> my mind is that we get graded on something that has no educational value. I would very much like to discontinue these childish dress-up days.—Jennifer Starsinic, Hummelstown (Starsinic, 2003)

Grades are supposed to be measures of achievement, so it is appropriate that students have "extra" opportunities to improve their grades, but these opportunities must involve demonstration of the knowledge and skills in the standards, as the opportunities described above did not. If these extra opportunities to improve grades are to be valid, it is equally important that the additional demonstration of knowledge and skill be at a higher level of achievement, not just more work earning more points. Thus, it is inappropriate to have bonus points on tests that simply make it appear that students' achievement is higher than it really is. It makes no sense for a student to be able to score 70 points on a test that has a maximum recorded value of 50 points. Furthermore, the questions for the bonus points are usually the questions that distinguish between competence and excellence, so all students should be expected to attempt these questions.

Grading Individuals

The other extremely important aspect of this guideline is the emphasis on grading individuals on their personal achievement rather than grading individuals on their group's achievement. With the increasing focus on the ability to work effectively with others in school and at work, this emphasis on individual achievement may seem strange. But remember that students' grades appear on their personal report cards and, therefore, should not be contaminated by the achievement (or lack of achievement) of other students.

Concerns About Group Grades

It is unfortunate that group marks are one of the reasons why students and parents give group work a bad name. Cooperative learning—despite its importance for the development of capable citizens and productive employees and its value to learning as shown by a significant body of research—has struggled against this legacy.

In an excellent article, Kagan (1995) provides strong criticism of eight arguments for group grades (Figure 3.4). He also gives seven reasons why he is "unequivocally opposed to group grades" (p. 69; see Figure 3.5 on page 106). Then he suggests "alternative ways to accomplish the same goals" (p. 71). (Please note that in most cases, Kagan uses *grade* to mean what this book calls *mark*.) Kagan also suggests that cooperative learning skills could be recognized through a variety of other approaches that are more effective than group grades. He says that it is preferable to give students a mark for "group skills" or marks for specific cooperative skills.

Figure 3.4 Kagan's Critique of Group Grades

ARGUMENT		COUNTER ARGUMENT
The real-world argument—Preparing students for the real world requires that they develop cooperative learning skills; in the real world, teams are rewarded for their group effort.	**BUT**	"In the real world there are many unfair practices . . . that doesn't justify unfair practices in the classroom."
The employment skills argument—Grading the social skill of cooperation, which is highly desired by employers, shows students that it is important.	**BUT**	"Group grades don't necessarily foster social skills," and "group grades on academic projects do not fairly assess the cooperative skills of individuals because, for example, if most members of the group cooperate very well, everyone in the group—even the least cooperative student—receives a high grade. The reverse is also true and is probably a more serious problem."
The motivation argument—Students won't work together unless it counts in the grade.	**BUT**	"There are many better ways to motivate students."
The teachers' workload argument—Some teachers prefer marking groups because it is faster than marking many individual papers.	**BUT**	"This is not a legitimate short cut. Group grades tell us nothing reliable about individual performance."
The grades-are-subjective-anyway argument	**BUT**	"The sometimes subjective nature of grading does not justify using a method that is even less precise."
The grades-aren't-that-important argument	**BUT**	"Try explaining it to the parents of a student who, based on his or her grades [which included group marks for cooperation], has just narrowly missed being accepted to a desired college."
The credit-for-teamwork argument	**BUT**	"Individuals should be given credit for their individual work, not a free ride on the work of others."
The group-grades-are-a-small-factor argument—Some argue that it is all right to use group marks because they rarely have a significant impact on the final grade.	**BUT**	"Very occasionally is far too often if it means giving individual grades that do not reflect individual performances."

SOURCE: Adapted with permission from "Group Grades Miss the Mark," by Spence Kagan. In the May, 1995 issue of *Educational Leadership*, 31(6), p 68–69. © 1995 by ASCD. Learn more about ASCD at www.ascd.org.

Figure 3.5 Kagan's Seven Reasons for Opposing Group Grades

1. **No fair.** Group grades are so blatantly unfair that on this basis alone they should never be used.

2. **Group grades debase report cards.** If the grade a student gets "is a function of who the student happens to have as a teammate," then no one can use the grades in a meaningful way.

3. **Group grades undermine motivation.** There are two problems here: (1) group grades penalize students who work hard but have cooperative learning partners who don't, and (2) they reward students who don't work hard but have hard-working partners. Both scenarios have undesirable effects on student motivation.

4. **Group grades convey the wrong message.** Grading practices send students messages about what is valued. The basic point of the guidelines presented in this book is that grading should emphasize and support learning and success, but if grades "are partially a function of forces entirely out of their control," it sends entirely the wrong message to students.

5. **Group grades violate individual accountability.** This is a key principle of cooperative learning. If it is applied effectively and appropriately, students are likely to achieve more; if not, students will find ways to manipulate the situation to their personal advantage.

6. **Group grades are responsible for parents', teachers', and students' resistance to cooperative learning.**

7. **Group grades may be challenged in court.**

SOURCE: Adapted with permission from "Group Grades Miss the Mark," by Spence Kagan. In the May, 1995 issue of *Educational Leadership*, 31(6), p 68–69. © 1995 by ASCD. Learn more about ASCD at www.ascd.org.

Rather than use group marks, Kagan (1995) proposes several alternatives:

1. Follow an approach similar to Kohn's (1993b) 3 Cs: collaboration—learning together; content—things worth knowing; and choice—autonomy in the classroom (pp. 212–221). This approach ensures that "we will not need grades to motivate students" (Kagan, p. 71).
2. Provide formal feedback in written form on students' cooperative learning skills. Kagan believes that students will work very hard if they know in advance that such feedback will occur.
3. "Meet with students individually after asking them to set their own goals" (Kagan, p. 71). This type of self-assessment promotes real learning.

Marking Cooperative Learning

How then should cooperative learning be marked? Obviously, the key is to focus on assessing the skills of each student as an individual. One way to do this is to use an assessment sheet, such as the one shown in Figure 3.6.

While students are working on a cooperative learning task, the teacher walks around the classroom and records information on each group. Observations may be made by the teacher, by students of other students, or by students of themselves but are restricted to two or three skills at one time. Feedback is given to individuals, to groups, and to the class as a whole. After students practice their cooperative skills and observation skills, then a sheet, patterned on Figure 3.6, can be used to summarize each student's achievement in this area. If—and it is a big if—teamwork or cooperative skills are part of standards, this summary can be converted to scores (see Chapter 6) for inclusion in student grades. If, however, these characteristics are not specifically mentioned in your standards, then evidence of these skills should only be used in the comments or learning/social skills part of the report card.

Bonus marks distort achievement grades because they mix other factors with achievement. It is better not to use them.

Sheeran (1994) suggests a variety of approaches to assessing cooperative learning. He appropriately emphasizes individual accountability and positive interdependence. However, a number of the methods he recommends are of dubious merit, because they are based on the concept of individuals receiving bonus marks when group goals are achieved, such as an average score on a test. This is inappropriate for two reasons: (1) an individual's mark depends on the efforts of others, and (2) bonus marks are not acceptable in any circumstances. Although positive, bonus marks distort achievement grades because they mix other factors with achievement. It is better not to use them: If students do something worthy of extra credit, consider it to be a reporting variable and recognize the exceptional achievement with either a formal (report card) or informal (note or phone call) communication.

Another approach to marking group projects is suggested by Culp and Malone (1992). For them, student contributions to such projects "fall into four main categories, most of which are usually included in standards: creativity/ideas contributed, research/data collection, writing/typing/artwork,

Figure 3.6 Group Cooperative Learning Assessment

Assessor: Teacher ☐ Peer ☐ Self ☐

Put the appropriate symbol in the boxes for each student.

Evidence of skill observed ✓ Not observed yet X

Cooperative learning skill / Names of students in the group	Student 1	Student 2						
Stays focused on task								
Fulfills assigned role								
Contributes ideas and solutions								
Works well with others (listens, shares, and supports others)								
Shows interest and involvement								
Additional skills (developed by teachers and students)								

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and organizing/collating" (p. 35). Students rate each other's contributions in each category, with the total for each category for all students adding up to 100 percent. Comparisons are made between student and teacher ratings to ensure that they are accurate; if there is a discrepancy, the teacher's judgment prevails. The average for each student is then converted to a percentage mark or, preferably, a level score. Scores for Culp and Malone's categories that are in the standards become part of the grade; scores for categories that are not in the standards may be used or reported elsewhere. Culp and Malone also suggest that keeping scores over several projects provides useful information. Students learn more about themselves as they see that individuals contribute differently to the team, and they may identify specific skills they might want to strengthen (pp. 36, 59).

Any student who hits the goal should get the highest possible mark.

One very significant positive aspect of Culp and Malone's approach is that it overcomes a problem that is seen frequently in the marking of cooperative learning—the rationing of success. They overcome the problem by giving a mark of 95 percent to each student in a group of four whose average contribution is 21 percent or greater. However, if a percentage contribution of 21 percent or higher is considered to be exemplary performance, the mark should be 100 percent for two reasons: (1) students are not arbitrarily penalized, and (2) the maximum score should always be attainable. To paraphrase Rick Stiggins's presentations on the subject, any student who hits the goal should get the highest possible mark. (It would, of course, be better not to use percentages but to assign the level scores based on clear criteria for the contributions of each student.)

Another very appropriate approach suggested by Burke is shown in Figure 3.7. The template provides a way for ensuring that, as the name of the strategy—cooperative *learning*—implies, the focus of the cooperative phase is on learning, which is followed by individual assessment of the knowledge or skill of each student. Benevino and Snodgrass (1998) support this approach with a number of suggestions about how individual accountability can be ensured: "teacher monitoring of [cooperative] activity work; essay response based on questions formulated during the activity; a class discussion of the questions and responses generated; and a [test] on the content" (p. 146).

In conclusion, note that "a carefully constructed cooperative environment that offers challenging learning tasks, that allows students to make key decisions about how they perform, and that emphasizes the value (and skills) of helping each other to learn" (Kohn, 1991, p. 86) is far more important than coming up with the perfect way to mark cooperative learning. The various aspects of cooperative learning (see Figure 3.6) can then be included in grades or learning skills, depending on whether they are part of the standards or not. This can be a challenging aspect of marking and grading. The ideas to keep in mind are that (1) cooperative learning is an instructional strategy and (2) we must assess individual achievement within the cooperative learning setting.

Figure 3.7 Creating Performance Tasks

Create a meaningful performance task for your subject area.

Subject Area: *Health* Grade Level: *8th Grade*

Task Description: As part of the school's Health Fair Week, students will develop a plan for eliminating all smoking areas from local businesses. The project will include: 1) a presentation; 2) a brochure; 3) a letter to the community newspaper; 4) a 5-minute video "selling" the students' ideas to the business owners.

Direct Instruction for Whole Class: The whole class will be involved in the following learning experiences:

- Guest lecture from the school nurse on the effects of secondhand smoke
- Training in computer graphic design
- Lectures and discussions on the health risks related to smoking

Group Work: Students may select their group.

Group One	Group Two	Group Three	Group Four
Research facts and statistics about effects of smoking.	Prepare charts and graphs on health risks of smoking in a brochure.	Summarize the key research points in a letter to the editor of the local newspaper.	Prepare a five-minute video to present to business owners.

Individual Work: In addition to the group project, each student will complete the following individual assignments:
1) A poster that integrates the most essential facts, statistics, quotes, and visuals to argue for a smoking ban in all public businesses in the area; 2) a portfolio that contains selected assignments from the unit as well as student reflections on each artifact.

Methods of Assessment

- Teacher-made test on the health risks of smoking
- Rubrics to assess each of the four group projects
- Checklist to assess criteria for poster and portfolios

SOURCE: Burke, K. (1999). *The Mindful School: How to Assess Authentic Learning.* Thousand Oaks: Corwin. Used with permission.

Think About This . . .

"It is essential to emphasize that cooperative learning is an instructional strategy, not an assessment strategy. If teachers want to evaluate students while working on a cooperative task, then the evaluation must be clearly outlined in the role expectations for each student. It must be very clear to students exactly on what they are going to be evaluated. The evaluation of each student should be based on what he/she accomplishes. There should not be a group mark. We cannot stress this enough. Further, teachers must develop the evaluation strategy as they design the assessment. Students should not have to guess what they are expected to do nor how their mark will be calculated."

—Stephens & Davis, 2001, p. 25

WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

What should be in grades? Grades should include individual achievement only, based on the published learning goals for the school/district.

What should not *be in grades?* Effort, attitude, behavior, attendance, punctuality, tardiness, group work, and so forth should not be in grades, unless they are specifically stated in the standards for a grade or course. These should be assessed and reported on separately. (See Chapter 11.)