas as they relate to their individual disciplines, and ask departments to share their observations with the administration.

Expert in the Lounge

Invite an expert in grading and assessment to spend a day in the teacher's lounge posing provocative questions, responding to concerns, and facilitating conversations about the topics.

Faculty Portfolio of Ideas

Place a crate containing a hanging file for each subject at every photocopier in the building. Ask teachers to photocopy one extra copy of whatever they're doing regarding grading and assessment practices and file it in their subject's file in the crate. Anything they put in there is now available for anyone in the building to use. At the end of the year, combine all the files into one portfolio of "best thinking" on grading and assessing that everyone can access.

Dedicated Intranet Folder

Maintain a folder dedicated to grading and assessment issues and practices on your school's intranet where teachers can post ideas and questions. A list-serv might be wise, too.

Instructional Roundtables

These are gatherings of one hour or less. Someone posts a topic and a location for the meeting two weeks in advance. In this case, the topics can be anything associated with grading and assessment. Sample topics might include: Dealing with paperwork—what do grades mean? What do I do with report card grades if I do different things for different students in my lessons? How do we tier tests? What are the best ways to set up our electronic gradebook?

Anyone who wants to get ideas on the posted topic is invited to come, but the ticket in the door is one idea photocopied a dozen times to share with those who attend. At the meeting, everyone shares their one idea, the group discusses new ideas generated by the conversation, and everyone leaves with multiple great ideas. This is done grassroots-style: Anyone can declare a topic and meeting date, not just administration or teacher leaders. All subjects are possible, which means there's likely to be one or more useful to each of us.

Teacher In-service

In addition to your own district's in-house experts, there are many professional development organizations with cadres of speakers, many of whom do presentations on grading and assessment. Contact them about working with your staff. Realize that it's usually best to contract with them for more than one day: one or more days to present and one day at a later time to return and answer questions, coach, and debrief. Highly recommended organizations that provide this service include the following: National Middle School Association (www.nmsa.org); the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) (www.ascd.org); Staff Development for Educators (www.sde.com); AEI Speakers Bureau (www.aeispeakers.com); and professional subject organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (www.ncte.org), the National Science Teachers Association (www.nsta.org), The International Reading Association (www.reading.org), the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (www.nctm.org), the National Education Association (www.nea.org), the American Federation of Teachers (www.aft.org), and Phi Delta Kappa International (www.pdkintl.org). Don't forget to inquire as to whether the organization conducts webcasts or e-seminars for professional development, too. They might be a better option for you.

When teachers have training, they are more inclined to try new ideas. Without professional development, they feel more threatened and less likely to deviate from what they know. Remember, though, one "drive-by" in-service won't cut it. Plenty of follow-up, encouragement, and nurturing will be needed. For every in-service planned, also identify your action plan for supporting teachers' exploration of the topic and maintaining the focus in the months and years ahead.

Figure 15.1 shows a format for helping teachers take in-service learning further.

Monthly or Quarterly Meetings

Regularly gather to debrief in small groups about how things are going with the new grading and assessment ideas. If possible, use teachers rather than administrators to lead the groups. Make sure to have a list of prompts or questions to facilitate discussion at each gathering.

Central Clearinghouse on Students

Establish a central data bank of all information the school has regarding individual students, and invite teachers to enter data as they become aware of it. For example, if you're an encore (elective) teacher, you can look on-line at

Figure 15.1 “3 x 3 x 3” to Use Following an In-service Training Session

Make a plan for your next steps in developing your assessment and grading approaches for differentiated classes. Page through your notes and the handouts and identify *three* attributes or perspectives likely to appear in your practice on your return to the classroom. Next, identify *three* areas of particular interest that you will explore in more depth during the coming school year. Finally, identify *three* specific steps you will take in order to pursue those areas. Examples include:

- Reread and consider notes from today a week from now
- Read a professional book on grading and assessment
- Start a support or study group about assessment and grading
- Implement a new idea (or two) that you’ve learned at the in-service, then write a reflective piece on how it worked or didn’t work with students. If it didn’t work, what would you do differently the next time you try it? If it worked, what evidence do you have that it worked?
- Start maintaining an intranet folder dedicated to grading and assessment discussions and ideas for your building
- Seriously reflect on your gradebook setup and how it might be improved
- Reconstruct your tests and other assessments so that they provide better feedback to students
- Write a one- or two-page summary of your assessment and grading philosophy
- Conduct turn-around training for colleagues
- Lobby for a revision of the school’s or district’s report card format
- Design many other formative assessment opportunities for units of study
- Reexamine redo policies
- Discuss some of the concepts from today with a colleague who wasn’t here
- Write an article for an education journal regarding your school’s investigation of grading and assessment practices

this data bank to learn about the multiple intelligence (MI) proclivities of your students, as posted by the math teacher who administered MI surveys to all students in the fall. As long as the information isn’t highly sensitive, it should be okay to place in this file. If it’s something extremely personal, such as that the child is a victim of sexual abuse, it’s better to put a flag or mark in the student’s database instead of the actual information. The symbol indicates that a school counselor or an administrator has pertinent information on this student that all teachers who work with him or her should see.

The more information we have, the better able we are to serve the student, and that includes assessing and grading.

Model, Model, Model

Begin with teachers who already embrace the new grading and assessing ideas, and support them as they explore the classroom applications. Invite

others to observe them. Any aspect of the assessing and grading philosophy that can be applied to all the teachers and administrators in the building should be tried as well. If it's a sound practice for students, it's probably sound when it comes to assessing teachers and administrators, too. We're all teachers and we're all learners and, in both cases, assessing and grading need to be responsive.

Incorporate Grading and Assessing Practices into Professional Goals

This can be attached to teacher evaluation or not, but ask every teacher to establish one or more goals related to grading and assessment. In addition, they should provide an accompanying work plan and evaluative criteria for achieving their goal(s). Work plans might include: read a book, read a few articles, discuss the topic with a mentor or colleague, try three or more ideas during the year and reflect on how they impact student learning, attend a conference and do turn-around training with the faculty, conduct action research, and/or participate in a study group dedicated to the topic. Again, if it's in sight, it's in mind, and professional goals and evaluations are usually kept in sight.

Provide Funding

Find funds for those teachers wishing to pursue additional training in grading and assessment. School business partners are a great source, as are education grants. Corwin Press (www.corwinpress.com) has published several good books about getting education grants, as does ASCD; *Education Week* and *Teacher Magazine* often have multiple grant offers listed.

Tip: As educator and author Todd Whitaker recommends: when sending teachers to conferences and training seminars, send two positive teachers for every negative teacher. This way the reporting and turn-around training following the conference will be balanced for the faculty.

Get Multiple Copies

Purchase multiple copies of books and publications devoted to grading and assessment for study groups, or buy one copy for every teacher. Don't waste money buying just one copy and telling the faculty to circulate it amongst themselves. One copy does not effect change, and your school's limited dollars should effect positive change.

Book Study Groups

Establish and encourage study groups dedicated to books about grading and assessment. Be sure to have one member who distills some of the major points encountered during the study group meetings for sharing with the larger faculty.

Critical Friends Groups and Action Research Groups

Form case study groups, such as those found in Critical Friends Groups and action research groups, that analyze grading and assessment issues in the classroom and devise investigations to explore those issues and potential responses. These groups can be amazingly supportive and keep things moving in a scholarly manner, often yielding substantive and useful data for teacher buy-in and decision making.

Become a Lab for a University or College

Ask to be a lab school for a local university or college. This gets professors and teacher candidates into the building, which often helps veteran teachers take a more objective look at what they're doing and forces them to address issues about which they may have become complacent over the years. Those of us who have had student teachers in our rooms know that our pedagogy is put to the test and, hopefully, reaffirmed as a result of their probing questions. Grading and assessment are great fodder for these interactions.

In many cases, connecting to a university also opens the university's faculty and resources to teachers. Teachers feel affirmed as professionals, and they can get information on the latest thinking and research on grading and assessment. Ask professors who visit the school to focus on grading and assessment practices, in particular. The university connection creates a professional atmosphere similar to that of a teaching hospital. Conversations are a bit more elevated, and teachers are more focused on professional issues. The professors can be a conduit of recent research, too, while the faculty provides frontline reality applications for them.

Make Use of Teacher Mailboxes

Disseminate pertinent articles and ideas about grading and assessment practices in teacher mailboxes. Make sure to provide opportunities and expectations for interaction on the articles' information at future faculty or department gatherings.

Update Parents and the Community

Inform the parents and community about the school's new emphasis and invite them to look for evidence of it in action. Explain in clear terms—not in “education speak”—what you're doing, and provide multiple channels and opportunities for them to provide input. Don't divert attention to other programs or sugarcoat any aspect of the school's new grading and assessment approaches. Straightforward honesty will work. Parents who are educated about the new approaches and who feel like they've had a chance to make their opinions known won't have as many issues as they are implemented. This won't eliminate challenges, but it will decrease them.

Promotional Materials to Inform

Add the new grading and assessment emphasis to the school's publications, such as newsletters, Web site, work plan, accreditation materials, and other school promotional materials. This is as much a public relations campaign as it is a change in grading policy.

Use Humor

Keep a sense of humor and a sense of journey. It's an engaging, three- to five-year process, not an overnight mandate. Welcome the occasional humor and recognize the messy path that reform can take. Three steps forward, two steps back is still progress, and it's easier with a smile. 😊

Affirmation

Regularly affirm and reward small steps of success, as well as what teachers are already doing well. To do this, try: public recognition at faculty gatherings, private notes of thanks and encouragement, taking over a teacher's class in order to give him or her an extra planning period, referring a teacher looking for help to a successful teacher, posting teacher successes somewhere visible, inviting news organizations to interview teachers who have been successful, and asking successful teachers to take on leadership roles regarding the school's grading and assessment practices.

Comparisons

Regularly show how the new grading and assessment strategies enable success and achievement not attainable via former approaches. This helps with naysayers who may be asking, “Why are we doing this?”

Examples and Non-examples

Just like in great instruction, provide examples and non-examples of the new strategy, concept, or principle (Marzano et al. 2001). Clarity is motivating to both students and teachers. If perception of the new idea is vague, nebulous perception among the teachers, they are less likely to explore it. Providing clear examples of sound grading and assessment practices, and contrasting them with examples of grading and assessment that are not sound clarifies the ideas for everyone. “Just show me what it looks like” is a common refrain from teachers struggling with new ideas.

Cognitive Theory

Update everyone on the latest thinking in cognitive science/theory. There is great overlap and mutual reinforcement with grading and assessment practices. Teachers who are well-informed about cognitive theory principles usually embrace responsive grading and assessment for differentiated classrooms readily. In addition, learning about cognitive theory empowers and excites teachers. David Sousa, Marian Diamond, Barbara Strauch, Pat Wolfe, Bruce Campbell, Robert Sylwester, Robert Marzano, and Eric Jensen, are among the many names with resources that might help.

Peer Observations and Mentoring

Maintain a system of peer observation and mentoring. This is a system of collegial feedback in which teachers observe and analyze each other's lessons in light of the new emphasis on grading and assessment. Assign someone the task of coordinating who is partnering with whom and the dates and times for observations and post-observation analysis. Observations can be in person by giving up an occasional planning period or by providing a substitute for a non-planning period slot. It can also be done by videotaping the class and analyzing the lesson with a colleague later. Enlist retirees and parents to do the taping, if that's easier.

Core Values

Focus colleagues on the school's core values. This may take a year or more, but identify those four or five bottom-line values with which everyone agrees. If the faculty has a stake in a commonly held mission, it's easier for them to see the worthiness of new approaches in grading and assessment. They buy into them; they don't see the new initiatives as sacrifices or threats. For example, if teachers really believe that we teach so that students learn, not just to

present curriculum, then they will employ whatever practices lead to students learning, not just getting through the units. If they believe all students should be taught in a fair and developmentally appropriate manner, then they will question grading practices that don't seem fair after close examination.

Small Beginnings

Start very small. As with most things, practice new behaviors in short chunks. How about implementing one new grading and assessment idea every month? Then, how about one every week until we use multiple ideas weekly?

School Visits

Visit other schools that are farther along in their grading and assessment reforms than your school, and report back what you find. Invite colleagues on professional listservs to share their “dos and don'ts” about grading and assessment reforms.

Reflective Practitioners

Create an atmosphere of reflective practice and analysis. Ask faculty members to maintain reflection (learning) logs, and to regularly connect dots between decisions they make regarding grading and assessment and the subsequent impact on students and their learning. If something bombs, ask teachers to reflect on what they would do differently next time they teach the unit, and if something succeeds, ask them to analyze why. If you're a teacher leader or administrator, make sure to do your version of this so that folks feel like you're working with them.

Common Planning Times

Facilitate common planning times among subjects/teams so they can really explore grading and assessment practices. This is not always easy to provide, but having time is still one of the most influential and transforming strategies available. Without common planning time, very little gets accomplished; the impact of new ideas dims. It's worth adjusting the master schedule to provide for this time.

Remember, though, that teachers who are not used to having common planning time will need training in how to best use such time when it becomes available. There are many, hard-won common planning times in schools that are squandered on activities best left to personal planning times or before or after school hours. Provide the necessary training to maximize its use.

Publishing

Publish what your school is doing regarding grading and assessment in education journals and magazines. It's very motivating to know that our work will get a broader audience than just us. It lends urgency and legitimacy to the new approaches, and we all have a stake in making the school look good. In addition, it feels great to think our school is making a contribution to the profession, let alone to see our names in print.

Risk-Taking

Affirm risk-taking. Make teachers feel safe in trying new things. It starts at the top with the administration taking risks publicly, and it's promoted weekly. Ask teachers how they've experimented with ideas this week and what they learned as a result—good, bad, or in-between. Give teachers license to experiment for the good of the cause.

Staff Health

Focus on staff physical and emotional well-being. If we're barely surviving ourselves, we have little inclination to explore something new or extend ourselves to students. If we're healthy, we're not threatened by the energy needed to take on something new. Specifically, then, make sure teachers are handling stress positively and feeling good about their work. They also need to be exercising regularly, hydrating, eating, and sleeping well. No problem is too great when we are physically and emotionally in a good place.

CBAM

Consider using CBAM, the Concerns-Based Adoption Model. Check the Internet for specific books and articles devoted to this model; it's worth it. Two suggested sources are:

- *Taking Charge of Change*, Shirley M. Hord, William L. Rutherford, Leslie Huling-Austin, and Gene E. Hall, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987
- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory catalog—see www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/cbam15.html

In the model, teachers move through different stages of concern—for themselves, for the task, for the new idea's impact—as well as through stages of use. It's great to use when moving teachers through grading and assessment reforms. If we respond to each level of concern and how teachers are

using the idea, teachers are more willing to partake in the new initiative. These are the levels and their corresponding uses.

CBAM Overview

Teacher Concerns

- 6—Refocusing
- 5—Collaboration
- 4—Consequences
- 3—Management
- 2—Personal
- 1—Informational
- 0—Awareness

Teacher Use of the New Idea

- 6—Renewal
- 5—Integration
- 4a/4b—Refinement/Routine
- 3—Mechanical
- 2—Preparation
- 1—Orientation
- 0—Non-use

Publish Time Lines

Create and reference a time line of implementation. Just like those new building construction time lines and fund drives, we need to graphically portray progress. It's motivating to see where we are compared to where we were. Post the time line in a conspicuous space and identify milestones in the journey. Make sure to celebrate those milestones every time they occur.

One More Idea

Here's a bonus idea that works as well: Ask faculty members to write their own grading policy. Writing a policy helps us do three things 1) affirm our efforts that have proven successful over the years, 2) confront any of our grading philosophies that seem stale and counterproductive, and 3) rededicate our efforts with students and for their learning. When we write about grading and assessment, we discover new ideas about those topics.

It's important to explore those insights with colleagues; once we've articulated what we believe in writing, the next step is to share it. Because we've clarified our thinking through writing, conversations with colleagues are much more productive. We have both language and a framework on which to hook our ideas, but we're also willing to look at our ideas from more than one angle. With all the candor and insight you can muster, write down your own grading philosophy right now.

Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that progress is not inevitable. In order to move forward, we have to pursue the future actively. This requires diligent attention to motivating colleagues at the micro- and macro-levels: from hall duty to the data analysis we do to close achievement gaps; from outdated, one-size-fits-all grading to responsive grading with grades that are accurate and fair. It still takes a spark to get a fire going, and as colleagues, we can be both flint and kindling for one another.