Depersonalizing Grading to Personalize Learning

Andrew Jones

Personal learning plans (PLP’s) and proficiency-based graduation requirements (PBGR’s) hinge on effective assessment and reporting systems in high schools. However, “traditional” grading practices tend to be inconsistent across districts, schools, and classrooms. In many instances, grades don’t mean much because there are so many factors bundled into the omnibus class score. Classroom grading practices remain insulated from education reforms, despite evidence that indicate numerous flaws in the current system. Through no fault of their own, teachers operate in their own “silos” and are provided significant autonomy in their classrooms. Though teachers are ultimately the ones responsible for the variability in grading practices, they are often following vague policies, operating with minimal formal training on grading and working on “pedagogical islands.” At this point in time, teachers are able to personalize their grading practices, which is doing more harm than good. Current grading practices could potentially stymie the success of personal learning plans and proficiency-based graduation requirements in high schools. Standards-based grading would provide transparency to what students are learning, thus opening the “black box” of the classroom. A standards-based grading policy would not only bring consistency to grading practices, but would help support other aspects of school reform as well. As many states in New England consider pushing towards competency-based systems of education and incorporate the use of personal learning plans, how students are assessed in classrooms is a necessary issue to consider. This qualitative case study analyzes the interviews of several high school teachers to investigate the importance of grading with maintaining fidelity to implementing PLP’s and PBGR’s in Vermont.