

I would like to provide: *	In-Person Virtual Public Comments
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Topic *	Zero Based Grading
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What is your relationship to ACPS? *	Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student
Enter your comments here OR upload below:	<p>I'd like to deliver my comments at the time of the school board meeting, but they generally concern comments I've made in numerous communications to the administration, and to the board both in emails and in a previous in-person meeting. In general, I have long held the belief that Alexandria is out of step with most school districts, including all those surrounding us, in giving students a grade of zero for incomplete assignments. Mathematically, a zero is considered five times worse than a grade given for work that is deemed a complete failure, or an F, which is a 50. Students, especially special ed students, with organizational disabilities pay a deep and unfair price for this policy. Moreover, I have researched this issue extensively. And to the extent there is a policy, the TC Williams policy is twofold: students should only be given zeros if a teacher determines that A.) the work is not complete and that B.) the student has no interest or intention to complete it. Take for example a student who has a total of 11 or 12 grades turned in. Seven or eight of them are A's or B's. But four or five of them are completely lost and they are given a grade of zero. The cumulative score for a student like this, depending on the weight of grading, could be as low as an 11. With four or five weeks left to go before final grading, and with no way of making up late assignments that are deemed to be zeros no matter what, even if this student got nothing but perfect scores the rest of the way out, she or he would at best get a score of perhaps a 45. In Alexandria, failing</p>

students are guaranteed a grade of a 50 at the end of a marking period. So the problem is, a student such as this one has no incentive whatsoever to try to catch up. And any policy that removes the incentive to learn is a bad one. Alexandria needs to catch up and get more in line with progressive school districts across the country and all around us in halting the targeting of students with disabilities.

Zero-based grading is harmful, destructive and discriminatory. and the board and the administration have been on notice for years. Yet nothing seems to be getting done about it. And I am very disappointed. But if acps wants to stand by this policy, at least the bar should be set very high for giving zeros. That is not the case.

I am attaching an academic paper that I have literally sent dozens of times to people within acps for years now. I'm somewhat reluctant to send it again because it has made no difference. But if you read it, and please do, you'll understand why I think that no educator or administrator or board member in good conscience could ever give a child a zero. Because to do so is to fly in the face of everything that the well-intentioned ACPS policy of equity stands for.

Children fall into deep holes of their own making. Especially now with covid. Many have checked out completely for weeks at a time. They are depressed. They are struggling. and when educators give them zeros for assignments they were too late and turning in, it removes the daylight they need to see at the end of the tunnel. They're always needs to be some hope. Their needs to be a chance to catch up. Zeros remove that chance and bury children. And I'm embarrassed that Alexandria hasn't learned that yet.

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The Case Against the Zero

Even those who subscribe to the “punishment” theory of grading might want to reconsider the way they use zeros. *Mc* suggests.

BY DOUGLAS B. REEVES

THIS IS not a trick question. If you are using a grading scale in which the numbers 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0 correspond to grades of A, B, C, D, and F, then what number is awarded to a student who fails to turn in an assignment? If you responded with a unanimous chorus of “zero,” then you may have a great deal of company. There might be a few people who are familiar with the research that asserts that grading as punishment is an ineffective strategy,¹ but many of us curmudgeons want to give the miscreants who failed to complete our assignments the punishment that they richly deserve. No work, no credit — end of story.

Groups as diverse as the New York State United Teachers and the Thomas Fordham Foundation rally around this position.² Let us, for the sake of argument, accept the point. With the grading system described above, the failure to turn in work would receive a zero. The four-point scale is a rational system, as the increment between each letter grade is proportionate to the increment between each numerical grade — one point.

But the common use of the zero today is based not on a four-point scale but on a 100-point scale. This defies logic and mathematical accuracy. On a 100-point scale, the interval between numerical and letter grades is typically 10 points, with the break points at 90, 80, 70, and so on. But when the grade of zero is applied to a 100-point scale, the interval between the D and F is not 10 points but 60 points. Most state standards in mathematics require that fifth-grade students un-

Missing assignment: F

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derstand the principles of ratios — for example, A is to B as 4 is to 3; D is to F as 1 is to zero. Yet the persistence of the zero on a 100-point scale indicates that many people with advanced degrees, including those with more background in mathematics than the typical teacher, have not applied the ratio standard to their own professional practices. To insist on the use of a zero on a 100-point scale is to assert that work that is 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. Readers were asked earlier how many points would be awarded to a student who failed to turn in work on a grading scale of 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, but I'll bet not a single person arrived at the answer "minus 6." Yet that is precisely the logic that is employed when the zero is awarded on a 100-point scale.

There are two issues at hand. The first, and most important, is to determine the appropriate consequence for students who fail to complete an assignment. The most common answer is to punish these students. Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, there is an almost fanatical belief that punishment through grades will motivate students. In contrast, there are at least a few educators experimenting with the notion that the appropriate consequence for failing to complete an assignment is to require the student to complete the assignment. That is, students lose privileges — free time and unstructured class or study-hall time — and are required to complete the assignment. The price of freedom is proficiency, and students are motivated not by threats of failure but by the opportunity to earn greater freedom and discretion by completing work accurately and on time. I know my colleagues well enough to understand that this argument will not persuade many of them. Rewards and punishments are part of the psyche of schools, particularly at the secondary level.

But if I concede this first point, the second issue is much more straightforward. Even if we want to punish the little miscreants who fail to complete our assignments — and I admit that on more than one occasion with both my students and my own children, my emotions have run in that direction — then what is the fair, appropriate, and mathematically accurate punishment? However vengeful I may feel on my worst days, I'm fairly certain that the appropriate punishment is not the electric chair. Even if I were to engage in a typically fact-free debate in which my personal preference for punishment were elevated above efficacy, I would nevertheless be forced to admit that giving a zero on a 100-


point scale for missing work is a mathematical inaccuracy.

If I were using a four-point grading system, I could give a zero. If I am using a 100-point system, however, then the lowest possible grade is the numerical value of a D, minus the same interval that separates every other grade. In the example in which the interval between grades is 10 points and the value of D is 60, then the mathematically accurate value of an F is 50 points. This is not — contrary to popular mythology — "giving" students 50 points; rather, it is awarding a punishment that fits the crime. The students failed to turn in an assignment, so they receive a failing grade. They are not sent to a Siberian labor camp.

There is, of course, an important difference. Sentences at Siberian labor camps ultimately come to an end, while grades of zero on a 100-point scale last forever. Just two or three zeros are sufficient to cause failure for an entire semester, and just a few course failures can lead a student to drop out of high school, incurring a lifetime of personal and social consequences.

This issue is as emotional as anything I have encountered since the phonics versus whole language debate. Scholars regress to the persuasive tactics of professional wrestlers (no offense intended to wrestlers — this article will generate enough hate mail as it is), and research and logic are subordinated to vengeance masquerading as high standards. Because the emotional attachment to the zero is so strong, I have given up advocating that 50 points should represent the lowest grade. What I do think we can do to preserve some level of sanity in our grading system is to return to a four-point system. A's no longer equal 100 points, but four points. If there is a need for greater specificity, then we can choose an infinite number of digits to the right of the decimal point and thus differentiate between the 3.449 and 3.448 to our heart's content. But at the end of the day in such a system, the F is a zero — one point below the D. It is fair, accurate, and, some people may believe, motivational. But at least the zero on a four-point scale is not the mathematical travesty that it is when applied to a 100-point system.

1. Thomas R. Guskey and Jane M. Bailey, *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2001).

2. Clarisse Butler, "Are Students Getting a Free Ride?," *New York Teacher*, 2 June 2004, available at www.nysut.org/newyorkteacher/2003-2004/040602grading.html; and Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, "Minimum Grades, Minimum Motivation," *The Education Gadfly*, 3 June 2004, available at www.edexcellence.net/foundation/gadfly/issue.cfm?id=151#1850. 

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