



For students' sake, say no to 'No-Zero Policy' on grading

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By Gina Caneva

Seven years ago, I became a founding teacher at a new, small CPS high school on the South Side. We replaced a neighborhood high school and admitted 150 students from the Englewood area. The initial year was incredibly challenging for many reasons. But a main factor in our struggles arose from the mismatch of teachers' expectations and students' academic skills and work habits.

Many students did not complete homework assignments. Some students did not complete class assignments even when they were present in class. One student – Vanessa – walked out on the final exam because she did not want to take it. Instead, she looked through the exam and said she would take it the next day. I asked her if something was wrong, but she admitted she just wasn't ready. I told her I couldn't give her the exam the next day because she had already seen it, and it wouldn't be fair. She walked out, saying she was going to fail anyway.

That year, we gave our students zeroes for the work they did not turn in. And those zeroes had an impact. Many students tried to make up the zeroes for partial credit through tutoring sessions in the morning, on lunch periods, and after school. I remember grabbing kids at lunch to work with them to improve their grades and skills. When, in spite of these efforts, only 59 percent of our students were considered on-track to graduate in four years by the end of the school year, many of the off-track students signed up for summer school.

No more incentive

After our first year, our principal proposed that we move to what is called a "no-zero policy," because a zero could bring a student's grade down so far that recovery was not an option. She had us read an article that argued that the traditional grading scale of 90-100 for an A, 80-89 for a B, 70-79 for a C, 69-60 for a D, and 59-0 as an F unfairly penalized students because the range for an 'F' was 59 points while the other grades spanned only 10 points.

The principal's proposal was quickly put to a vote, and teachers had the notion that we could always change the policy if we thought it wasn't working. The majority of teachers voted in favor of the policy, which meant that if a student did not complete an assignment, he or she would receive a 50 percent.

Many students continued to fall into similar categories--the students who didn't do homework still didn't do it, those who didn't do much class work still didn't do much class work, and a few opted out of an exam. But there was one major change: The kids who once worked hard to pass by attending tutoring sessions instead decided to forego the sessions and do other things.

In fact, even though both batches of freshmen were similar academically, our on-track rate rose from 59 percent to 87 percent. Since few students were truly failing, hardly anyone thought they needed to work hard to improve.

With 87 percent of our freshmen considered on-track, one would expect that those in the second group would have much higher standardized test scores. But in fact, the ACT scores of both groups were nearly the same, and equally abysmal—a 15.1 for those with a 59 percent on-track rate, and a 15.4 for the group with 87 percent on-track.

After one year, some teachers wanted to reverse the no-zero policy, but the administration would not allow it. Why would they, when a major metric for rating a school, the freshman on-track rate, had increased nearly 30 percentage points and was far higher than the CPS average?

However, the statistic was not accurate in comparison to schools that did not have a no-zero policy. It was just that our expectations weren't as high: If a student earned a D at our school for the same work that would have earned an F somewhere else, of course our on-track rates were higher.

Solutions for better academics, accountability

Now, with the new school ratings system in CPS, many networks and schools are trying out no-zero policies, especially schools that are already on probation and have experienced little improvement. My suggestion to these schools is to not lower your expectations for students by giving them the academic equivalent of a Monopoly-like "Get out of jail free" card. With the no-zero policy, I saw us telling our students, "You can get a pass even when you don't work hard for it."

It is incredibly difficult for people in our country to claw their way out of generational poverty. A good education is central to that struggle. And yet we are saying to young people in Chicago who have grown up in the deepest poverty, "You don't have to work hard to pass. You can miss half of your assignments in all of your classes, and you can still graduate from our high school." Most suburban schools and selective enrollment schools

would never even consider this rule. And no, most colleges will not apply it either. But we are allowing our students in CPS to believe they are on-track because of it.

A better solution to the problem of ensuring that students get on-track is to offer clear, school-wide standards for revision of work and late assignments. The selective enrollment school where I currently work has implemented such policies as determined by departments. For example, in our English department, kids have up to two weeks to hand in late work, but their grade declines by a certain percentage each class day that their work is late. They also have two weeks to revise assignments for a higher grade.

We must also find a solution for how schools are held accountable for growth. If a school does have a no-zero policy, it is incredibly unfair to rank them equally alongside schools that do not. For accountability reasons, schools that have a no-zero policy should have an asterisk beside all of the numbers that are affected by the policy and explaining that the policy is in place. These schools should be held responsible for their D's as well as their F's when it comes to on-track data reporting.

It is a terrible lesson to teach any student in America that it is okay to be lazy, but this lesson is exactly what the no-zero policy says to our Chicago students. Teachers in schools where this policy is under consideration need to band together to fight it. We know that lowering academic expectations will only hurt our students in the long run.

Parents can be allies for teachers on this issue. During parent-teacher conferences at my old school, parents were surprised and put off by the no-zero policy. Many parents felt that students should receive zeroes if they didn't do work, and that receiving a grade of 50 percent instead was not giving students real consequences.

It may seem like an uphill battle, but keeping our expectations high will help our students in school as well as in their future careers.

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