

Why Zeros Should Not Be Permitted!

Consider two scenarios: A principal is late on a report and the boss says, “You didn’t do it on time, so you don’t have to do it.” It’s April 16, your income taxes haven’t been submitted, and you receive an e-mail from the IRS stating, “Your taxes are late so you don’t have to pay them this year.” Neither scenario is realistic, yet in schools many educators have policies that if a student doesn’t complete work on time, the student earns a zero and the work cannot be completed for credit. Thus, the student doesn’t do it. It is just the opposite that should be true: Students should be required to do the work and not permitted to take the easy way out by accepting the zero grade.

No More Zeros

When the staff at Darmstadt Middle School (DMS) in Germany grappled with the question, “Why do students fail?” they identified many independent factors. But upon closer analysis a cycle emerged that explained the failure of many: Students get behind on assignments, they don’t turn in work, they earn zeros on the work, the zeros lower the grade-point average significantly, the students lose motivation, and they get further behind on assignments. Before long, the zero grades have made it mathematically impossible for these students to pass. No wonder they quit working! Even more important, if teachers assign projects and assignments that are rigorous and matched to their curriculum, students who do not complete work are missing the important practice and applications of the skills they are supposed to learn. How can teachers assess students’ progress against their standards when there is no performance to assess? The DMS staff members committed to developing a program that would break the cycle of failure by eliminating zeros, and in the fall of 2005, the ZAP (Zeroes Aren’t Permitted) program began.

The program requires students to complete every assignment. Because our team takes homework seriously, teachers give meaningful projects and assignments and provide plenty of support to students as they work on assignments. If a student is missing any work in any class, the following opportunities are provided in order for that child to be successful:

- A seminar period is held for an hour after school every other day. The seminar period is a structured study period where students can complete assignments and make up work.
- Students are assigned to the after-school homework club on Thursday if an assignment is not turned in on the due date. Students are given at least one seminar period to turn in the missing assignment before homework club meets. Students who turn in the missed work prior to homework club are not required to attend.
- If missing work is still not completed after the seminar period and homework club, the student is assigned to attend Saturday school from 9 to 11 a.m. Parents are notified by school personnel if a student is assigned to Saturday school.

All students are welcome to voluntarily attend homework club or Saturday school, but students assigned to homework club or Saturday school are expected to attend unless there is a conflict confirmed by a parent.

Results

During the two years the ZAP program has been in place, student failure decreased significantly. In the last three quarters of the 2006-2007 school year, there was not a single student who failed any of his or her classes. The staff could also prove that the success was

not attributable to lowered standards since the student scores on the yearly standardized test increased in most areas with no significant decreases.

The program also forced the staff to confront the philosophical basis of their grading policies. All teachers adjusted their policies so that even late work earned some credit; many teachers experimented with a “work in progress” policy where students could earn full credit when they met the standard. The DMS team leaders, and the staff as a whole, made many needed adjustments to the program as obstacles emerged. Professional development on differentiated instruction helped everyone to design activities and tasks to meet the needs of individual learners who in the past might have been written off as unmotivated students who deserved the zeros they earned.

Should your school allow zeros? Absolutely not! Knowing that zero grades are the cause of so much student failure, educators must find creative ways to eliminate the zero-grade option. The ZAP program at DMS is just one example that proves that when teachers eliminate zeros, they can greatly increase student productivity, learning, and success. **P**

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HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author believes that students should never receive zeros on assignments because it results in loss of learning, lower motivation, and, ultimately, failure. What do you think—are schools better off eliminating zeros from grading scales? Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to the Principals’ Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on “Speaking Out” under the categories section.