



At some schools, failure goes from zero to 50

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In most math problems, zero would never be confused with 50, but a handful of schools nationwide have set off an emotional academic debate by giving minimum scores of 50 for students who fail.

Officials in schools from Las Vegas to Dallas to Port Byron, N.Y., have proposed or implemented versions of such a policy, with varying results.

HOW AN F BECOMES A D

A look at how a minimum-50 policy would affect three hypothetical students in their four marking periods:

Student 1

Scores: 30, 40, 80, 80

Average: 57.5, an F

Average with 50 Policy: 65, a D

Student 2

Scores: 40, 40, 40, 80

Average: 50, an F

Average with 50 Policy: 57.5, an F

Student 3

Scores: 0, 70, 70, 70

Average: 52.5, an F

Average with 50 Policy: 65, a D

GREAT DEBATE: Is 'minimum-F' grading an unfair penalty or unfair boost?

Their argument: Other letter grades — A, B, C and D — are broken down in increments of 10 from 60 to 100, but there is a 59-point spread between D and F, a gap that can often make it mathematically impossible for some failing students to ever catch up.

"It's a classic mathematical dilemma: that the students have a six times greater chance of getting an F," says Douglas Reeves, founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, a Colorado-based educational think tank who has written on the topic. "The statistical tweak of saying the F is now 50 instead of zero is a tiny part of how we can have better grading practices to encourage student performance.

But opponents say the larger gap between D and F exists because passing requires a minimum competency of understanding at least 60% of the material. Handing out more credit than a student has earned is grade inflation, says Ed Fields, founder of HotChalk.com, a site for teachers and parents: "I certainly don't want to teach my children that no effort is going to get them half the way there."

Schools have taken a variety of approaches:

- In Hillsboro, Ore., the school district is planning to roll out such a policy slowly. School board member Hugh O'Donnell says he hopes it is implemented within a couple of years "once we educate the teachers."

- The Dallas Independent School District has a policy not to allow semester grades below a 50. One principal's decision to disallow grades below a 70 in certain instances drew protests this spring and was rescinded.

- At Lehn Middle School in Port Byron, N.Y., the teachers turn in numerical averages from zero to 100 for report cards, and a computer program rounds up anything below a 50, following principal Sally Feinberg's policy. "An F is an F, and 50 is still not passing," Feinberg says. "The point is motivation and to give kids the opportunity to pass a grade."

A top proponent of a minimum-50 policy, Thomas Guskey of Georgetown College in Kentucky, acknowledges that there are no studies he knows of that examine whether such approaches increase passing rates.

"Oftentimes, when schools go to this policy, a major component of doing so is a significant parent training program," Guskey says. "That makes it hard to tell if it's anything the school did, or maybe by informing parents, they become more conscientious."