

**FIX 3****Don't give points for extra credit or use bonus points; seek only evidence that more work has resulted in a higher level of achievement.**

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Recently it was “Dress like an Egyptian Day” at my school. If we dressed like an Egyptian we got extra credit. When we didn’t (which the majority of the kids didn’t) our teacher got disappointed with us because we just “didn’t make the effort.” . . . One of the most frustrating things in 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.

—*Starsinic, 2003, n.p.*

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**E**xtra credit and bonus points can distort a student’s record of achievement—grades are broken as a communication tool if we give points for “dressing like an Egyptian” when such “performances” do not demonstrate achievement of specified academic standards. It is obvious in the quotation that the writer, a high school senior, understands this but that her teachers do not. The fix for this is to not use extra credit or bonus points. If students want to get higher grades teachers can require them to provide “extra” evidence that demonstrates a higher level of achievement.

Over the years I have heard of an amazing array of extra credit activities including cleaning blackboards, bringing in classroom supplies, supplying food for the food drive, or bringing a Mexican dish for the Spanish class. My favorite

story was from someone who said her high school Physics teacher believed very appropriately in students identifying examples of physics in the “real world.” He provided them with a “worksheet” with six questions, and for each worksheet they completed 1 percent was added to their grade. Her final grade in Physics was 91 percent and she did 60 extra credit sheets! It is interesting, is it not, to speculate on her level of physics knowledge? One high school Science department even has an “Extra Credit Counter” (like a counter or merchandise display in a store) for each course on the school’s website. I have also heard many stories about the availability of bonus points on tests and exams so students finish with grades of 110 percent!

The basic problem with weaving extra credit and bonus points into a grade when they reflect something other than the expected learning is that they distort the record of achievement. Extra credit and bonus points stem from the belief that school is about doing the work, accumulating points, and that quantity is the key—with more being better—rather than about achieving higher levels of learning. But in standards-based systems the main issue should be having enough quality evidence to accurately determine each student’s achievement. Extra credit and bonus points come from a culture that emphasizes extrinsic motivation. As with other nonachievement factors that find their way into the grade, they have frequently been used to manage student behavior.

Students should, of course, be able to provide additional evidence of their understanding, knowledge, and/or skill. However, this additional evidence must reveal new or deeper learning—and should be considered along with the previous evidence to determine the student’s level of achievement. For example, if previous evidence was a mixture of the

achievement levels of “competent” and “approaching competency” and a student’s additional evidence was all “competent,” this would allow the teacher to justify assigning this student a final achievement level of “competent” with the appropriate letter grade. (See Fix 8 for more on levels of achievement and performance standards.)

The shift in thinking is illustrated in the following example. Imagine that a student receives the following scores for a series of tests and assignments:

5/10, 66/100, 39/50, 27/35, 37/50, 8/10,  
15/20, 20/25, 8/10, 75/90

The total would be 300/400, and if the grade were calculated as a mean in the traditional way the grade would be 75 percent, which in most schools/districts would be a grade of C. The student then completes three extra credit assignments (which may or may not be in any way related to the learning goals) for which he receives scores of 14/20, 7/10, and 3/5. The total is now recorded as 324/400 (although it is really 324/435) with a mean of 81 percent, so the student receives a final grade of B, which is an inflated grade.

Now imagine that a different student has a teacher who is truly standards based; this teacher records scores as proficiency levels, with 3 as proficient (meets the standard). The scores this student receives on a series of tests and assignments are 1, 2, 2, 1, 2, 2, 2, 2, 3, and 3. The mean, median, and mode for these scores are the same—2—so this student would normally receive a grade of C. The teacher, however, notes that the two more recent scores are 3s so asks the student to provide extra evidence on specific learning goals to see if this is now her level of achievement. The student receives 3, 4, and 3, which shows she is now proficient, so her final grade is a well-deserved B.

## **Student Involvement**

Through self-assessment and teacher communication, students can acquire a clear sense of their level of achievement. If it is less than proficient, or lower than they (or their parents) are willing to accept, teachers can offer students opportunities to provide additional evidence. It must be clear that this will not result merely in points being added to a total. If students are able to show that they now know, understand, or can perform at a higher level, their grade must reflect this. At minimum, students should be partners in identifying appropriate evidence of additional learning, making suggestions about what they will do to show a higher level of achievement. For some it may be a traditional test, for others it will be a product, for still others it will be a performance or a personal communication such as an interview or oral exam. If they have participated appropriately in student-involved assessment they will make the right choice(s).

## **Summary**

Grades are broken when teachers provide extra credit or bonus points that are just about more points, not about higher levels of proficiency. The fix is to eliminate extra credit and bonus points that do not relate to achievement and to communicate clearly to students and parents that better grades come from evidence of higher levels of performance, not just from more points.

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Some teachers add "extra credit" points to the total scores. . . . This does a disservice to students when their test scores rightly show that they did not learn certain key concepts and skills and the extra credit