HARING CENTER
FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION



Inclusionary Practices and Systems:

Inclusive Grading in General Education Classrooms

What is Inclusive Grading in General Education Classrooms?

Grading practices are often deeply personal and closely tied to a teacher's philosophy and beliefs about learning. As we begin to examine grading in the context of inclusive classrooms, it's essential to ground the conversation in three key areas: the purpose of inclusion, the goals of students receiving special education or other support services, and the fundamental purpose of grades. Centering these principles helps ensure that grading is fair, meaningful, and aligned with our shared commitment to equity and access for all learners.

The Purpose of Inclusion: Over 30 years of research shows that intentional and meaningful inclusive education benefits not only students with disabilities but also creates supportive and accessible learning environments where ALL students feel valued and are able to learn and grow. An inclusive classroom provides both social and academic benefits for all learners. (Haring Center Inclusion Research Tip Sheet)

The Goals of Special Education: Special education is a service designed to remove barriers to learning and ensure students with disabilities can access and meaningfully engage with grade-level content and standards. Through accommodations, modifications, and evidence-based instructional supports, educators create equitable opportunities for students to participate, learn, and thrive. Before considering modified grades, IEP teams should first support access through universal design for learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and flexible pathways for engaging with learning standards at varying levels of depth, breadth, and complexity. Ultimately, the purpose of special education is to provide equitable access to grade-level learning by addressing barriers and supporting meaningful participation and progress.

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The Purpose of Grades: Grades are a form of communication about student learning and progress. However, research suggests that traditional grading practices can have unintended consequences, including reduced student engagement, interest, and critical thinking (Kohn, 1999). As schools expand inclusive practices, many educators are shifting toward more equitable approaches to grading. According to Grading for Equity (2018), effective grades should be "accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational," reflecting a student's academic performance while supporting continued learning and growth.

For students with individualized education programs (IEPs), grades should communicate progress without becoming a barrier to success. All students deserve opportunities to experience and see evidence of their growth. When determined necessary for an individual student, modified grades can provide an accurate, meaningful, and clear measure of progress toward course standards or individualized learning goals (OSPI, Tips from the Special Education Division: Modified Grading). Inclusive grading practices help ensure that success remains accessible and meaningful for every learner.

Inclusive Grading Considerations & Take Aways

- **Focus on the purpose of inclusion.** Grading practices should support a classroom community where every student feels valued, capable, and included. Inclusive grading aligns with inclusive instruction by creating equitable opportunities for all learners to engage, learn, and thrive.
- **Align grading with the goals of the IEP**. Before modifying grades, ensure students have access to the curriculum through Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiation, and appropriate accommodations. Grade modifications should be individualized, documented, and based on student needs rather than applied broadly to all students with IEPs.
- **Use grades that are accurate, motivational, and bias-resistant.** Grades should communicate what a student knows and can do academically—not reflect behavior, participation, effort, or compliance. Grading practices should be transparent, consistent, and support student growth.
- **Ensure grades are not a barrier to student success.** The gradebook should communicate learning, not limit opportunities. When appropriate, modified grades can provide an accurate and meaningful measure of progress toward IEP goals or adjusted course expectations while maintaining clarity about student achievement.

RESOURCES

Feldman, Joe. Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms. Corwin, 2018

Kohn, Alfie. "The Case Against Grades." Educational Leadership, vol. 69, no. 3, Nov. 2011, pp. 28–33. ASCD, https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-case-against-grades.

Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Tips from the Special Education Division: Modified Grading. Dec. 2023, https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/WAOSPI/2023/12/04/file_attachments/2704057/Tip%20Modified%20Grading.pdf