The Main Idea's PD Suggestions for Improving Grading

NOTE: You can conduct the following discussions with just school leaders or with your entire faculty depending on how much you want to open up the topic of grading for discussion.

I. Lay the Groundwork for Changes in Grading Practices: Discussion of a Better Future

Reeves clearly warns school leaders *not* to introduce new ideas about grading with a discussion of *grading policies* in Chapter 8. This will just lead to a heated discussion and a hardening of views. Instead, lead staff through a discussion of a different and better future using questions like the ones below:
- How would our school be different if we had fewer student failures?
- What would it mean to have fewer students in each class *repeating* that class?
- If we did not have to devote so many resources to students failing classes, how else could we use those resources?
- If we had fewer failures, suspensions, expulsions, and fewer low-level discipline problems, how would our professional and personal lives be better?

II. Discussion of the purposes of Grading

1. Have staff rank what they believe to be the top three purposes of grading from the list below from 1 – 3. Then have them discuss their rankings with a partner.
- A. Giving feedback to improve student performance
- B. Reporting to parents on student progress
- C. Communicating with teachers at the next level of instruction
- D. Giving rewards to students for good behavior and attitudes
- E. Assigning punishments to students for poor behavior and attitudes
- F. Making public distinctions between good and bad students

2. Share with staff that research shows that using grades to reward and punish does *not* improve student achievement. Only the top three purposes (A, B, and C) are valid reasons for giving grades. We should NOT be giving grades as rewards. And yet, a number of our actions and grading practices reflect other reasons for giving grades. Share these quotations with staff and have them discuss whether these are valid reasons for giving grades:

> - "I know that she didn't meet the academic standard, but how else I am supposed to recognize that she tried hard, came to class, and finished her homework? Honor roll grades are the only recognition that poor kid will ever get!"
> - "He's not even sorry for missing his assignments! His attitude is casual and contemptuous. I don't care if he aced the end-of-course exam – he's failing my class until he shows some contrition."

III. Some Problems with Our Current Grading System

1. *Varying Methods for Calculating Grades:* Have your staff (each person independently) determine the final grade for a student who has received the following grades throughout one marking period: C, C, MA (missing assignment), D, C, B, MA, MA, B, and A. Then have teachers share the final grades they calculated. There will be a wide variety of results. Discuss: How can our grading system be accurate when we have such widely differing final grades for this student?

2. *Including Behavior in Grades*: To share another example of a problem with our current approach to grading, show teachers how including behavior in grades means that the same grade can be given to a wide range of students. In the example below, a grade of B- has been given to four different students for four different reasons:

> - Outstanding effort and perseverance, but the student has not yet met grade-level standards
> - Outstanding performance well above grade level, but the student's attitude, work ethic, and class participation are inadequate
> - Superior performance, except for one incident of cheating that resulted in a score of zero on a major exam
> - Failure to meet all academic standards, but the student earned several extra credit points to merit the final grade

Have teachers discuss this. Should a B- be allowed to represent all of these different situations? If not, what's the alternative? If this is too abstract, have teachers think of two students who received the same grade last marking period and determine how well the grade represented the differences in the two students. If your teachers include behavior when they calculate grades have them discuss what

type of behavior (in-class disruptions, turning in homework late, etc.) they include in their grades and how this affects the legitimacy of those grades.

3. _The Distortion of Zeroes:_ If teachers at your school use a 100-point scale, ask them to mark on the number line below where an A, B, C, and D fall. Then ask them how many points they think a student should get for not turning in an assignment and have them mark this on the number line as well.

```
0    10    20    30    40    50    60    70    80    90    100
|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|
```
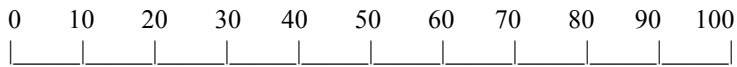
Discuss that giving a student a zero for not turning in work would mean that the distance between the zero and the D (if a D is 60) is 60, or six times as much as the distance between a C and a D (which is 10). So not turning in the work is six times worse than doing an awful job on the work!

IV. Alternatives: Changes We Can Make in Our Grading System

1. _The Four Criteria of Effective Feedback_: To make changes in the grading system, teachers need to understand the four criteria necessary for effective feedback. Distribute the chart below and have teachers assess themselves. Have teachers think back to the last assessment they gave to students and rate themselves on these four criteria – how accurate, fair, specific, and timely was their feedback to their students? Have them think and then discuss this in pairs.

The Four Criteria of Effective Feedback	
Accurate	Feedback must accurately reflect what a student has learned rather than how well the student behaved. Note that a grade may be mathematically accurate (in the case of a "correct" average) yet not reflect what the student has learned.
Fair	Feedback must not be influenced by the gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of the students.
Specific	Feedback must be specific enough to help students improve their performance. Furthermore, the more specific the feedback guidelines (in a rubric, for example), the more reliable and consistent the feedback will be.
Timely	Feedback is timely when it is delivered to students with sufficient promptness to influence their performance.

2. _Grading Changes We Can Make at Our School_: Have small groups brainstorm together to come up with possible suggestions for ways to revise your current approach to grading in order to make it more accurate, fair, specific, and timely. Before sending off the groups to brainstorm, share some of the suggestions from the book to give them ideas:

- Eliminate the use of zero and instead require students make up missed work during the school day
- Give separate grades for behavior
- Have teachers collaboratively score student work to improve accuracy
- Use a Standards Achievement Report (p. 4 of the summary) to clarify how students are performing on each individual standard and to separate out grades for behavior
- Eliminate the practice of averaging to find final grades and instead weigh end-of-year assignments more heavily
- Eliminate the grade of D ("the coward's F") and require that students rework assignments instead
- Use the "Menu System" (p. 7 of the summary) as an alternative to the quick zero

Have the small groups share their brainstormed ideas for reforming the grading system, discuss the merits of each, and then charge a committee to move forward and work out the details of making some school-wide changes to improve grading.

An Idea for Conducting Classroom Observations: Observe for FEEDBACK

Assessing teacher feedback when conducting classroom observations
Use the questions Reeves gave to his students when observing a coach at a basketball game to observe how effective your teachers are at giving feedback. Go into several classrooms and _only_ observe for feedback. Look for:
- The <u>percentage</u> of students who received feedback – Did everyone get some type of feedback?
- The <u>frequency</u> of feedback for each student – Did those who need more help get it?
- The <u>nature</u> of the feedback – Was the feedback positive, negative, challenging, or prescriptive? Was the feedback differentiated based on student need?
- The <u>impact</u> of the feedback – Did the feedback lead to improved performance?

Collaborative Scoring of Student Work

Email Jenn if you want three suggestions for ways your teachers can collaboratively score student work.