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Zero Support for No-zero Policies

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His columns promoting common sense education reforms have been published in major daily newspapers including the *National Post, The Globe and Mail,* the *Calgary Herald,* the *Winnipeg Free Press,* and the *Chronicle Herald.* He is also a frequent guest on radio stations across the country. His first book, *What's Wrong with Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them* (co-authored with Rodney Clifton and John Long), was released in 2010.

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Executive Summary

- Many school boards and individual schools across the country have implemented no-zero policies as part of their formal guidelines for teachers. These policies prohibit teachers from giving marks of zero for incomplete work or for academic misconduct such as plagiarism. Since no-zero policies obviously have a major impact on assessment practices, it is important to carefully evaluate the arguments made in favour of this approach.
- It is difficult to quantify how widespread no-zero policies are across Canada, since school boards tend not to advertise their existence. Nevertheless, the media report enough examples of no-zero policies to demonstrate that this practice is widespread.
- The research on no-zero policies is surprisingly weak. In fact, the assessment consultants regularly cite each other as their only sources when defending no-zero policies, and they rarely refer to actual research evidence to support their position.
- There are many reasons why school administrators should avoid no-zero policies. First, they inevitably bring controversy with them, something that is acknowledged by even their strongest proponents.
- Second, no-zero policies unreasonably interfere with the professional discretion of teachers to determine grades. Teachers know their students and realize it is unrealistic to expect the same technique to work with every student. They use a variety of methods to hold students accountable.
- Third, no-zero policies fail to prepare students for life after school. Employees are not paid for doing nothing, and universities do not grant credit to students who choose not to hand in their assignments.
- The arguments against no-zero policies are compelling. No-zero policies always encounter fierce resistance from parents and teachers, unreasonably interfere with the professional discretion of teachers, penalize students who complete all their assignments on time and fail to prepare students for life after school. These are all excellent reasons for school administrators to avoid stepping into the quagmire of no-zero policies.

Introduction

Many school boards and individual schools across the country have no-zero policies as part of their formal assessment guidelines for teachers. No-zero policies prohibit teachers from giving their students marks of zero for incomplete work or for academic misconduct such as plagiarism. Rather, teachers are expected to use a variety of interventions (such as scheduled homework time during lunchtime or after school) to make sure students complete the assigned work.

Unsurprisingly, no-zero policies are highly controversial among teachers and parents. Many parents think that schools are not preparing students for the real world when they impose policies that make it impossible for students to receive zeros. Many teachers oppose no-zero policies because they undermine their professional autonomy to determine appropriate grades.

Nevertheless, no-zero policies receive strong endorsements from most assessment consultants in the field of education. Ken O'Connor, Damian Cooper, Douglas Reeves and Thomas Guskey are some of the best-known authors who claim that no-zero policies make sense because there is substantial research evidence supporting them.

Some people are skeptical of this approach. The recent suspension of Edmonton high school teacher Lynden Dorval for defying a no-zero directive at Ross Sheppard High School garnered attention across the country. Largely because of the public outcry, trustees with the Edmonton Public School Board agreed to review their assessment policies and practices. The outcry also prompted other jurisdictions to reconsider their assessment policies and practices.

Since no-zero policies obviously have a major impact on assessment practices in schools, it is important to carefully evaluate the arguments made in favour of this approach. This includes the theoretical arguments and the evidentiary research base. If evidence for this approach is lacking, school administrators should question the wisdom of no-zero policies.

" Many parents think that schools are not preparing students for the real world when they impose policies that make it impossible for students to receive zeros.

The current approach to assessment

Grading practices have changed significantly over the years. Teachers used to determine students' grades without input from school boards. Understandably, this led to a wide variety of practices, some more valid than others. However, starting approximately 20 years ago, researchers began paying closer attention to how teachers graded their students.[1]

While assessments are primarily associated with unit tests, project marks and final grades, assessment consultants emphasize that this type of evaluation is only one component of a proper assessment protocol. Formative assessment, also known as assessment for learning, now receives a great deal of emphasis.[2] Such assessment provides specific feedback to students about their progress and is generally not included in their final grades. It supports the learning process and gives students the opportunity to practice their skills in a non-judgmental environment. In contrast, assignments and tests given for the purpose of evaluation are summative assessment or assessment of learning.

Research strongly supports the importance of feedback as part of the learning process. In his examination of more than 900 meta-analyses consisting of approximately 60,000 research studies, John Hattie, the director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute in Australia, found that feedback has "twice the average effect of all other schooling effects" and it "places in the top ten influences on [students'] achievement."[3] Thus, there is good reason for the attention given to formative assessment.

Assessment consultants also emphasize the importance of ensuring that grades are valid and reliable. "Validity" means that grades convey appropriate information about the specific achievement in question, and "reliability" means that grades are accurate on a consistent basis.[4] Some argue that combining all of the scores in one subject into a single grade may increase the risk of a measurement error, since some teachers fail to ensure validity and reliability when determining grades.[5]

One way to address this concern is to implement a clear separation between data about achievement and data about behaviour and attitudes.[6] Assessment consultants tend to be highly critical of incorporating behavioural factors such as attendance, attitude, effort, participation and punctuality into final grades. They argue that behavioural factors should be reported separately on the report card and that they should not affect a student's final academic grade.[7]

Because the time an assignment is turned in is considered a behavioural factor, many assessment consultants say that students should not receive academic penalties for lateness or incomplete work. Similarly, given that plagiarism is also a behavioural choice, consultants argue that it is inappropriate for guilty students to receive a mark of zero. In these cases, students should redo the work properly, and their marks should accurately reflect their achievement rather than their behaviour.[8]

As a result, assessment consultants who support an absolute separation of behaviour from academic achievement insist that a no-zero policy is the only reasonable policy for school boards. As such, a significant number of Canadian school boards have enacted such policies.

> ...feedback has "twice the average effect of all other schooling effects" and it "places in the top ten influences on [students'] achievement."

No-zero policies across Canada

It is difficult to quantify how widespread no-zero policies are since school boards tend not to report these policies to the public. Generally, the public becomes aware of a no-zero policy when the media reports on controversial cases. Nevertheless, there are enough examples to demonstrate that this practice is quite widespread.

The most famous case in Canada is at Ross Sheppard High School in Edmonton. Teachers there cannot give students a zero for any incomplete work. Instead, they are required to enter a three-digit behaviour code. This code does not affect the students' final mark.[9] In May 2012, the Edmonton Public School Board suspended physics teacher Lynden Dorval for failing to comply with his school's no-zero policy. While the Edmonton Public School Board does not have a division-wide no-zero policy, some schools under its jurisdiction, such as Ross Sheppard, have implemented one.[10]

Public response to this issue has been overwhelmingly on Dorval's side. Students rallied to his defence, teachers spoke out in support of his position and newspaper pages were filled with letters attacking the no-zero policy. Even an online poll conducted by the *Edmonton Journal* reported that more than 97 per cent of the 12,486 respondents opposed the no-zero policy.[11] Largely in response to this public pressure, the school trustees voted at their June meeting to review their assessment practices.[12]

Edmonton is not the only place in Alberta with a no-zero policy. Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools has had one for the last five years.[13] In addition, at least one school in the Calgary Board of Education, Dr. E. P. Scarlett High School, has a no-zero policy.[14]

In Saskatchewan, at least two school divisions have no-zero policies. Saskatoon Public Schools prohibits teachers from deducting marks for lateness or plagiarism. Not surprisingly, the board faced substantial public criticism when the policy became known.[15] Prairie Spirit School Division, located north of Saskatoon, also has a similar policy.[16]

For a number of years, Manitoba had a province-wide policy that prohibited teachers from deducting marks for late or missing assignments. Nevertheless, in November 2010, Education Minister Nancy Allan announced a reversal of that policy and made it clear that teachers may decide how to handle late or missing work.[17] The official policy document released by the Manitoba government now permits teachers to deduct marks for late or missing work and for academic dishonesty.[18]

A similar about-face on assessment took place in Ontario. Guidelines from the provincial department of education originally stipulated that teachers could give marks of zero only as a last resort. Because of this guideline, a number of schools implemented formal no-zero policies. However, the Minister of Education released a new set of guidelines in 2010 that explicitly gave teachers the option of giving a mark of zero for incomplete work.[19] This reversal received the enthusiastic endorsement of Ken Coran, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.[20]

No-zero policies have even made their way to Canada's East Coast. The Eastern School District in St. John's, Newfoundland, explicitly prohibits teachers from deducting marks for late or missing work or for plagiarism.[21] Despite opposition from the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, this district has kept its no-zero policy.[22]

Regardless of where a no-zero policy is implemented, it usually generates controversy when the public becomes aware of its existence. However, the strong pushback from many parents and teachers makes it difficult to implement these policies. Public opposition to no-zero policies shows no sign of subsiding.

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Arguments in support of no-zero policies

Advocates of no-zero policies think that there are good reasons for them. Among other things, they point to documents produced by provincial education departments. For example, the Alberta Education Learner Assessment Branch recently produced a 150-page report that provides a number of formal recommendations to schools. Among other things, it says, "No-zero policies support student-learning outcomes" and consequently the report recommended that teachers should accept late assignments without penalty.[23]

Several recurring themes appear regularly in defense of no-zero policies. Let us look at them.

1) Empirical research strongly supports no-zero policies.

This is potentially the strongest argument offered in support of no-zero policies. If empirical research studies clearly point to the superiority of the no-zero approach, then we would need to give it serious consideration, even when there is public opposition.

However, the research on no-zero policies is surprisingly weak. In fact, the various assessment consultants regularly cite each other as sources when defending no-zero policies, but they rarely refer to research data in support of their position. For example, Mark Weichel, the director of curriculum for the Papillion-La Vista School District in Nebraska, wrote, "Not one study has shown that assigning a zero is effective in improving student achievement,"[24] and he cites an article written by Guskey that appeared in *Principal Leadership* in November 2004 to support that view.[25]

However, this argument cuts both ways, since no-zero advocates cannot avoid the fact that the burden of proof rests with them. They are the ones proposing that schools completely revamp their assessment practices, and for this reason, they should be able to produce research evidence that supports their position. It is revealing that neither Weichel nor Guskey cite even one research study showing that no-zero policies effectively improve student achievement. Since all jurisdictions in Canada and the United States have at least some standardized testing, it should be possible to produce research that shows how no-zero policies improve scores on standardized tests. However, none has been produced.

On its website, the Edmonton Public School Board links to two articles in support of no-zero policies.[26] One of these is an article by Guskey that appeared in the October 2004 edition of *Principal Leadership* called "Zero Alternatives."[27] In it, he boldly claims that zeros rarely provide an accurate picture of what students have learned, and he cites only one source for that claim. His source is English teacher Barry Raebeck's paper presented to the National Middle School Association at its 1993

conference in Portland, Oregon.[28] While Raebeck's paper describes the use of zeros as a questionable grading practice, nowhere does he cite any research evidence to support this position. Thus, Guskey's key argument against zeros is based on one English teacher's opinion-based presentation at a conference almost 20 years ago.

Interestingly, Guskey repeats the same claim about zeros in several of his books and cites the same presentation by Raebeck.[29] Even if we assume Guskey meant to refer to Raebeck's more recent book *The Teacher's Gradebook*, it still does not help Guskey's argument. While Raebeck strongly opposes the use of zeros, his book cites no research evidence in support of no-zero policies.[30]

In his book *How to Grade for Learning,* O'Connor states that zeros are a problem because low grades cause students to withdraw from learning.[31] To support this statement, he cites an article by Guskey that appeared in the *NASSP Bulletin* in 2000.[32] In this article, Guskey cites only one source for this particular claim—a 1992 article in the *British Columbia Journal of Special Education* by Deborah Selby and Sharon Murphy.[33] There, Selby and Murphy describe the experiences of six learning-disabled students in mainstream classrooms. These students had negative experiences with letter grades and blamed themselves for their poor marks.

It should be obvious that it is absurd to generalize from the experiences of six learning-disabled students to the rest of the student population. Yet, Guskey regularly cites this article when he makes the claim that grades of zero have a negative impact on students. Even a more recent article by Guskey that appeared in the November 2011 edition of *Educational Leadership* contains the same claim with the same Selby and Murphy article again providing the only research support.[34]

The Edmonton Public Schools' website lists an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* written by Douglas Reeves that also supports no-zero policies.[35] He asserts that grading as punishment is an ineffective strategy but cites only one source—Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey's book *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning.*[36] As noted earlier, Guskey's claims about zeros are based upon articles that do not support his position.

Even the 150-page assessment study commissioned by Alberta Education yields little empirical evidence for recommending no-zero policies.[37] Although the report endorses no-zero policies, the main references are articles and books by O'Connor, Reeves and Guskey—all of which we have examined here—and none of which provides any empirical evidence in support of the policies.

In short, the claim that no-zero policies are supported by empirical evidence is false. Any defense of no-zero policies must rely solely on other arguments.

2) Behaviour and attitude must remain separate from achievement.

This argument rests on the premise that teachers must "separate student work habits from their academic achievement."[38] The goal of separating achievement from behaviour is laudable but not always practical in classroom settings. Once students know there is no academic consequence for late or missing work, some of them will take advantage of this opportunity. While marks should be based primarily on achievement, it is reasonable for teachers to use their professional discretion when dealing with late or missing work.

That there ought to be some discretion explains why the assessment consultants themselves often make exceptions to their rule about separating behaviour from achievement.[39] Even Raebeck, the English teacher frequently cited by Guskey, openly states that he enforces deadlines in his classroom by deducting marks for late assignments.[40] He goes on to say: "… [N]o matter what we would like to believe about ourselves, we cannot separate a student's attitude from his or her performance. Nor should we."[41]

On this point, Raebeck is correct. Teachers work with real students who do not always conform to the latest educational theory promoted by idealistic consultants. Implementing an absolute separation between behaviour and performance on report cards may sound good in theory, but it often does not translate well in a regular classroom setting.

3) Zeros unfairly skew a student's average mark downward.

Reeves argues that the use of zeros on a 100-point scale with letter grades is unfair to students, because there is a much bigger interval between a D and an F than between the other letters. Since an A is typically 90 to 100, a B is 80 to 89, etc., the interval between D (60) and F (0) skews a student's mark downward farther than is reasonable.[42]

However, this argument is only applicable to schools that convert percentages to letter grades. In Canadian schools, grades often remain in percentages, especially at the high school level. This means there are many different achievement levels possible within a failing mark. For example, a student could receive a mark of 0, 12, 37 or 48 on an assignment. Most teachers can easily point out the difference between someone earning a mark of 48 and someone getting 12, even though these are both failing marks. If an assignment never comes in, a mark of zero is fully appropriate, since the student has produced zero evidence of learning.

As for schools that use letter grades, Reeves' argument still only holds weight if the conversion to a letter grade takes place on the assignment itself. In many cases, teachers use percentages for assignments and tests and only convert a student's mark to a letter grade when calculating final report card marks.[43] Thus, students have the same range of performance below 50 per cent as they do above 50 per cent.

Even if Reeves is correct about the disproportionate effect of a zero, one has to ask why this is such a serious problem. After all, any student who does not like the

negative effect a zero has on his or her average can avoid it by simply doing the assignment. Dorval, the Edmonton teacher suspended for disobeying his school's no-zero policy, said that showing students the impact zeros have on their marks motivated them to complete their assignments.[44]

4) Zeros make it easy for students to avoid taking responsibility for their learning.

It is ironic that no-zero advocates will, on the one hand, argue that zeros have a disproportionate impact on a student's final grade but then say that letting students "take a zero" is the easy option.[45] In addition, this argument relies on the premise that teachers who hand out zeros do not use any other forms of intervention to get students to complete their assignments and hand them in on time.

However, there is no evidence that most teachers simply hand out a zero to students at the first sign of trouble. Rather, they often work with students, adjust deadlines when necessary and provide extra support outside of regular classroom hours. Despite all these interventions, there are times when the work is just not handed in. At this point, teachers have to decide on an appropriate consequence, and many think that a zero is reasonable. They know what the zero means, and so do the students.

5) There are more-effective ways of dealing with late or missing assignments.

O'Connor argues that the appropriate way of dealing with missing assignments is to record an "I" for incomplete. In his view, this mark should not have a direct impact on a student's average. Instead, the teacher makes a judgment call as to whether the student has provided enough evidence of learning from other assignments. If there is enough evidence for the teacher to assess the student, then the incomplete assignment should not count against his or her mark.[46]

Ross Sheppard High School in Edmonton took this recommendation to heart and devised a long list of letter codes to replace zeros. Some of the "marks" students can receive include MPA (missed performance assessment), AMP (academic malpractice), NHI (not handed in) and CNA (chose not to attempt).[47] However, instead of simplifying the grading process, this new alphabet soup grading system makes the teachers' work much more complex. Many teachers at Ross Sheppard were finding it more difficult to get students to complete their work, and they supported Dorval's opposition to the new system.[48]

In addition, a system of letter codes is ultimately worthless if it does not have an impact on the final grades. Students who want to do less work will quickly figure out that they can choose which assignments they hand in. As for the pyramid of interventions recommended by O'Connor and other assessment consultants, there is no reason why they cannot be implemented with the zeros in place. Teachers do not stop providing support and encouragement to students just because they have the option of giving a zero for work the students do not hand in.

Why no-zero policies are a bad idea

There are many reasons school administrators should avoid no-zero policies. One is that the no-zero policies inevitably bring controversy with them, something acknowledged by even their strongest proponents.[49] Many parents and teachers strongly oppose no-zero policies, and this makes it difficult to implement them. If a school chooses to use a no-zero policy, it can expect that controversy will likely overshadow other more important initiatives. For this reason, school administrators need to ask themselves whether a no-zero policy is worth the opposition they are certain to face.

No-zero policies also unreasonably interfere with the professional discretion of teachers to determine grades. Teachers know their students, and they realize it is unrealistic to expect the same strategies to work with every student. Most teachers use a variety of methods to hold their students accountable. All a no-zero policy does is take away one of the significant consequences that teachers can use for students who fail to submit their work.

Since no-zero policies prohibit teachers from giving a zero for incomplete work, a student who hands in an assignment and receives a grade of only 30 per cent or 40 per cent would actually be better off not submitting it. In fact, students will figure out that it is in their best interest to choose the assignments they submit. Conscientious students who do all their work could be at a significant disadvantage in the grades they receive.

Finally, no-zero policies fail to prepare students for their working lives after school. Employers do not pay employees to do nothing, and universities do not give credit to students who choose not to hand in their assignments. A pilot who never flies a plane, an electrician who never wires a house and a journalist who never hands in a story can all expect not to be paid. Employers are not going to accommodate employees who do not submit their work. Teachers need to prepare students for this reality.

“ Conscientious students who do all their work could be at a significant disadvantage in the grades they receive.

Conclusion

No-zero policy advocates claim there is overwhelming evidence for their position. However, as we have seen, this claim is demonstrably false. The number of articles and books cited in defense of no-zero policies is limited, and they do not justify the grand claims made by the no-zero supporters.

Other arguments for no-zero policies also fall flat. They do not improve the accuracy of final grades; they do not encourage students to take responsibility for their work; and they make it difficult for teachers to hold students accountable. The arguments made by no-zero advocates are little more than a house of cards that easily collapses.

In contrast, the arguments against no-zero policies are compelling. No-zero policies always encounter fierce resistance from parents and teachers, unreasonably interfere with the professional discretion of teachers, make teachers work longer on their grading, penalize students who complete their assignments on time and fail to prepare students for life after school. These are all very good reasons for school administrators to avoid no-zero policies.

Thus, no-zero policies are logically flawed, unsupported by research, mathematically questionable and an administrative nightmare. Consequently, no-zero policies deserve zero support.

> The arguments made by no-zero advocates are little more than a house of cards.

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39. Marzano, op. cit., pp. 37-39. ←

40. Raebeck, op. cit., p. 17. ←

41. Ibid., p. 52. ←

42. Reeves, op. cit. pp. 324-325.←

43. Brookhart, op. cit., p. 25.←

44. Joe O'Connor, "Edmonton Teacher May Lose Job for Refusing to Let Kids Skip Assignments," *National Post,* June 2, 2012. Available at: http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/06/02/edmonton-teacher-may-lose-job-for-refusing-to-let-kids-skip-assignments/. ←

45. Ken O'Connor, op. cit., pp. 163-167. ←

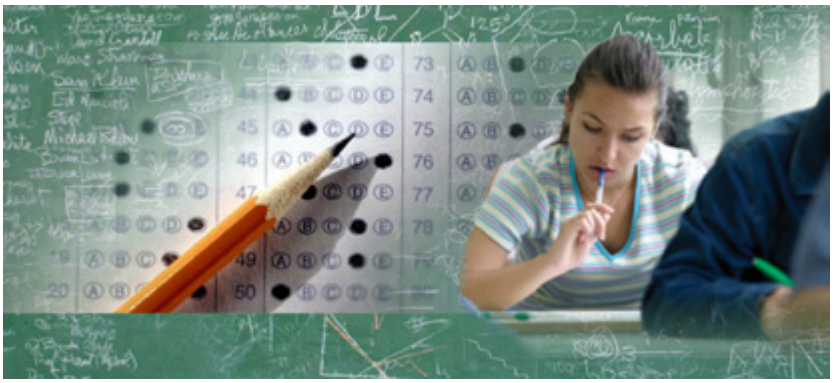
46. Ibid. ←

47. Ross Sheppard School Assessment, *Grading and Reporting Practice,* 2011-12. Available at: http://shep.epsb.ca/images/stories/Assessment_Policy_2011-12.pdf. ←

48. Dean Bennett, "Alberta Teacher Suspended for Giving Out Zeros Fears Colleague Will Be Punished," *The Canadian Press,* June 13, 2012. Available at: http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/canada/alberta-teacher-suspended-for-giving-out-zeros-fears-colleague-will-be-punished-158927075.html. ←

49. Reeves, op. cit. ←

Further Reading



October 2011

Standardized Testing is a Good Thing

By Michael Zwaagstra

http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/3939

June 2012

2nd Annual Western High School Report Card

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http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/4249