

The Problem with Penalties

Punitive policies—whether for not brushing your teeth or for incomplete homework—are not very effective. Positive guidelines work better.

Myron Dueck

My wish that my 7-year-old son would take the initiative to brush his teeth coincided with his interest in collecting quarters. Seizing upon this opportunity, I made a rule that I was certain would encourage him to faithfully brush. I boldly announced one evening that it would cost him 25 cents every time he forgot to brush his teeth at bedtime. The echo of my protocol was still bouncing off the walls as he dashed off to what I thought was a good bout of oral hygiene. He rounded the corner with seven quarters, slapped them on the counter, and declared, “There, I’m good for a week.” Son: 1, Dad: 0.

Parenting has taught me something about what works—and doesn’t—



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when it comes to conjuring up penalties. Whether at home or school, influencing change in human behavior seems to hinge upon four simple rules, which I call the CARE guidelines. Even the most well-intended penalty often misses the mark on these four rules, and if any one of them is lacking, the penalty loses effectiveness.

My teeth-brushing penalty failed miserably when measured by these rules:

■ **Care.** The penalty must evoke concern on the part of the learner. Clearly, my son didn’t care enough about the penalty; he was willing to give up a quarter seven nights in a row.

■ **Aim.** The penalty structure must align with the ultimate objectives of the penalty giver (likely the teacher). I wanted to encourage my son to brush his teeth, not increase my personal wealth.

■ **Reduction** of undesirable behavior. The penalty must result in a marked decrease in the number of times you need to enforce it. In the case of my son, introducing the penalty actually *increased* the frequency of the infraction. (For seven nights in a row, he wouldn’t brush.)

■ **Empowerment.** The penalized person must have control over the factors that lead to the infraction and be capable of understanding the

situation. Likely, my son failed to understand the long-term implications of tooth care and wasn’t in a position to make an empowered decision.

Why Grading Homework Fails the Test

Grading homework, especially applying penalties for incomplete homework, is ineffective for numerous reasons, most of which hinge on the four rules. I stopped

grading standardized homework seven years ago and wish I'd abandoned this misguided routine sooner.

When deciding whether to complete homework, many students, especially those most at risk, don't *care* about a potential zero. Faced with the choice to complete an assignment or take a zero, far too many students opt for the grading hit; thus, they render assignments "optional." In these instances, grading homework becomes a measure of behavior and compliance rather than of learning. Can't you recall students asking, "What's my grade if I don't do the assignment?" or "Can I just take a zero on that?"

The usual *aim* for assigning homework and providing feedback is to further student learning and understanding. Unfortunately, grading standardized homework doesn't always further learning, and it routinely sabotages the accuracy of existing grades. Homework grades leave students overconfident or frustrated. Those who rely heavily on the assistance of others will likely have inflated homework grades and crash on the corresponding unit test. On the other hand, students who don't have a stable home environment in which to complete homework inevitably suffer from deflated grades; they can't deliver work reflecting the extent to which they understand the material. Many poverty-affected students struggle just to make it to school, only to be faced with a grading penalty for incomplete homework.

Penalties don't *reduce* homework avoidance. In my experience, the number of grading penalties a student incurs has little effect on his or her future homework behavior. I've seen students on both ends of the academic spectrum completely shirk homework. For some struggling learners in particular, it's nearly 100 percent predictable that they won't do their homework regardless of the severity

of the penalty. Conversely, one of the most proficient students I ever taught also ignored my assignments. Every history test he completed was exceptional. If the homework was intended to further understanding, he didn't need it. Perhaps he opted for a zero on every standardized homework assignment on principle.

Many students simply aren't *empowered* to finish homework because they don't have the resources to do so. Poverty is just one of many hurdles to homework completion thousands of students face; others

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include violence in the home, utility disconnection, and low self-esteem or negative school views passed on from parents. And few situations are more frustrating for learners than to be punished for something stemming from variables beyond their control.

During one of my sessions at a school in Kentucky, a teacher shared, "Three of my students were recently evicted and are living in a camper with no electricity. Is it still called homework if you live in a dark RV?" An educator in Washington told me of a low-income student who waited for her father to get home so she could complete her homework. She didn't need his help, but she did need the light from the headlights of his truck.

A Word About Effort

Many teachers assign and grade homework out of a pressing desire to instill a good work ethic in learners. What these educators look for in homework completion is actually effort rather than evidence of learning.

But accurate measurement of learning is compromised when teachers collect data about effort rather than about what students have learned. Years of graded homework results may teach students that giving the impression of exerting effort yields a better grade than does actually striving to learn.

Teachers who factor effort into the final grade are likely including a variable that is neither accurate nor asked for by governing education authorities. As important as effort is to a productive society, few courses have it listed as a learning outcome.

Alternatives to Grading Homework

It should be clear by now that grading homework *completion* is often a measure of compliance and socioeconomic opportunity rather than learning. If a punitive grading routine, such as applying a zero to incomplete homework, actually met all four penalty rules for a certain group of students, that group would be made up of academically successful students from supportive homes who were extrinsically and intrinsically motivated by grades. I'd rather build a universally appropriate system that both supports learning and measures it.

As a history teacher, I use practices that avoid penalties and make homework completion more personal, meaningful, and tied to achievement—and I've seen colleagues adopt similar practices. Here are some examples.

In-Class Quizzes

Ben Arcuri, a chemistry teacher in Penticton, British Columbia, has

developed a system of homework-supported quizzes that are personalized, efficient, and bulletproof to the perils of misrepresentation. At the conclusion of an in-class lesson, Ben suggests homework questions and activities that reinforce the concepts covered in class. Students are given time in class to ask questions and start on the suggested homework activities.

At the start of the next class, students take a short quiz that's based on the concept they were encouraged to practice at home. Immediately after Ben collects the quizzes, the class goes over the correct solutions to that quiz; most students can determine through this review the extent to which they mastered the concept. If a student knows he or she failed to meet the learning objective, that learner can request a "re-quiz" before even seeing his or her grade. The majority of these re-quizzes are completed the next day after specific homework questions have been practiced.

Ben sometimes opens his room at lunch or after school to students who still need assistance. During these tutorial-like sessions, Ben not only reteaches, but might also review with students the quizzes completed that day and give personalized feedback to those who need it. Ben's students track both their quiz and re-quiz scores on a customized tracking sheet. These quiz results correspond to a homework completion sheet also managed by each student so students can identify the specific homework problems that will facilitate their success on each concept-specific quiz.

Teachers Ken Bauer and Hilda Matias of Valley High School in Las Vegas, Nevada, use carefully crafted in-class quizzes to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their Algebra I students, with the help of technology. The quizzes are graded instantly by a card reader, and the ingenuity of their question design

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enables the teachers to immediately identify where student weaknesses lie. These two teachers have adjoining classrooms, and after a quiz is administered in each room, students report to one of the two classrooms—for reteaching or enrichment—depending on their individual quiz results.

Why This Works. Rather than fail on the four rules, these in-class solutions are effective for a number of reasons. Students get the results of their quizzes frequently and in a timely, personalized way, which is empowering. Because all the work is done in the classroom, the potential for cheating and misrepresentations is minimal, so quiz results are an accurate measure of learning.

Incompletes and Interventions

Assessment and grading strategies geared toward enabling students to show what they know are much more effective than penalties are in promoting student learning. As one of my students informed me, "Penalties have never really motivated me, but a chance to improve—that's motivating."

One way I allow for improvement and avoid resorting to the finality of a zero on any homework assignment is through *temporarily* rendering the assignment, as well as a student's overall course standing, "Incomplete." My first step is to establish a specific date for when an assignment is due. Students who miss the deadline should immediately begin planning for its completion. I have each student who

doesn't turn something in complete my Incomplete Assignment Form (fig. 1), which was born out of my frustration when I would grade work at home and be unable to recall *why* a particular student's work was missing. The first part of the form asks students to indicate why the assignment is incomplete, and the second part reminds students of the many interventions that are available to support them in completing the missing work.¹

Whatever mutual agreement the student and I reach in terms of how and when the work will be completed, the interventions need to begin immediately. Don't wait until the end of the term for a tidal wave of missing assignments. Students who promise they'll complete the assignment "in a day or two" are allowed to prove their sincerity, but if this time period proves insufficient, I mandate one or more of our high school's interventions. It's ideal if schools provide homework completion centers for students to attend at lunch or after school, or even a "Saturday School." Whatever the structure, the key is to have an adult with expertise present to manage the environment and assist students.

The crucial element of this system is in the power of the Incomplete standing. Once a student has been offered a (well-supported) opportunity to complete the assignment, the grade-book record of the assignment remains Incomplete until it's handed in. Most important, the entire course standing of that particular student can be posted as Incomplete—whether for a parent inquiring about his or her child's current course standing or on a class list of grades.²

Why This Works. Students want to have an overall grade in the course; therefore, they care about changing the incomplete standing into a numeric or letter grade. The results of completed assignments are more accurate than zeros in measuring student learning.

FIGURE 1. Incomplete Assignment Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Missing assignment: _____

Reason(s) for missing the due date:

- school-based sports/extracurricular activity
- job/work requirements
- difficulty with material/lack of understanding
- procrastination
- heavy course load
- social event(s)
- club or group event out of school
- other

Details: _____

Date assignment is expected to be completed: _____

Interventions/support required:

- extra study/home-based effort
- homework club
- extra help from teacher
- tutorial
- use of planner
- time management
- counselor visit
- other

Details: _____

owes much to the work of Naryn Searcy, an English teacher at Princess Margaret Secondary School in British Columbia. She shared with me a template that essentially involved two columns, one for listing the learning outcomes of a project and the other for indicating how each would be addressed. This template was effective for my most successful students, but I made adaptations for those who were most at-risk. Some struggling learners found it difficult to both identify and write out the learning outcomes and link these outcomes to their project elements. The amount of writing derailed my most vulnerable students.

In the left column, the teacher lists all the potential learning outcomes that a student might incorporate into a project; students choose from the list what learning outcomes they want to pursue with this project. Students can be both informed and reminded of the required elements of the learning unit. For instance, the project planning sheet I created for a unit on World War II included these learning outcomes, among others: “Compare the nature of democratic and totalitarian states and their impact on individuals” and “Explain the significance of key military events in World War II.” The best projects tend to focus on fewer outcomes and delve into greater detail.

The middle column provides space for the student to consider *how* these outcomes will be addressed. Students can plan to demonstrate their learning through diverse avenues. Projects in my class have involved pottery, drama, song, art, videography, photography, and plastic models, to name a few. The third column includes the student’s plan for essential details of the project; this is a crucial piece in ensuring that the student includes detailed knowledge and skills that correspond to the content of the unit.

This planning sheet is highly useful

This matches my aim to reflect learning through sound data. I’ve found that when students are asked to show what they know rather than accept a punitive grading measure, they naturally experience more success—which leads to a reduction in homework-skipping behaviors. Thus, even at-risk learners with little home support feel empowered to improve their learning potential.

Personalized Projects

Choice, purpose, and ownership are key elements in determining the extent to which students will engage in the learning process. When project-based

learning is used as a portal for incorporating student interests, the learning potential is incredible. Traditionally, it’s been the teacher’s job to focus on the salient learning outcomes of the project, while the student fixates on the final product. It’s high time that we placed the student at the wheel of this process. When students pursue projects connected to their passions, with learning outcomes they help choose, they become so motivated to complete assignments that using penalties to push them into completion becomes unnecessary.

The Project Planning Sheet I use (see www.ascd.org/el0314dueck1)

to the teacher tasked with grading a creative, multidimensional project. With it, the student essentially begins the grading process by determining the standards by which his or her work will be measured. The assessment should hinge entirely on the extent to which these learning outcomes are met, with anecdotal commentary recognizing effort, care, and creativity.

Why This Works. Students are excited and eager to embark on a project involving personal interests and style. Their care and attention to detail are natural by-products of this individualized process. The grades derived from this process match the teacher's aim to measure learning solely based on established learning outcomes. Negative behaviors like procrastination and cheating are greatly reduced when students are meaning-

fully engaged in the learning process. Finally, students become empowered through personal ownership and control over their learning.

Student Ownership Trumps Penalties

Penalties that are administered with little regard for each student's individual needs are antiquated and unprofessional. People demand that doctors gear solutions toward their personal health—shouldn't educators gear solutions toward students' personal learning? My experiences at home, in school, and in my community reinforce my belief that choice and ownership trump penalty structures every time when it comes to empowering young people. Once educators open a broader space for students to show what they know, we can

stop leaning on penalties that neither motivate students nor measure learning well. **EL**

¹Teachers might also use my Late Assignment Report (available at www.ascd.org/el0314dueck2), which shows both learner and teacher which interventions proved successful in getting late homework done.

²Some jurisdictions may not allow an Incomplete to be printed in the report card, but this policy can be challenged. In one school in which I operated, we were allowed to have an Incomplete on the report card, but after two weeks we needed to convert it into a numerical value. In many cases, 14 days was enough time to resolve the situation.

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