

Cutting Through the Edu-Babble:

How to Bring Common Sense Back to Assessment

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH OUR SCHOOLS



and HOW WE CAN FIX THEM

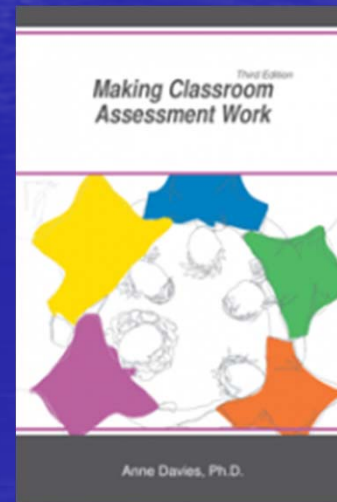
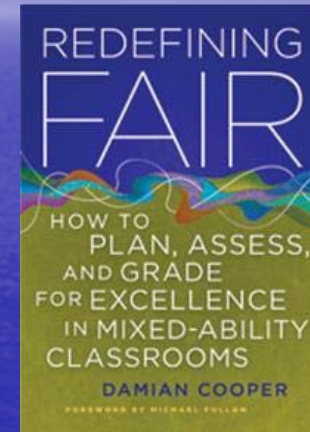
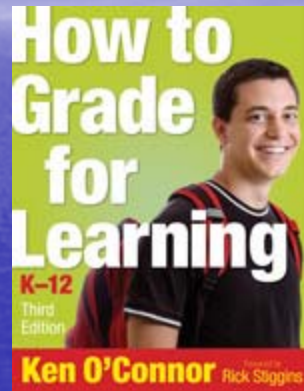
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How Assessment has Changed

- 1) More emphasis on assessment *as/for* learning and less emphasis on assessment *of* learning.
- 2) Clear divide between *formative* and *summative* assessment.
- 3) Assessment more closely correlated with curricular outcomes
- 4) Behaviour and academic achievement are reported separately.

Who's behind these changes?

- Ken O'Connor
- Damian Cooper
- Anne Davies
- Sandra Herbst
- Thomas Guskey
- Douglas Reeves
- Rick Stiggins



Why So Much Controversy?



Recent Case Studies in Assessment Controversy

- 1) Ross Sheppard High School, Edmonton Public Schools
- 2) Battle River School Division, Camrose, AB
- 3) Calgary Public School Board
- 4) Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows School District #42 (British Columbia)

When do parents begin to voice concerns about assessment?

- 1) No-zero policies – Most people believe students are not being held accountable.
- 2) Removal of percentage and/or letter grades, particularly at the upper grade levels.
- 3) Difficult to understand report cards.

Where the Assessment Gurus Have Gone Astray

- Two assessment principles are being implemented far too rigidly:
 - A) Separation of behaviour and academic achievement.
 - B) Linking assessment only to curricular outcomes.

Should behaviour and academic achievement always be separated?

- Without a late work penalty, some students have less incentive to submit their assignments on time.
- Plagiarism is a serious offence that often deserves a more serious consequence than simply redoing the assignment.
- Students who complete their assignments on time are more likely to learn the course outcomes than those who do not.

Case Study – No-Zero Policies

Arguments FOR no-zero policies:

- Incomplete assignments are a behavioural issue rather than an academic issue.
- The consequence for not doing the work should be making the student do the work.
- Zeros are the “easy way out” for students.
- Zeros have a disproportionately negative mark on students' grades.
- Research supports no-zero policies.

The Reality

- No-zero policies are unsupported by the evidence and often fail when implemented in a school setting.



1) Research doesn't support no-zero policies

Claim: Receiving a mark of zero causes students to withdraw from learning (Ken O'Connor, *How to Grade for Learning*, 2009, p. 164).

Source: Thomas Guskey, "Grading practices that work against standards... and how to fix them," *NASSP Bulletin*, 2000, pp. 20-29.

- In his NASSP article, Guskey does make the claim that low grades cause students to withdraw from learning, but cites only one source.
- Deborah Selby and Sharon Murphy, "Graded or de-graded: Perceptions of letter grading for mainstreamed learning-disabled students," *British Columbia Journal of Special Education*, 1992, pp. 92-104.

- The Selby and Murphy article reports on a study of only six learning-disabled students in a mainstream classroom.
- No-zero advocates regularly cite Thomas Guskey for their claim that zeros and/or low grades make students withdraw from learning.
- Thomas Guskey cites only the Selby and Murphy study to back up this claim.
- Thus, empirical evidence does not back up this key claim made by no-zero advocates.

Claim: "A zero is seldom an accurate reflection of what a student has learned or is able to do." (Thomas Guskey, "Zero Alternatives," *Principal Leadership*, 2004, pp. 49-53.

Source: Barry Raebeck, *Exploding Myths, Exploring Truths: Humans, productive grading and grouping in the quality middle school*. Paper presented at the annual National Middle School Association, 1993.

- While Raebeck's paper describes the use of zeros as a questionable grading practice, nowhere does he cite any research evidence to support this position.
- Thus, Guskey's key argument against zeros is based on one English teacher's opinion-based presentation at a conference almost 20 years ago.
- Interestingly, Guskey repeats the same claim about zeros in several of his books and always cites the same presentation by Raebeck.

2) Zeros do not have a disproportionately negative effect on grades

Claim: "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." (Douglas Reeves, "The Case Against the Zero," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2004, p. 325.

Reality: Zeros do not impact grades disproportionately when assignments and tests are graded using a percentage scale.

- On a 100-point scale with 50 as the pass mark, there are just as many performance ranges above 50 as there are below 50. For example, a student who received a mark of 48 did better than one who received 15, while both are better than a 0. While they are all still failing marks, some failing marks are worse than others.

3) A zero is an appropriate consequence for a student who refuses to do the work.

- Claim: "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." (Reeves, p. 325).
- Reality: Sometimes students choose not to complete their assignments, even when required to attend mandatory detentions. For these students, a zero is appropriate.

4) No-zero policies unreasonably restrict the professional discretion of teachers.

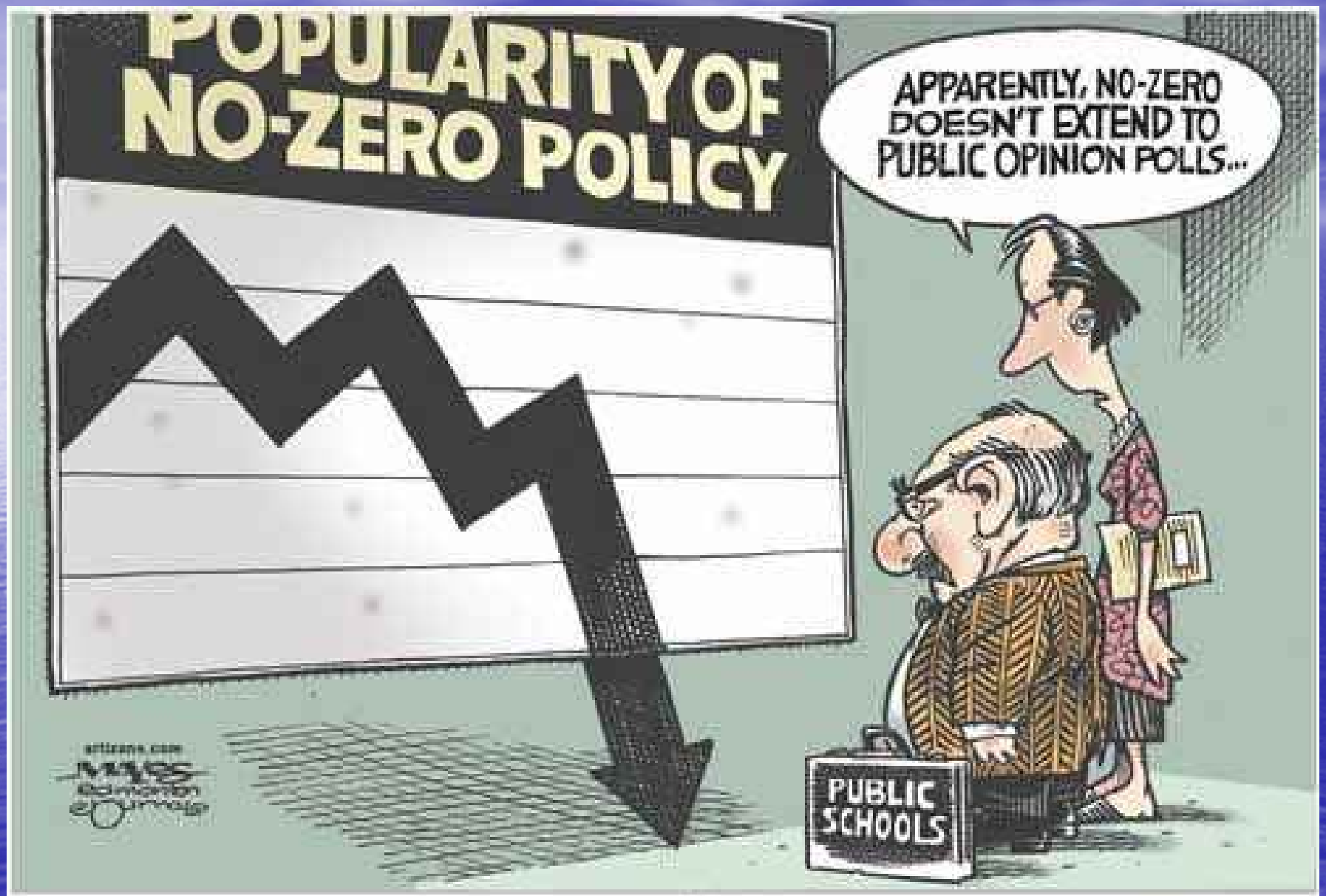
Claim: "If guided by reflections on the true purpose of grading, it is likely that teachers at all levels will abandon the use of zeros completely."
(Guskey, p. 52).

Reality: Most teachers who give zeros generally do so only as a last resort. Considering the emphasis that assessment gurus usually place on the professional discretion of teachers, it is ironic that these same gurus want to remove a teacher's discretion when it comes to zeros.

5) No-zero policies are a surefire way to alienate the broader community.

Claim: "...parents, communities, and postsecondary institutions need to be educated about the changing nature of reporting on learning." (Damian Cooper, *Redefining Fair*, 2011, p. 156).

Reality: As we recently observed in Edmonton, no amount of explanation and education can overcome the fact that an overwhelming majority of the public strongly opposes no-zero policies. The controversy over no-zero policies threatens to overshadow many of the positive aspects of new assessment practices.



Source: *Yorkton This Week*, September 12, 2012

Should percentages be replaced by performance scales?

Claim: "The basic problem with the percentage system is that it has too many levels (101). This implies a precision that simply does not exist, because no one can describe the difference between 71 and 73 percent." (O'Connor, p. 85).

Defending Percentages

- 1) Percentages are easily understood by parents and students.
- 2) Percentages make it possible to distinguish between various levels of excellence i.e. 98 is better than 89. This gives students a target for improvement.
- 3) Teachers can use their professional discretion to ensure percentage grades fairly reflect student achievement.

When do percentages work particularly well?

- Calculating the overall percentage of questions answered correctly on a unit test.
- Grading longer assignments and projects (such as written essays).
- When communicating information about academic achievement to students and their parents.

Key Recommendations

- 1) Be less rigid when expecting teachers to separate behaviour from academic achievement in grades.
- 2) Stay away from formal or informal no-zero policies.
- 3) Use percentage grades on report cards for grades 5-12.
- 4) Allow teachers to use their professional discretion when determining grades.

- Thank you for your attention.
- Questions? Comments?
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