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## Arkansas Teachers' Grading Practices and Implications

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Summary Points

- Arkansas teachers’ support for grading equity practices is associated with liberal ideologies, degrees of education, teaching in elementary grades, or teaching core subjects.
- Arkansas teachers develop grading practices based on perceptions of equity, professional development, tradition, and valuing student behaviors and efforts.
- Reforms to grading practices should start with reflective opportunities for teachers and be implemented gradually with administration-teacher collaboration.

## Arkansas Teachers’ Grading Practices and Implications

*In this brief, we assess current grading practices in Arkansas. We find teachers’ grading practices are inconsistent across the state. We suggest districts assess their grading practices and provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to reflect on their grading practices.*

### Introduction

Grades often predict future earnings and educational attainment (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; French et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2021). Some teachers and researchers have started to question the traditional A-F grading system, which was introduced in the late 1800s (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). These teachers and researchers argue that grading practices should be accurate, and that traditional grading practices can be detrimental to student learning and motivation (Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2004; Kohn, 1999).

Examples of traditional grading practices include grading homework for completion, grading class participation, subjectively evaluating effort, and grading punctuality on turning in assignments (Guskey, 2020). Researchers refer to this traditional style of grading as “hodgepodge” grading (Brookhart, 1991), because students’ final grades are often a combination of cognitive and non-cognitive components. This traditional grade can be difficult for parents

### This Brief

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and students to translate into a reflection of a student’s understanding of the material (Cross & Frary, 1999).

Teachers assign grades based on how they value grades, and their grading practices differ by their personal beliefs (Bonner & Chen, 2017; Sun & Cheng, 2014). Some teachers view grading as a way to help students learn better (Bonner, 2016). While some teachers still prefer to include behavior components in students’ grades to provide a more holistic assessment of a student (Cross & Frary, 1999), others argue that grades should only reflect a student’s understanding of the content material (Feldman, 2019). Some research has shown that grades that are aligned to standards and not behavior components are more meaningful, reliable, and positively impact student achievement, learning, and engagement (Betts & Grogger, 2003; Bonesrønning, 2004; Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Jung, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019). Grades that are only aligned to standards and not behavior more effectively communicate student success to parents and stakeholders (Brookhart & Guskey, 2019).

In place of traditional grading practices, researchers suggest implementing standards-based grading (SBG), which can improve student learning and engagement by focusing instruction on standards where students struggle.

Rather than assigning zeros that can bottom out a student's grade on the 0-100-point scale, SBG uses a 0-4-point scale to provide more accurate feedback on a student's progress (Feldman, 2019). Moreover, teachers can better focus instruction on areas students struggle with SBG instead of averaging away areas of concern (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). Through SBG, grading could serve as a means of effectively conveying feedback on a student's progress with regards to a standard (Kramer, 2017).

Since grading practices can affect student learning and success, it is essential to comprehend how Arkansas teachers currently perceive and develop their grading practices. By gaining insight into the factors that influence grading practices, districts can pinpoint areas for improvement and work together to implement fairer grading practices.

We conducted a survey and interviews with Arkansas teachers to explore their views and practices related to grading equity practices and standards-based grading. Our goal is to provide information to districts about their grading practices and suggest ways teachers in Arkansas schools can use grades to support student learning and success.

### Study Design

Our research will answer the following questions:

- How do Arkansas teachers currently perceive grading equity practices?
- How have Arkansas teachers developed their grading practices?
- What is the current state of grading practices in Arkansas?

In November 2022, the Office for Education Policy (OEP), distributed a survey for Arkansas teachers. We emailed each Arkansas principal, with a request that they forward the survey to their teachers. We received responses from 506 teachers from 78 schools.

In January and February 2023, OEP conducted semi-structured interviews with Arkansas educators. We invited principals of buildings serving ninth-grade students to participate in interviews describing their buildings grading practices. Sixteen educators representing 12 districts across Arkansas participated in the interviews. Participants included ten principals, four teachers, one instructional facilitator, and one assessment director.

### Survey Results

On average, the teachers self-reported that 45% of their students received A's, while only 5.5% received F's. The teachers indicated that the largest portion of a student's final grade is based on daily assignments/in-class assignments. We present these percentages in Figure 1.

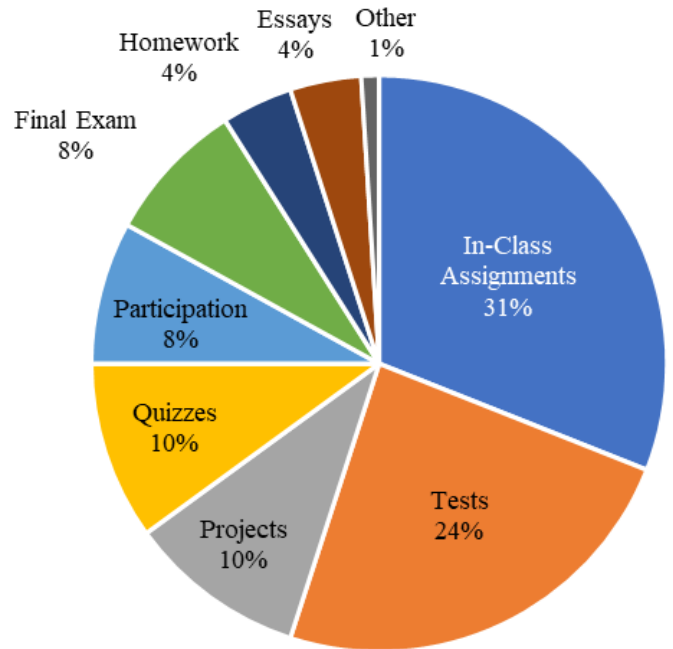


Figure 1: Percentages and portions of students' final grades, Teachers' Grading Perceptions Survey, 202

Eighty-two percent of teachers reported their school has a written grading policy. As shown in Table 1, most teachers report that neither school leaders nor parents pressure them to adjust grades, though the former are slightly more likely to do so.

Table 1: How often teachers feel pressure from leadership and parents to adjust grades, Teachers' Grading Perceptions Survey, 2022

Frequency	Leadership		Parents	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Never	191	37.8	131	25.9
Rarely	138	27.3	195	38.5
Sometimes	136	26.9	126	24.9
Often	41	7.9	54	10.7
Total	506	100	506	100

We calculated associations between teachers and their feelings about grading equity practices. We find four statistically significant results:

- More liberal learning teachers rate 9 percentage points higher towards grading equity practices compared to conservative leaning teachers.
- Teachers with Master's Degrees rate 4 percentage points higher towards grading equity practices compared to teachers with only Bachelor's Degrees.
- Teachers in grade levels K-4 rate 6 percentage points higher towards grading equity practices compared to teachers in grade levels 9-12.
- Teachers in core courses self-rank 3 percentage points higher towards grading equity practices compared to teachers in noncore courses.

Overall, support for grading equity practices is 52%, indicating modest favorability among the teachers surveyed. Teachers with Master's Degrees are more likely to support grading equity practices compared to Bachelor's Degrees. We also find teachers in lower grades are more likely to prefer grading equity practices compared to secondary level teachers, as are teachers in core content areas compared to other teachers.

### Survey Themes

In order to better understand how Arkansas teachers develop their grading practices, we asked an open-ended question on our teacher survey. From the qualitative analysis of the responses to this question, we identified four reoccurring themes, which we present in Figure 2.

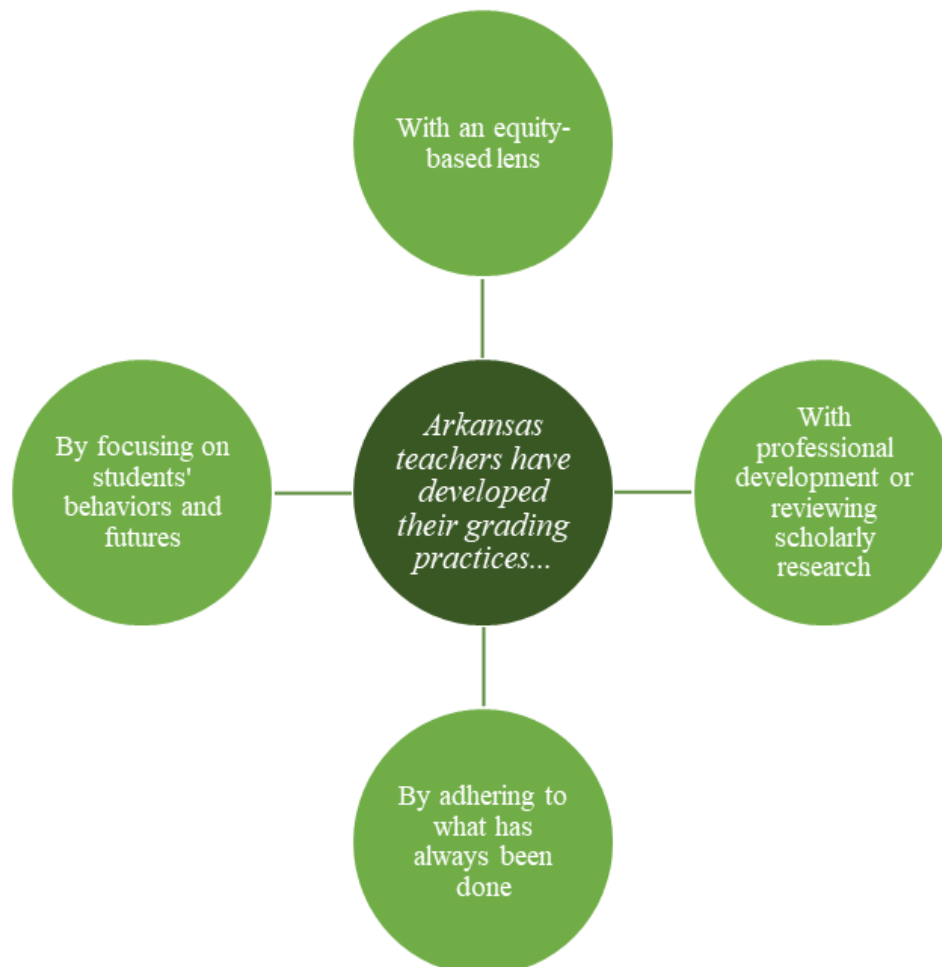


Figure 2: Themes for how Arkansas teachers developed their grading practices, *Teachers' Grading Perceptions Survey, 2022*

We organize and describe the four themes below:

*Arkansas teachers have developed their grading practices...*

1. With an equity-based lens: Around 27% of Arkansas teachers grade their students based on mastery or standards, without assigning graded homework, allowing late work without point deductions, grading on a 1-4 scale, and allowing retakes to reassess student standards. These teachers focus on mastering content rather than grades, with one teacher saying, "Grades should not be tombstones."
2. With professional development or reviewing scholarly research: About 30% of the surveyed teachers stated that their grading practices have developed gradually over time, either based on their personal experiences, mentor teachers, district policies, or research-backed techniques. These teachers evolved their grading practices through trial and error, reflection, and experimentation until they found what worked best for them and their students by adopting equity-based practices such as those promoted by Thomas Guskey.
3. By adhering to what has always been done: Sixteen percent of Arkansas teachers use a mixed grading system. These practices vary from teacher to teacher, but including the use of weights, rubrics, and different assessment weights. In addition, some teachers consider factors such as effort and participation in addition to content knowledge. Some teachers in this group prefer to stick with traditional grading practices, including the use of the 0-100-point scale, while others feel free to grade in their own way without administrator input.
4. By focusing on students' behaviors and futures: Fifteen percent of teachers grade to train their students, aiming to prepare them for real-world situations and hold them accountable for their efforts. This group includes some non-core teachers who grade based on participation and effort.

We also report that approximately 12% of teachers reported to be fair graders, but their responses indicate not all of their grading practices are equity-based. These teachers mix their grading practices with personal beliefs or a combination of grading criteria—such as including effort as a significant component of a student's grade.

## Interview Themes

From our 16 interviewees, we gathered five major themes. We present these themes in Figure 3 below.

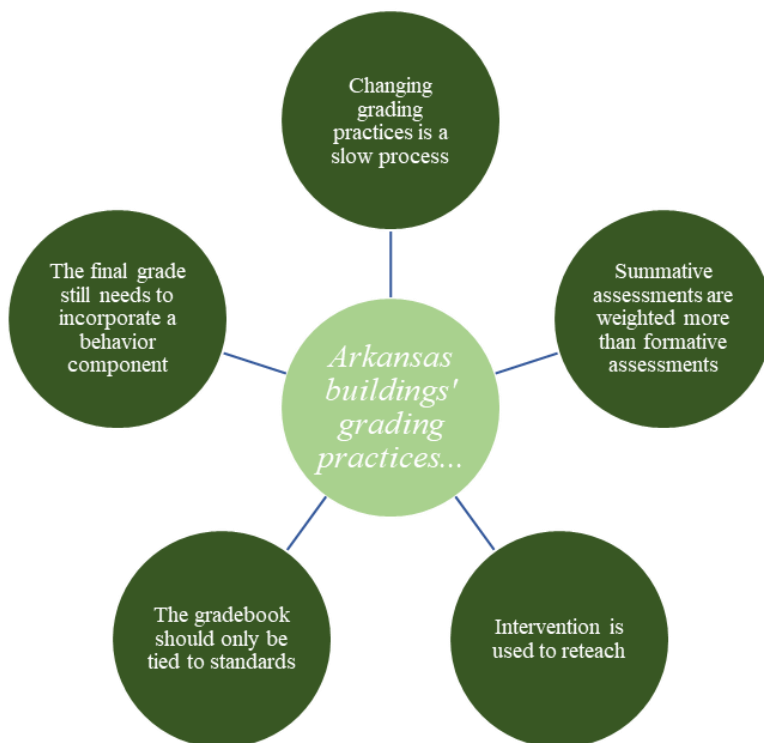


Figure 3: Themes for how Arkansas building currently practice grading, Interviews, 2023

All educators valued formative assessments as opportunities for students to learn and allowed retakes, though opinions on replacing or averaging original grades varied. Additionally, most educators stated that summative assessments could not be revisited once the unit was completed.

*Arkansas buildings' grading practices...*

1. Changing grading practices is a slow process: Fourteen out of 16 educators reported that changing grading practices is a slow process and should start with individual conversations and deep discussions among faculty. Only one of them reported a negative experience from changing grading practices too quickly, leading to a "riot" among teachers.

2. Summative assessments are weighted more than formative assessments: Thirteen out of 16 educators reported weighting summative assessments more heavily than formative assessments, while the remaining three reported either equal or less weighting. All educators valued formative assessments as opportunities for students to learn and allowed retakes, though opinions on replacing or averaging original grades varied. Additionally, most educators stated that summative assessments could not be revisited once the unit was completed.



3. Intervention is used to reteach: All participants in the study noted the importance of the intervention period, which they use to reteach and allow retakes. Educators valued the intervention period as a way to reach struggling students and help them improve their content skills.

4. The gradebook should only be tied to standards: Educators emphasized the importance of tying grades to standards, although they varied in their level of implementation of Standards-Based Grading (SBG). Some believed in assigning two grades for standards per week, while others found it too fast-paced for the material, and three educators did not grade homework or assigned a zero-weighted score. Communication with parents was initially difficult, but they eventually appreciated the focus on standard concepts over "hodgepodge" grading (Brookhart, 1991).

5. The final grade still needs to incorporate a behavior component: Despite the commitment to grading reform, six educators still incorporate student behavior into the final grade and insist on its importance. Some teachers believe that including a behavior component will impact students beyond just their mastery of standards, while others consider work ethic as the most important behavior reflected in the final grade.

## Discussion

This case study analyzed the self-reported grading practices and preferences of 506 Arkansas teachers and 16 educators through a survey and interviews. We found inconsistencies in grading practices across the state and identified four teacher characteristics that were statistically significantly associated with preferences for grading equity practices, including politically liberal leaning, a Master's Degree, teaching at the elementary level, and teaching core content courses. We also identified major themes in how teachers developed their grading practices and a glimpse of current grading practices in Arkansas school buildings. Based on the information gathered from the surveys and interviews, we make the following recommendations to districts and school leaders, in pursuit of increased student motivation and success.

This study finds that, as indicated in prior research, teachers' grading perceptions may be influenced by personal beliefs. We recommend, therefore, that district leaders examine current opportunities for teacher reflection on grading practices, to encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of equitable grading practices across all teacher demographics. These discussions would be well-suited for professional learning community (PLC) meeting times, where teachers are already discussing how to support student learning in their classes. As our interview results suggest, providing teachers with opportunities to reflect on the purposes of their grading and the reasons behind their practices is essential for more effective evaluations of students (Brookhart & Guskey, 2019; Stiggins et al., 1989).

Our results indicate that grading practices evolve through professional development, continuing education for higher degrees, or personal research, which is consistent with prior research (Brookhart & Guskey, 2019; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Researchers suggest the need for professional development on grading practices is high, and ongoing supports need to be in place for teachers since teachers can have a wide-range of implementation of grading equity practices (Bonner, 2016; Guskey, 2009, Link, 2018, Sturgis & Casey, 2018; Tierney et al., 2011).

Overall, our study highlights the importance of promoting and supporting equitable grading practices in Arkansas's schools. We recommend one way to achieve this is that policymakers, district leaders, and educators work collaboratively to support professional development opportunities on grading practices, and leverage PLC meeting times for this purpose. These meetings and opportunities should include time for teachers to reflect on their grading practices, explore the purposes of grading, and learn about evidence-based grading practices that are best for students, like researchers find standards-based grading to be. Furthermore, ongoing support and resources should be provided to ensure that teachers can effectively implement these practices in their classrooms. By investing in equitable grading practices, we can help ensure that all Arkansas students have a fair and equal opportunity to succeed in school and beyond.

# Office for Education Policy

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