

# Replacing “Zero” Grading at the Secondary Level

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In the following report, Hanover Research investigates alternatives to traditional grading systems at the secondary school level, focusing on “no-zero” grading policies. The report begins with a review of the discussion of no-zero grading before profiling no-zero grading policies at eight different districts and secondary schools.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

## INTRODUCTION

The use of grades is integral to our education system, determining whether students advance to the next grade, earn a place on the honor roll, or graduate at the top of their class. An *Education Week* article calls grading “one of the most sacred traditions in American education,” a practice that has “acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools.”<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, then, that stakeholders and reformers continuously scrutinize the grading systems used in schools. One recently-introduced reform to the grading system eliminates the use of zeros in grading. This report aims to understand the rationale behind no-zero grading policies and to determine how no-zero grading policies have been implemented at secondary schools. This report is divided into two sections, as follows:

- **Section I: No-Zero Grading Systems** – this section examines the literature for best practices and evidence of the effectiveness of alternative grading systems.
- **Section II: Implementation of No-Zero Grading Policies** – this section investigates the implementation of no-zero grading policies at eight districts and secondary schools. The section considers both active and failed no-zero grading models.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Controversy often follows the introduction of no-zero grading policies.** Stakeholders, particularly parents and teachers, commonly view no-zero grading as an unfair policy that encourages laziness and fails to prepare students for life after graduation. Public opposition and limited evidence of effectiveness has led multiple schools to abandon no-zero grading policies.
- **Proponents of alternative grading models argue that the use of zero in traditional 100-point grading systems excessively punishes students for missed assignments, distorts the ability of grades to reflect student mastery of academic subjects, and is ineffective at altering student behavior.** Supporters state that grades should ultimately reflect student learning, and incorporating behavioral issues (e.g., absences and missing work) into grades prevents them from effectively communicating student understanding.
- **Proponents of no-zero grading recommend three main alternative grading models: the 50-point scale, the four-point scale, and the “Zeros Aren’t Permitted” policy.** The 50-point and four-point scales restructure the grading scale to make failing grades proportional to the other letter grades, reducing the deflationary impact of a zero on a student’s overall grade. The “Zeros Aren’t Permitted” policy prevents

<sup>1</sup> Olson, L. “Cards on the Table.” *Education Week*, June 14, 1995.  
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1995/06/14/38report.h14.html>

students from receiving zeros by enforcing mandatory work sessions outside of class to complete missing work.

- **The most common models implemented by schools are the 50-point scale and the “Zeros Aren’t Permitted” policy.** Models reflective of the “Zeros Aren’t Permitted” policy appear to be most popular in schools and districts that have successfully implemented no-zero grading programs, with such programs offering students opportunities to make up assignments and develop a stronger work ethic.

## SECTION I: NO-ZERO GRADING SYSTEMS

No-zero grading policies are a subject of much discussion among consultants, school and district administrators, parents, and other stakeholders. Despite the interest that the subject garners, there is little scientific research about no-zero grading practices. Proponents of no-zero grading cite few studies to support their argument, and opponents of the policy are likewise unable to prove their claims with scientific evidence. The claims from the groups on either side of the issue are grounded in opinion and anecdotal evidence rather than scientific studies. This section presents the different arguments made in education literature, both in support of no-zero grading policies and opposed to them.

### SUPPORT FOR NO-ZERO GRADING

The most visible proponents of no-zero grading policies believe that traditional grading systems are failing students. Traditional grading systems are defined in this report as grading systems that:

- Allot student scores according to a 0 to 100 point scale
- Use letter grades that generally correspond to the scores shown in Figure 1.1.
- Calculate end-of-unit grades based on averages of student scores throughout the year.

**Figure 1.1: Traditional Grading Scale**

SCORE	GRADE
90-100	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
0-59	F

**The proponents of alternative grading models assert that grades, first and foremost, should reflect students' learning and mastery of academic material.** Deviations from this goal diminish the value of grading. Supporters of no-zero grading argue that assigning zeros distorts the ability of the grade to accurately measure student learning. According to Thomas R. Guskey, one of the most recognizable proponents of no-zero grading, "if the grade is to represent how well students have learned mastered established learning standards, or achieved specified learning goals, then the practice of assigning zeros clearly misses the mark."<sup>2</sup> Advocates of alternative grading cite three key problems with the use of zeros in grading: deflationary impact, grade dilution, and ineffectiveness of punitive grading.

### DEFLATIONARY IMPACT

The effect of a zero on a student's final grade can be dramatic. This is especially true in traditional grading systems. The difference between a "D," representing poor work, and a zero is usually 59 points. The difference between a "D" and an "A," representing excellent work, on the other hand, is just 30 points. One advocate notes that in this system "the F

<sup>2</sup> Guskey, T.R. "Zero Alternatives." *Principal Leadership*, 5:2, October 2004. pp.49-53.  
<http://www.hsd.k12.or.us/Portals/0/district/Grading%20Reporting/Grading/zero%20alternatives%20-%20guskey.pdf>

[has] six times the impact [of] any other grade.”<sup>3</sup> Ken O’Connor, another well-known supporter of alternative grading models, asserts that “giving zeros for incomplete work has a devastating effect on averages and often zeros are not even related to learning or achievement but to nonacademic factors like behavior, respect, [and] punctuality.”<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1.2 illustrates the effect of a single zero on a student’s final grade. In the hypothetical scenario, Student A performed quite well on four out of five assignments. Receiving a zero on the second assignment, however, reduced the student’s overall score from an “A” to a low “C.” Student B received identical scores on four assignments but carelessly completed assignment two, receiving a “D” grade. Student B’s final grade was a “B,” eight points higher than student A’s grade.

**Figure 1.2: Student Scoring Scenario**

Assignment	1	2	3	4	5	Final Score
Student A	85	0	92	93	90	72
Student B	85	61	92	93	90	84

Douglas Reeves contends that the 100-point scale communicates “that work not turned in deserves a penalty that is many times more severe than that assessed for work that is done wretchedly and is worth a D.” Reeves and other supporters of no-zero grading policies oppose the 100-point grading scale for this reason, arguing that the “punishment” for failing to complete work should “fit the crime.”<sup>5</sup> Guskey echoes Reeves’ assertion, stating that “the zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student has learned or is able to do” and “no evidence demonstrates that assigning zeros helps teach students [accountability].”<sup>6</sup>

Some proponents of no-zero grading disagree with the idea of averaging grades entirely. O’Connor argues that learning is “incremental and progressive,” and averaging grades throughout the year does not accurately portray a student’s learning by the end of the year. O’Connor suggests that schools create processes to recognize situations in which students’ past grades do not accurately reflect their mastery of the subject at the end of the course, except in cases where students learn discrete content that should be evaluated independently.<sup>7</sup>

### *GRADE DILUTION*

Using zeros to grade behavioral issues such as absences, lack of dedication, or lateness can also dilute a student’s grade, making it unclear what the actual mastery of an academic

<sup>3</sup> Erickson, J.A. “Grading Practices: The Third Rail.” *Principal Leadership*, 10:7, March, 2010. p.24.

<http://www.leadandlearn.com/sites/default/files/articles/1003-pl-grading-practices-the-third-rail.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> O’Connor, K. “How to Grade for Learning by Using 15 Fixes for Broken Grades” (Presentation). 2012.

<http://www.gfps.k12.mt.us/sites/default/files/Ken%20O'Connor%20GFPS%20Aug%202013,%202012.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Reeves, D.B. “The Case Against Zero.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86: 4, 2004. pp.324-325.

<http://www.leadandlearn.com/sites/default/files/articles/caseagainstzero.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Guskey, T.R. “Zero Alternatives.” Op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor, K. “15 Fixes for Broken Grades” (Presentation).

[http://www.uky.edu/P12MathScience/PDFs\\_Files/KenOSession6PPT-3perpg.pdf](http://www.uky.edu/P12MathScience/PDFs_Files/KenOSession6PPT-3perpg.pdf)

subject is. The diluting effect may be exacerbated if teachers weigh the importance of behavioral issues differently. Poor marks based on behavior may lower an otherwise satisfactory grade, preventing an academically capable student from advancing academically. According to researchers Jane Bailey and Jay McTighe,

Grades often reflect a combination of achievement, progress, and other factors (e.g., effort, behavior, completing assignments on time). Though most secondary schools currently report using a single, holistic grade or number for subject area courses,...this tendency to collapse several independent elements into a single grade may blur its meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Guskey argues that this dilution invalidates grades by reducing their capacity to accurately evaluate academic ability.<sup>9</sup> O'Connor agrees, asserting that grades should only measure student achievement. The Manitoba Department of Education and Training advises school leaders that "reports on student progress and achievement should contain...information that indicates academic progress and achievement for each course or subject area separate from...punctuality, attitude, behaviour, effort, attendance, and work habits."<sup>10</sup>

### *INEFFECTIVENESS OF PUNITIVE GRADING*

Many teachers, parents, and other stakeholders feel that students who fail to turn in assignments or complete them satisfactorily should face negative consequences for their behavior. Some teachers assign zeros to punish students for inadequate effort or poor performance.<sup>11</sup> Proponents of no-zero grading, however, argue that assigning zeros is not an effective response to poor academic performance or misbehavior. Guskey claims that "no studies support the use of low grades or marks as punishments." He goes on to state that low grades are more likely to discourage students and lead to their withdrawal than encourage them to make greater efforts:

Especially in the early years of school, the negative consequences of failing grades are quite serious and far outweigh any benefits. Even in upper grades, the fear of failure is a questionable motivation device.<sup>12</sup>

Other proponents of no-zero grading, such as Douglas Reeves<sup>13</sup> and Gregory Cizek,<sup>14</sup> concur with Guskey's assertions. Rick Wormeli, a noted proponent of no-zero grading, explains that "when we grade to motivate, punish, or sort students, we do three things: we dilute the grade's accuracy; we dilute its usefulness; and we use grading to manipulate students,

<sup>8</sup> Bailey, J. and McTighe, J. "Reporting Achievement at the Secondary Level: What and How." *Yearbook (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996.*

<sup>9</sup> Guskey, T.R. "Forget Minimum Grades: Get Rid of Percentages." The HOPE Foundation. <http://www.hopefoundation.org/nl/1009/guskey.html>

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, K. "How to Grade for Learning by Using 15 Fixes for Broken Grades" (Presentation). Op. Cit.

<sup>11</sup> Guskey, "Zero Alternatives," Op. cit., pp.49-53.

<sup>12</sup> Guskey, T.R. "Grading Policies that Work Against Standards...and How To Fix Them." *NASSP Bulletin*, 84:620, December, 2000. pp.24-27. <http://www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/academics/gradingandreporting/Documents/GradingarticleGUSKEY.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Reeves, D.B. "Leading to Change/Effective Grading Practices." *Educational Leadership*, 65: 5. February, 2008. pp.85-87. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Effective-Grading-Practices.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> Cizek, G.J. Quoted in O'Connor, "How to Grade," Op. cit.

which may or may not be healthy.”<sup>15</sup> These authors agree that students should face consequences for their actions; they do not, however, agree that grading is the appropriate vehicle for such punishment.<sup>16</sup>

## PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES

Opponents of traditional grading systems have proposed numerous alternative grading models. Three models, in particular, aim to eliminate zeros or reduce the impact of zeros on a student’s grade. Two of the models – the 50-point scale and the 4-point scale – propose altering the grading scales that schools use, while the other suggests that schools avoid accepting incomplete work altogether. All of these models do not have to be used independently, either: schools may alter their grading scales *and* implement policies where incomplete assignments are not accepted. This subsection explains the models generally; Section II profiles no-zero grading systems that have actually been implemented at schools in the United States and Canada.

No-zero grading can be used to, among other things:

- Reduce school failure rates
- Improve advancement from one class to the next
- Improve graduation rates
- Reduce the impact of failing marks on one assignment
- Separate behavioral issues from academic ones

Ken O’Connor presents a foundation for new grading systems using 15 different “fixes” that schools can implement. O’Connor isolates the use of zeros in one of his fixes, exhorting schools to avoid using “zeros in grade determination when evidence is missing or as punishment.” He advises schools to “use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine real achievement or use “I” for Incomplete or Insufficient evidence.”<sup>17</sup>

### 50-POINT SCALE

Some schools restructure their grading scale and eliminate the use of zeros by implementing a 50-point grading scale. In the 50-point scale, students may only receive grades between 50 and 100. Some schools using the 50-point scale allow zeros to be given, but only in extreme circumstances. The 50-point scale leaves the core structure of the 100-point scale intact so schools do not have to introduce an unfamiliar numbering system. It also diminishes the effect of a single poor grade on a student’s overall evaluation.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Wormeli, R. *Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*. 2006. p.103.

<sup>16</sup> Reeves, “Leading to Change,” Op. cit., pp.85-87.

<sup>17</sup> O’Connor, K. “How to Grade,” Op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Reeves, D.B. “The Case Against Zero.” Op. cit.

An example of a similar grading system currently used at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, NC is provided in Section II.

#### *FOUR-POINT SCALE*

The four-point scale represents a dramatic ideological shift away from traditional grading systems. Rather than giving students grades between 0 and 100, teachers give students a 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 (corresponding to F, D, C, B, A). For added specificity, teachers can assign grades using decimal places (e.g., 2.35 or 3.5). The four-point scale avoids the deflationary impact of zeros in a 100-point scale by making all letter grades proportional to each other. It also avoids creating the impression that students who fail to complete work receive a “gift” of 50 points. Students who fail to complete their work still receive a zero, which may satisfy stakeholders who support punitive grading or who are opposed to granting credit for incomplete work.<sup>19</sup> Reeves, Guskey, and Robert J. Marzano support this four-point scale, arguing that it strikes a balance between granting no credit for incomplete work and avoiding the extreme deflationary impact of a zero on the 100-point scale.<sup>20</sup>

#### *ZEROS AREN'T PERMITTED*

“Zeros Aren’t Permitted” (ZAP) policies are an alternative to restructuring the entire grading system. Students in ZAP schools may still be graded on a 0 to 100 point scale, but the schools enforce policies that do not allow students to receive a zero. Teachers dispense an “I,” or incomplete, grade to students that fail to turn in an assignment or fail to complete it satisfactorily rather than allowing students to shirk responsibility and “take a zero.” Teachers assign students with “I” grades to “ZAP labs” that take place after school, during breaks, or on Saturdays. Students must attend ZAP labs until their work is completed, at which point the “I” grade can be replaced by a letter or number grade. Grades left incomplete despite ZAP lab requirements may ultimately be converted to zeros.<sup>21</sup>

ZAP policies grant students multiple opportunities to overcome poor performance, absences, or other behavioral issues. In such systems “quality, rather than being an option, is non-negotiable – and what is needed to certify proficiency is accurate evidence of each student's level of achievement.”<sup>22</sup>

Many advocates for no-zero grading support the use of ZAP policies as an effective replacement for traditional grading. Douglas Reeves suggests that requiring students to take time to complete the assignment, while losing privileges and freedom in the process, is the appropriate punitive response to behavioral issues. According to Reeves, motivation for

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> [1] Reeves, “The Case Against Zero,” Op. cit., pp.324-325.

[2] Guskey, “Forget Minimum Grades,” Op. cit.

[3] Marzano, R.J. *Classroom assessment and grading that work*. ASCD, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Guskey, T.R. “Zero Alternatives.” Op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, D., O’Connor, K., and Wakeman, N. “Redefining ‘Fair:’ Assessment and Grading for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” *Changing Perspectives*, February, 2009. pp.27-31. <http://damiancooperassessment.com/redefiningfair.pdf>

freedom is a stronger influence than threats of failure.<sup>23</sup> Thomas Guskey recommends the use of “incomplete” grades to address behavioral issues and also to ensure that students gain mastery of academic subjects. He states that in such systems, teachers should push their students to complete their work in a timely and satisfactory fashion, following the mantra: “if it’s not done well, then it’s not done!”<sup>24</sup>

There is some evidence that ZAP policies can be effective at managing behavioral issues. Minnetonka Public Schools in Minnesota, which implemented a variation of the ZAP policy, reported that unexcused absences and suspensions decreased by 55 percent and 40 percent, respectively, after ZAP implementation. The school’s policy did not allow teachers to give zeros because of absences, nor did it prevent students from completing work that was missed due to unexcused absences. The policy contained a cheating component in which the schools required students caught cheating to take alternate assessments, complete an “ethics study,” and surrender school privileges. A district administrator stated that “we believe that we have elevated the consequences of cheating and shifted the emphasis from purely punitive to learning from mistakes.”<sup>25</sup>

## **OPPOSITION TO NO-ZERO GRADING SYSTEMS**

No-zero grading systems, when proposed and implemented, are often controversial. Various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students themselves, may oppose alterations to the grading system. Many opponents defend the use of the zero, stating that such a harsh penalty is appropriate to instill proper values within students. The most common arguments against alternative grading systems, exhibited in the profiles in Section II, are that preventing students from receiving zeros:

- Is unfair toward students that work to complete assignments on time
- Does not prepare students for real-world situations, in which incomplete or late work is not acceptable and often results in loss of employment or censure
- Rewards laziness and encourages students to avoid work
- Inappropriately inflates student grades
- Damages the academic reputation of the school and its teachers
- Interferes with teachers’ ability to use their own discretion in grading

Further, critics of no-zero grading criticize the research used to support no-zero policies. They question the circular nature of the references used by the most visible proponents of no-zero grading, recognizing that many of the proponents’ assertions are not grounded in scientific research.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Reeves, “The Case Against Zero,” Op. cit., pp.324-325.

<sup>24</sup> Guskey, T.R. “Grading Policies that Work,” Op. cit., pp.24-27.

<sup>25</sup> Erickson, J.A. “Grading Practices,” Op. cit., pp.22-26.

<sup>26</sup> Zwaagstra, M. “Zero Support for No-Zero Policies.” Frontier Centre for Public Policy. August, 2012.  
[http://www.fcpp.org/files/5/PS140\\_ZeroSupportID\\_AG20F1.pdf](http://www.fcpp.org/files/5/PS140_ZeroSupportID_AG20F1.pdf)

## SECTION II: IMPLEMENTATION OF NO-ZERO GRADING POLICIES

This section profiles no-zero grading policies at eight different districts and secondary schools. It is divided into two subsections: one that examines active no-zero grading policies and another that considers failed attempts to implement no-zero grading.

Much of the public discussion of no-zero grading policies concentrates on controversies. This may be because news outlets, a major source of information about no-zero policy implementation, are attracted to controversies rather than routine policy changes. Additionally, schools may choose not to publicize the implementation of no-zero grading, limiting the exposure of policy changes to the public.

### ACTIVE NO-ZERO GRADING POLICIES

#### *CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS (CHARLOTTE, NC)*

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) announced in May 2013 that it would expand a pilot no-zero grading policy throughout the district.<sup>27</sup> The no-zero policy explicitly forbids the use of grades for punitive purposes in district schools,<sup>28</sup> and in most cases students cannot receive grades lower than 50.<sup>29</sup> A document outlining the CMS grading policy states that “if a student has no chance to regain success after making mistakes, they will give up; often becoming discipline problems.” It asserts that the purpose of awarding grades is first and foremost to measure students’ learning and mastery of content and skills.<sup>30</sup>

The policy includes a caveat that teachers may award zeros to students who fail to show effort during tests or assignments.<sup>31</sup> Such caveats also exist in the policies used by individual CMS schools, such as Mallard Creek High School (MCHS), the site of the first no-zero policy in the district. The principal at MCHS explained that students who do not take a test on time will still have to complete the test; a grade of 50 will not be assigned automatically. The MCHS principal described the program as follows: “Basically, [the no-zero policy] only applies where a student has made a good-faith effort to complete an assignment and has showed continued effort. Kids have bad days. We have students who have terribly disturbing things happen in their home life. That means on any given day, they’re sitting in a chair not prepared to focus on learning.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Watson, S. “CMS schools replacing failing ‘zero’ grades with score of ‘50.’” WCNC.com, May 17, 2013.

<http://www.wcnc.com/news/iteam/CMS-schools-replacing-failing-zero-grades-with-score-of-50-207945941.html>

<sup>28</sup> “Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools High School Grading Procedures Plan.” Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools.

[http://media.cmgdigital.com/shared/news/documents/2013/05/17/Grading\\_documents.PDF](http://media.cmgdigital.com/shared/news/documents/2013/05/17/Grading_documents.PDF)

<sup>29</sup> Watson, Op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> “Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools High School Grading Procedures Plan,” Op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Watson, Op. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Price, M. “Mallard Creek High tests new CMS grade scale of 50-100.” *The Charlotte Observer*, May 17, 2013.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2013/05/17/4047915/cms-trying-new-test-grade-scale.html>

The CMS program’s proponents assert that the program rewards student effort, allowing hard-working students to recover from a poor test or assignment. Its opponents cite many of the common arguments against no-zero grading. Parents and teachers claim that the policy will give students an inaccurate view of life after school and promote declining academic ability among students. Opponents also assert that no-zero grading rewards laziness and inflates student grades; one high school student noted that some of his classmates are content to accept a grade of 50 without putting forth the effort needed to achieve a higher grade.<sup>33</sup>

#### *CHARLOTTE HIGH SCHOOL (CHARLOTTE, MI)*

Charlotte High School (CHS) addresses unsatisfactory or late work through its “Zeros Aren’t Permitted” (ZAP) program. As previously discussed in Section I, the program does not allow students to receive a zero on an assignment. The school handbook notes that “late credit is *always* preferable to a ‘zero’ no matter what the assignment.” Unlike programs that restructure the grading scale, ZAP does not shift the minimum grade possible. Rather, students that do not complete work or produce unsatisfactory work must attend after-hours “ZAP Labs” to complete their work.<sup>34</sup>

ZAP Labs take place on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons or on Saturdays. Students assigned to a ZAP Lab must remain there until their work is completed and accepted by a ZAP supervisor, and their assignment grade may be reduced commensurate to their effort. Students that fail to attend an assigned ZAP session may be assigned to Saturday School or have their school privileges revoked.<sup>35</sup>

The school places some restrictions on the ZAP program: parents must be notified for their child’s first ZAP session; students must be given 24 hours’ notice before a ZAP session; ZAP sessions must be assigned promptly after assignment due dates; and all staff members must oversee at least one lab session during the year.<sup>36</sup>

#### *APPLE VALLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL (HENDERSONVILLE, NC)*

The Apple Valley Middle School (AVMS) no-zero policy aligns with the ZAP policies implemented at other schools. The goal is not to minimize the negative effect of a zero; rather, AVMS designed the program to ensure that students complete all the required assignments. Students that do not complete assignments before they are due at AVMS must dedicate time before school, after school, during free time, or during lunch to finish their work. Students may also be required to redo work that is unsatisfactory. Students must

<sup>33</sup> Watson, Op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> “Student Handbook 2012-13.” Charlotte High School. pp.34-35.  
<http://www.charlottenet.org/chs/Student%20Handbook%202012-2013.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

complete their assignments before the midterm, after which students may no longer receive credit for the assignment.<sup>37</sup>

### *RUSSELL HAWKINS JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL (JACKSON, MO)*

In spring 2010, Russell Hawkins Junior High School in Jackson, Missouri, began a pilot for a program similar to the ZAP model. The program, known as the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) system, is based on the philosophy “where zeros are not given... [and] teachers do not allow students not to do their work.”<sup>38</sup> The program was designed for eventual implementation across all secondary grades at the school.

Through the ICU program, students are provided with an extra day to turn in any assignments, but must fill out an “SOS sheet” as soon as they realize they are going to miss the assignment deadline. Students then receive assistance from their teacher on the assignment during lunch that same day. If the student still does not complete the assignment by the following day, the SOS sheet is passed to the student’s advisory teacher. As all students at the school have one study period each day, the advisory teacher ensures that the student works on the assignment at school or contacts the student’s parents to discuss how the assignment will be completed at home.

If the assignment is not completed by the end of the week, the student’s name is added to the “ICU list.” This list is available to the principal and all teachers, and is monitored by one teacher known as the “lifeguard.” This teacher meets with the student to discuss why they did not complete the assignment, and works with the student, their teachers, and their parents to ensure the assignment is completed.

According to the school’s principal, there are normally between 50 and 100 names on the ICU list each week. However, the principal believes that this number slowly decreased throughout the implementation of the program. He explains: “It is a culture change within the building, certainly with our teachers and how they do business, and with our kids... It’s been positive for the kids, because they know we aren’t out there trying to find where they mess up. They know instead we are there for help.”

While teachers initially expressed hesitation, buy-in has increased as the initial results become visible. As one teacher noted, “In the past it’s been really easy to just give them zeros when they don’t do the work... Now they aren’t let off the hook. They’re kids. They’ve got to be required to do things, even when they don’t act responsibly about it the first time.”

<sup>37</sup> “Apple Valley Middle School.” Apple Valley Middle School. p.3. Downloaded at <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDUQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hendersoncountypublicschoolsnc.org%2Favm%2Ffiles%2F2011%2F01%2Fagenda-for-website.doc&ei=AVLLUc-TDu7h4APYyoDICw&usq=AFQjCNHE4wdBqXrBTJsdTYSYdc2TuDW4Q&sig2=J5yFfJt0B6e-502eCHS-Bg&bvm=bv.48340889,d.dmg&cad=rja>

<sup>38</sup> All information in profile drawn from: Ragan, E. “Jackson has success with no-zeros education policy.” *Southeast Missourian*. November 2, 2011. <http://www.semissourian.com/story/1780077.html>

By the end of the first quarter of full implementation of the ICU program, the school witnessed the largest percentage of A's and the lowest percentage of D's and F's in the past 15 years.

### **FAILED NO-ZERO GRADING POLICIES**

Controversy tends to accompany the introduction of no-zero grading policies, and many schools struggle to successfully implement changes to the grading system. Even the most well-intentioned plans may be unable to survive public opposition. The schools profiled in this subsection proposed or implemented no-zero grading policies but eventually abandoned their plans.

#### *ROSS SHEPPARD HIGH SCHOOL (EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA)*

The failure of the no-zero grading policy at Ross Sheppard High School (RSHS) in Edmonton serves as one of the most visible examples of failed implementation. RSHS's no-zero policy aligned closely with the ZAP model. The policy strictly pertained to class assignments; it did not place restrictions on test grades. RSHS issued a directive to its teachers instructing them not to award zeros for assignments that were not completed. Under the no-zero guidelines, students who failed to turn in assignments were required to meet with teachers to explain the cause of the missed assignment. Teachers worked with students individually to ascertain the root of the problem and develop a solution, which generally included completing the assignment later.<sup>39</sup>

Public opposition to the program arose after RSHS fired a teacher who refused to adopt the no-zero policy. The firing ignited a public outcry and led to a district review of no-zero grading.<sup>40</sup> An unscientific poll conducted on the *Edmonton Journal* website found that over 97 percent of respondents opposed the no-zero grading policy.<sup>41</sup> Administrators from Edmonton Public Schools (EPS) and RSHS defended the policy, arguing that giving students zeros distorts the ability of a grade to measure student mastery, as student grades should summarize student knowledge, not comment on student behavior.<sup>42</sup> This limits teachers' ability to accurately identify students that need extra academic support and makes high school completion more difficult for students.<sup>43</sup> EPS further asserted that requiring students to complete assignments held them accountable for their actions, while giving students a zero allowed them to avoid responsibility.<sup>44</sup> The district superintendent argued that the "all or nothing approach" of traditional grading failed to serve students in their educational development.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Schmidt, E. "Open letter on student assessment." Edmonton Public Schools, June 1, 2012. <http://news.epsb.ca/2012/06/open-letter-on-student-assessment/>

<sup>40</sup> "Edmonton teacher who gave 0s for unsubmitted work fired." CBC News, September 14, 2012. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/story/2012/09/14/edmonton-dorval-zero-fired.html>

<sup>41</sup> Zwaagstra, "Zero Support," Op. cit., p.8.

<sup>42</sup> "Edmonton Public Schools' Assessment Practices." Edmonton Public Schools, June 6, 2012. <http://news.epsb.ca/2012/06/edmonton-public-schools-assessment-practices/>

<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, Op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> "Edmonton Public Schools' Assessment Practices," Op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> Schmidt, Op. cit.

The no-zero policy was eventually reversed at the district level after months of review following the controversial firing.<sup>46</sup>

### *GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS (GRAND RAPIDS, MI)*

Grand Rapids High School (GRHS) introduced its “Success Only Option” program in 2008. The program had three components designed to reduce student failure rates. The first component allowed students to hand in missing work after its due date. The second part of the program eliminated teachers’ ability to use punitive grading to address “excessive absences or poor behavior.” The third component was a unique no-zero policy. The GRHS no-zero policy (which was extended to other district high schools) did not shift the school’s grading scale, nor did it mandate that students spend extra time in classrooms to complete missed work. Rather, it grants students a grace period to complete missed or poor quality work. GRHS converted failing grades to “held” or “incomplete” grades. Students could improve “incomplete” grades by turning in missing assignments, or could improve “held” grades by repeating courses online or during weekends or by working with tutors to improve poor work. GRHS granted students until the end of the following trimester to rectify their work. Students also had the option of choosing to accept a failing grade.<sup>47</sup>

GRHS justified the Success Only Option plan by arguing that students need additional opportunities to succeed. The district superintendent stated that “the only time we insist on failure if you don’t get it the first time is with children in high school. Our children are our precious gifts and, if sometimes they need a little longer for their light to shine, let’s let them do it.”<sup>48</sup>

Opponents to the policy argued that the no-zero policy exacerbated a culture of laziness that was supported by the first two elements of the Success Only Option program. They claimed that the policy was an ill-advised effort to inflate grades to improve school image. The president of the teacher’s union stated that “we’ve already told kids they don’t have to turn in their work when it’s due, and then that they don’t have to show up. Now they don’t even have to work hard when teachers tell them to.”<sup>49</sup>

**Figure 2.1: Statistics from the First Year of No-Zero Policy**

Number of students	4,186
Number of classes taken	20,930
Number of “holds” issued	2,364

Source: MLive.com

<sup>46</sup> Parrish, J. “Edmonton public school board reverses policy prohibiting zeros.” CTV, April 23, 2013.

<http://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/edmonton-public-school-board-reverses-policy-prohibiting-zeros-1.1251220>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Murray, D. “Grand Rapids high school students cannot get failing grade under new policy.” MLive.com, December 3, 2008. <http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2008/12/grade.html>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

During the first trimester of the no-zero policy, approximately one “held” grade was issued for every two students (see Figure 2.1).<sup>50</sup> The Grand Rapids policy proved to be largely ineffective, however. Only 16 percent of “held” classes were converted to passing grades during the first trimester that the program was in place (see Figure 2.2). Of 2,866 reported “held” grades during the first and second trimesters of the program, only 472 were converted to better grades through student make-up work or retaking classes. Perhaps most disappointingly to program administrators, students did not appear to respond to the program at all – in 68 percent of classes, students made no attempt to make up or improve their work.<sup>51</sup>

**Figure 2.2: Results of the First Year of No-Zero Policy**

Total “held” grades issued	2,866
Number of “held” grades converted	472
Percent of classes for which students did not make an effort to improve	68%
Percent of retaken classes that were failed a second time	15%

Source: MLive.com

Grand Rapids Public Schools abandoned the no-zero policy in 2012, four years after its implementation. School officials cited low participation and confusion as reasons for ending the program. The “H” grade complicated the transfer process for students moving to other schools, and teachers and parents repeatedly expressed confusion with the system.<sup>52</sup>

*PUEBLO MAGNET HIGH SCHOOL (TUCSON, AZ)*

The administration at Pueblo Magnet High School (PMHS) attempted to implement a no-zero grading policy in 2012, but the school quickly abandoned the policy after provoking widespread indignation from teachers. The grading policy, outlined in an e-mail to teachers, restructured the grading scale to eliminate any grades lower than 50 (see Figure 2.3). Regardless of student behavior or performance (including cheating), teachers were not allowed to assign grades lower than 50. Additionally, teachers were required to allow “do-overs” to students that received a “D” or “F” on an assignment.<sup>53</sup>

**Figure 2.3: Proposed PMHS Grading Scale**

SCORE	GRADE
90-100	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
50-59	F

Source: Tucson Sentinel

The administration argued for its grading policy by citing research that criticizes the subjective nature of grading policies and the deflationary effect of a zero on a student’s overall grade. The administration also argued against the use of averaging in grades, noting that an average grade does not recognize student proficiency in individual content areas.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Grand Rapids schools’ new ‘H’ grade-conversion plan results in 16 percent of failed classes turning into passing grades.” MLive.com, April 20, 2009. [http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/04/grand\\_rapids\\_schools\\_new\\_h\\_gra.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/04/grand_rapids_schools_new_h_gra.html)

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, R. “Grand Rapids schools ditching controversial ‘H’ grade for struggling students.” MLive.com, April 17, 2012. [http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/04/grand\\_rapids\\_schools\\_ditching.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2012/04/grand_rapids_schools_ditching.html)

<sup>53</sup> Smith, D. “Pueblo’s ‘no-zero’ grade scale to award half-credit for cheating.” *Tucson Sentinel*, July 31, 2012. [http://www.tucsonsentinel.com/local/report/073112\\_pueblo\\_grades/pueblos-no-zero-grade-scale-award-half-credit-cheating/](http://www.tucsonsentinel.com/local/report/073112_pueblo_grades/pueblos-no-zero-grade-scale-award-half-credit-cheating/)

Their primary argument for no-zero grading, though, was that zeros diminish students' hope and do not accurately measure mastery when averaged with other grades.<sup>54</sup>

The PMHS no-zero policy never went into effect. Shortly after the policy was announced, the district superintendent stated publicly that PMHS would not be allowed to implement the no-zero policy. He asserted that the plan was "well intentioned" but "naïve." Opposition to the policy was particularly strong among PMHS teachers, who claimed that the program was poorly considered and expressed concern that resulting grade inflation would diminish their reputations as instructors.<sup>55</sup>

### *SHIPROCK HIGH SCHOOL (SHIPROCK, NM)*

Shiprock High School (SHS) announced a pilot no-zero grading strategy in January 2013 that would eventually be expanded to govern all district schools.<sup>56</sup> The policy, which applied primarily to daily assignments rather than quarterly assessments or other tests, set 50 as the minimum score a student could receive. An "F" in the new system is any grade between 50 and 59, aligning with 10-point spreads for other letter grades.<sup>57</sup>

SHS administrators argued that the program allowed assignments to measure student progress according to measurable learning standards, as well as mitigates the effects of a failing grade. A school district spokesman stated that "if you have a 50, you have a chance to pull yourself out to passing with a 50. If you're given a 20, as a grade, as an 'F,' it's a grade killer." The school also cited academic reports such as "Effective Grading Practices" by Douglas B. Reeves, discussed in Section I of this report.<sup>58</sup>

Opponents of the policy, particularly teachers, criticized the program as a "major step backwards" from the district's progress toward greater student accountability. One math teacher calculated that under the new plan, students could pass academically by completing only 14 percent of assigned work.<sup>59</sup> Other critics of the program included parents, students, and the New Mexico Public Education Department.<sup>60</sup>

SHS abandoned the policy only one month after it was implemented. The school cited implementation issues, rather than public opposition, as the cause of the policy reversal. A district spokesman explained that SHS did not intend to abandon the no-zero grading policy

<sup>54</sup> Shaw, K. "Welcome Back 2012-2013" (Presentation). Pueblo Magnet High School, June 30, 2012. <http://www.authorstream.com/Presentation/pueblowarriors-1487327-welcome-back-2012-2013-kathi-shaw/>

<sup>55</sup> Smith, D. "Pedicone: Pueblo's no-zero grading 'crossed the line.'" *Tucson Sentinel*, August 1, 2012. [http://www.tucson sentinel.com/local/report/080112\\_pueblo\\_grades/pedicone-pueblos-no-zero-grading-crossed-line/](http://www.tucson sentinel.com/local/report/080112_pueblo_grades/pedicone-pueblos-no-zero-grading-crossed-line/)

<sup>56</sup> Kane, J. "Shiprock High School rescinds its 'no-zero' grading policy for the current school year." *The Daily Times*, February 22, 2013. [http://www.daily-times.com/ci\\_22648807/shiprock-high-school-rescinds-its-no-zero-grading](http://www.daily-times.com/ci_22648807/shiprock-high-school-rescinds-its-no-zero-grading)

<sup>57</sup> Bitsoi, A.L. "Shiprock High adopts 'no-zero' grade policy. *Navajo Times*, February 21, 2013. <http://navajotimes.com/education/2013/0213/022113zer.php>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kane, Op. cit.

completely. Rather, he stated that the district will reconsider the policy and investigate the possibility of implementing it at a future date.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

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