

# OPINION | SARAH MORRIS & SARAH MCKENZIE: For fairer grades

Update policies, help pupils succeed

November 18, 2022 at 3:43 a.m.

by Sarah Morris and Sarah McKenzie Special to the Democrat-Gazette  
<https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2022/nov/18/for-fairer-grades/>

The recent release of letter grades for Arkansas schools is a reminder that grades can be unfair. Whether it's covid-19 or poverty, the letter grades can reflect the impact of things beyond many teachers' and principals' control.

Teachers and principals show up each day and work hard. Similarly, high school students come to school each day to learn and most try their best. Sometimes, their best isn't good enough, and they fail.

Their teacher may not consider what was occurring in the students' lives outside of school hours.

Our research shows that 22 percent of Arkansas' high school freshmen fail at least one course. Among students with the same ability levels, poorer students are the most likely to fail. Students who get an F in a course are 27 percentage points less likely to go to college. These Fs may start with the student getting a zero on a classroom assignment.

Let's consider the current zero to 100-point grading scale along with the A through F scale. The failing grade, F, covers a 60-point range. The passing grades combined, A through D, cover 40 points. Additionally, the average of an A and F is a C, but the average between zero and 100 is 50, which corresponds to an F.

If you're sensing the miscalculation in the scales we've been using for over 100 years, you're on the right track.

No data support the idea that students learn better from receiving zeros. Instead, research points to lower motivation levels after receiving failing grades.

Enter the minimum grade--a way to even out the grading scale. Teachers can still assign F's, but 50 is the lowest grade. This is a more mathematically correct and fairer scale. Students who consistently score well continue to score well. Those who never engage with the curriculum will continue to fail.

Critics of the minimum grade claim adjusting the grading scale will lead to grade inflation and lower academic standards. So far, research indicates otherwise.

Implementing the minimum grade system for a district in Massachusetts reduced achievement gaps and raised test scores. The minimum grade implementation didn't affect most passing and failing grades. Minimum grading created a path for some students to return to success after experiencing a failure.

Grading is fairer with the minimum grade, but it is only part of a larger approach to equity in the classroom.

Modern graders built equity-based grading around what the premise of grades should be-- communicating where a student is performing academically. Students' course grades should not reflect things like extra credit, participation, good behavior, willingness to comply, etc. These skills are important for students to learn, but the message gets blurred when educators use grades to communicate how to behave. When a student's grade is used only to communicate level of mastery, academic standards and expectations rise in schools.

Educators want meaningful and fair letter grades and should provide the same for their students. Updating grading policies is a way to help all students succeed.

---

Sarah Morris is a doctoral student in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas and a former public-school teacher. Sarah McKenzie is the executive director for the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas and an assistant research professor in the Department of Education Reform.