

Disrupting the Hidden Costs of Behavioral Grading: Uncovering Stakeholder Perceptions to Advance Equity

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ABSTRACT

Grading practices in K-12 education continue to perpetuate inequities by including behavioral components that mask academic achievement and disproportionately affect historically marginalized students. This analysis examines perceptions of behavioral grading among five key stakeholder groups: administrators, instructional support staff, parents, teachers, and students. Comprehensive survey data were collected from over 20,000 participants in 10 U.S. school districts. Using GradingRx®'s validated assessment instrument, the study revealed significant perception gaps about the purposes of grading and whether behavioral factors should be included in academic evaluations. Teachers view grading as a tool for feedback and motivation. In contrast, students perceive grades as measures of inherent ability and gatekeepers to opportunities. The data reveal troubling disparities in stakeholder alignment, with administrators showing less agreement than other groups regarding behavioral grading practices. These findings underscore the urgent need for culturally responsive professional learning, transparent communication systems, and systematic reform of grading policies focused on equity and student voice. District and school leaders can use these stakeholder insights to transform grading from an administrative function into a strategic lever for educational justice and systemic change.

Keywords: behavioral grading, educational equity, stakeholder perceptions, grading reform, cultural responsiveness

As schools across the United States confront persistent achievement gaps and mounting demands for educational equity, classroom grading practices have emerged as a critical focal point requiring immediate attention and systematic reform (Brookhart et al., 2016). The intersection of behavioral assessments with academic grading presents a particularly complex challenge that demands a nuanced understanding of stakeholder perspectives and their implications for student outcomes. Through our comprehensive work with GradingRx®, a leading provider of K-12 classroom assessment and grading survey instruments, we have uncovered significant disparities in how key educational stakeholders perceive the purposes and appropriateness of incorporating behavioral factors into academic grades (Duchesneau, 2020; Link et al., 2025). Two of the three authors work as consultants with GradingRx®, an educational consulting company that partners with school districts nationwide to assess and reform grading practices. This affiliation provides us with unique access to large-scale stakeholder perception data while also positioning us as advocates for grading reform guided by equity principles.

The practice of behavioral grading, incorporating elements such as participation, compliance, and classroom conduct into academic evaluations, represents more than a mere pedagogical choice; it embodies deeply embedded cultural assumptions that can either support or undermine educational equity (Rasooli et al., 2019). Research consistently demonstrates that behavioral grading practices frequently mask accurate academic achievement while disproportionately

impacting students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Backes et al., 2023; Di Liberto et al., 2022). This occurs when students receive lower grades not because of their mastery of content, but rather their perceived ability to conform to dominant cultural norms that may not align with their home experiences or cultural expressions (Wu et al., 2021).

Understanding stakeholder perceptions of behavioral grading becomes essential for school leadership seeking to implement equitable assessment practices. When perception gaps exist between those designing grading policies and those experiencing them, the potential for meaningful reform diminishes significantly (Link et al., 2025). This analysis examines comprehensive survey data from over 20,000 educational stakeholders across multiple U.S. districts to illuminate these perception disparities and their implications for advancing educational equity through grading reform.

This analysis addresses the following guiding questions that emerged from our ongoing work with district grading reform initiatives: First, to what extent do different stakeholder groups share common understandings about the primary communicative purposes of grades, particularly regarding information shared with parents? Second, how do stakeholders differ in their support for including behavioral factors (specifically behavior, attitude, and class participation) in academic grade determination? Third, what do these perception gaps reveal about the challenges and opportunities facing educational leaders who seek to implement more equitable grading practices? By examining these questions through analysis of comprehensive survey data, we aim to provide educational leaders with evidence-based insights that can inform culturally responsive approaches to grading reform.

The Cultural Context of Behavioral Assessment

The evaluation of student participation and behavior in academic settings is closely linked to broader cultural contexts. These contexts shape educational expectations and norms. Research shows that classroom participation expectations often reflect white, middle-class cultural values. These include verbal assertiveness, sustained eye contact, and engagement in teacher-directed activities (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Yesbeck, 2011). When participation becomes a grading criterion, it may unintentionally favor students who display these dominant cultural behaviors. It can also disadvantage those from diverse backgrounds who show engagement through different cultural modalities (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Similarly, behavioral expectations embedded in grading practices frequently reflect implicit norms rooted in specific cultural values, such as deference to authority, limited physical movement, and restrained emotional expression (Skiba et al., 2011). These norms, while rarely articulated explicitly, serve as the foundation for behavioral expectations in many educational settings. When educators lack training to recognize and appreciate cultural variations in expression and engagement, student behavior is often interpreted through a deficit lens that reinforces existing inequities rather than acknowledging the validity of diverse cultural approaches to learning and participation (Gregory et al., 2010; Link & Guskey, 2019a).

The implications of these culturally embedded assessment practices extend beyond individual student outcomes to influence broader educational patterns. Students who cannot or choose not to conform to dominant cultural norms in their behavioral expressions may find themselves systematically disadvantaged in academic evaluations, regardless of their mastery of content or intellectual capabilities. This dynamic creates what we term “hidden costs” of behavioral grading—consequences that are not immediately apparent but accumulate over time to create significant barriers to educational opportunity and achievement.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Grading Purposes

Our comprehensive analysis of stakeholder perspectives reveals fundamental differences in how various groups conceptualize the primary purposes of grading. Teachers consistently view grading as a tool for providing feedback and motivating student effort, approaching assessment through a lens of instructional improvement and student development (Link, 2018; Link & Guskey, 2019b; McMillan, 2019). While teachers may intend for their grading practices to serve these formative purposes, research suggests that using grades as primary feedback mechanisms often misaligns with formative assessment principles, which emphasize feedback separated from evaluative judgment (Brookhart et al., 2016). This disconnect between teacher intentions and actual practice outcomes becomes particularly problematic when behavioral factors influence academic grades, further obscuring the feedback that might support student learning.

In contrast to teachers, students often perceive grades more as measures of their inherent abilities and as gatekeepers for future educational and career opportunities (Link & Hunter, 2024). This fundamental difference in perception creates a disconnect between educator intentions and student experiences that can undermine the motivational and learning benefits that grading is intended to provide. When students view grades as fixed judgments about their capabilities rather than feedback about their current performance, the potential for grades to support learning diminishes (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009).

Parents tend to view grades as indicators of both student achievement and school effectiveness, often regarding academic evaluations as measures of their child's progress and the quality of educational services provided (Link et al., 2025). This perspective adds another layer of complexity to grading reform efforts, as parental expectations and interpretations of grades may not align with either educator intentions or student experiences.

Instructional support staff, who often work closely with diverse student populations, may be more attuned to the potential inequities embedded in common grading practices (Da Fonte & Capizzi, 2015). Their proximity to students receiving additional academic support provides unique insights into how grading practices can either facilitate or hinder student success, particularly for those already facing educational challenges.

These divergent perspectives on grading purposes directly connect to stakeholders' willingness to include behavioral factors in academic evaluations. When stakeholders view grades primarily as communication tools for reporting student status to external audiences (parents, future educators, employers), the inclusion of behavioral information may seem appropriate and valuable. Conversely, when grades are conceptualized as feedback mechanisms supporting ongoing learning, behavioral factors that obscure academic achievement become problematic inclusions. The alignment, or misalignment, of stakeholder perspectives on both the communicative purposes of grades and the appropriateness of behavioral components, therefore, represents interconnected dimensions of the same fundamental challenge: establishing a shared understanding of what grades are meant to accomplish and what evidence legitimately belongs in determining them.

METHODS

Our comprehensive analysis employed convenience sampling (Shields et al., 2025) to examine survey data from 20,152 educational stakeholders across 10 geographically diverse U.S. school districts, collected through GradingRx®'s validated assessment instrument from March 2021 to August 2023. This extensive secondary dataset offers unprecedented insight into stakeholder alignment, or lack thereof, regarding fundamental grading practices and the integration of behavioral assessment.

Participant Demographics, Instrument, & Ethics

The stakeholder composition (Table 1) reflects a typical educational ecosystem, with students comprising the largest group ($n = 11,605$), followed by parents ($n = 4,371$), teachers ($n = 3,571$), instructional support staff ($n = 340$), and administrators ($n = 265$). Participating districts varied considerably in size and scope, serving between 1,800 and 23,000 students annually, with student participants representing grades 6-12 across both middle and high school levels.

Table 1

Role Characteristics of Stakeholders (N = 20,152)

Stakeholder Role	<i>n</i>	%
Administrators	265	1.3%
Instructional Support	340	1.7%
Parent	4,371	21.7%
Teacher	3,571	17.7%
Students	11,605	57.6%

Survey data collection utilized GradingRx®'s validated assessment instrument, which was developed through iterative piloting and refinement in partnership with educational researchers and practitioners. Survey items were drawn from scales developed in the research of Liu et al. (2006) and Guskey (2013). Pilot testing of the student, parent/guardian, and teacher/administrator surveys with samples of 20+ individuals each yielded internal reliability coefficients (α) of .81, .81, and .87, respectively, demonstrating that the items effectively captured meaningful variation in stakeholder perspectives on grading practices. The instrument employs four-point Likert scales (Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 4), eliminating neutral positioning and requiring directional stakeholder perspectives on grading practices. Survey items were also drawn from established grading research frameworks (Brookhart, 2011; McMillan, 2001), with content validity established through expert review and pilot testing across diverse district contexts (GradingRx, 2025).

For purposes of this analysis, three survey items (questions 23, 33, and 37) addressing behavioral grading components were selected from the broader 38-item instrument. These items focused solely on parents' perceptions of the purpose of

grading and on two types of behavioral evidence used in determining grades (Appendix A). District-level and school-level administrators were combined into a unified category to facilitate meaningful cross-group comparisons.

This analysis utilized de-identified, aggregated survey data with no individual participant identifiers or personally identifiable information. The researchers secured proper permissions to conduct the survey research from a university's Institutional Review Board. All survey participants received informed consent documentation at the time of original data collection explaining that their aggregated, de-identified responses might be used for research and reporting purposes. The completely anonymous and aggregated nature of the data ensured that no individual participants could be identified in any analyses or reports.

Analytical Framework

Our analysis focused on three critical dimensions of behavioral grading practices, examining stakeholder perspectives captured through three specific survey items. Table 2 presents responses to survey item 23, which asked whether grades should primarily communicate information to parents about students' performance in school. Table 3 presents responses to survey item 37, which asked whether behavior or attitude should be used in determining students' grades. Table 4 presents responses to survey item 33, which asked whether class participation should be used in determining students' grades. The exact wording of these items, along with the full set of survey questions about grading purposes and evidence sources, appears in Appendix A. For each item, descriptive statistics including means, medians, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated and presented.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The data reveal concerning patterns in stakeholder alignment regarding the communicative purposes of grading and the inclusion of behavioral factors in academic evaluations. Across three key dimensions of behavioral grading, significant disparities exist, revealing fundamental challenges for equitable assessment and grading reform.

Communication to Parents and Grading Purposes

Students consistently showed the lowest within-group agreement ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.78$) that grading is meant primarily as communication to parents. This indicates a fundamental misalignment between how adults in the system conceptualize grades and those most directly impacted by grading practices (Table 2). In contrast, administrators ($M = 3.47$), instructional support staff ($M = 3.53$), parents ($M = 3.53$), and teachers ($M = 3.50$) demonstrate relatively high and consistent agreement with this communicative purpose. This disparity suggests that current grading practices may not effectively serve students' learning and motivational needs, despite being designed with these purposes in mind.

Table 2

Average Scores of Stakeholders' Beliefs Regarding Whether Grades Should Primarily Communicate Information to Parents About Students' Performance in School ($N = 20,152$)

Stakeholder	<i>Med</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>
Administrators	4	3.47	0.60	$\pm.07$
Instructional Support	4	3.53	0.57	$\pm.06$
Parents	4	3.53	0.62	$\pm.02$
Teachers	4	3.5	0.56	$\pm.02$
Students	3	3.17	0.78	$\pm.01$

Behavior and Attitude in Academic Assessment

The inclusion of behavior and attitude in grade determination reveals the most pronounced stakeholder divisions (Table 3). Administrators demonstrate notably lower agreement ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.14$) compared to all other stakeholder groups, with a difference of 0.94 scale points separating administrators from parents, which is nearly a full point on the four-point scale. This substantial gap in perspective suggests potential policy-practice disconnects that could fundamentally undermine reform efforts. The administrator group's mean falls closest to the midpoint between disagree and agree, while other

stakeholder groups' means cluster near agreement, indicating that administrators hold considerably more ambivalent or negative views.

Parents show the highest agreement ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.82$), followed by students ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.86$), instructional support staff ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.96$), and teachers ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.98$). This pattern suggests that while administrative leadership may acknowledge the equity concerns associated with behavioral grading, those closest to the classroom experience—parents, students, and support staff—tend to maintain stronger support for traditional practices that integrate behavioral assessments with academic evaluations.

Table 3

Average Scores of Stakeholders' Beliefs Regarding Whether Behavior or Attitude Should be Used in Determining Students' Grades ($N = 20,152$)

Stakeholder	Med	M	SD	CI (95%)
Administrators	3	2.38	1.14	$\pm.14$
Instructional Support	3	3.01	0.96	$\pm.10$
Parents	3	3.32	0.82	$\pm.02$
Teachers	3	2.91	0.98	$\pm.03$
Students	3	3.21	0.86	$\pm.02$

Examination of response distributions reveals that while all stakeholder groups show substantial variability in perspectives on behavioral grading, administrators demonstrate the widest spread of viewpoints, as evidenced by their standard deviation of 1.14. Parents show the tightest clustering of responses around agreement, with responses concentrated in the “agree” and “strongly agree” categories. Teachers and instructional support staff show more moderate distributions, with notable proportions selecting both agreement and disagreement options, suggesting divided perspectives within these professional groups on whether behavioral factors should be included in academic grades.

Class Participation in Grading Practices

Similar patterns emerge regarding the inclusion of class participation in grades (Table 4), with administrators showing significantly lower agreement ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.97$) compared to other stakeholder groups. Parents demonstrate the highest agreement ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.68$), followed closely by instructional support staff ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.73$), teachers ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.72$), and students ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.81$). The high agreement among parents, teachers, and instructional support staff on including participation in grading raises serious equity concerns, as it signals a collective reliance on traditional grading norms that can perpetuate cultural bias and systematically disadvantage students whose engagement does not align with dominant cultural practices (Gregory et al., 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Table 4

Average Scores of Stakeholders' Beliefs Regarding Whether Class Participation Should be Used in Determining Students' Grades ($N = 20,152$)

Stakeholder	Med	M	SD	CI (95%)
Administrators	3	2.83	0.97	$\pm.12$
Instructional Support	3	3.32	0.73	$\pm.08$
Parent	3	3.37	0.68	$\pm.02$
Teacher	3	3.29	0.72	$\pm.02$
Students	3	3.21	0.81	$\pm.01$

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP AND REFORM

The perception gaps revealed by our comprehensive stakeholder analysis present both challenges and opportunities for educational leaders committed to advancing equity through grading reform. Our focus on descriptive patterns rather than inferential statistics reflects the exploratory nature of this multistakeholder investigation, where understanding the magnitude and direction of perception differences across five distinct groups provides essential groundwork for future hypothesis-driven research. The practical significance of these differences emerges not from statistical testing but from their

consistency across dimensions and their implications for policy implementation. The consistent disconnect between administrative perspectives and those of other stakeholders across all three dimensions (parent communication, behavioral assessment, and participation grading) suggests that current policy development processes may not adequately incorporate the voices and experiences of those most directly impacted by grading practices.

The particularly striking disparity regarding behavior and attitude inclusion (Table 3) underscores the complexity of reform efforts. While administrators appear to recognize the equity implications of behavioral grading, the higher agreement among parents, students, teachers, and instructional support staff reveals deeply embedded cultural expectations about appropriate student behavior and its relationship to academic evaluation. These findings suggest that behavioral grading practices may be so normalized within educational culture that stakeholders closest to the classroom experience view them as natural and necessary components of academic assessment.

Understanding why stakeholders support behavioral grading despite its documented inequities requires examining the situated logic that makes these practices seem reasonable from particular vantage points. Teachers working daily with students who appear disengaged may view behavioral grading as a legitimate tool for encouraging participation and effort, particularly when they lack alternative strategies for motivating struggling learners. Parents seeking a holistic assessment of their children may interpret grades that include behavioral components as more complete pictures of student development rather than contaminated measures of academic achievement. Students who have experienced behavioral grading throughout their educational careers may have internalized these practices as simply how school works, limiting their ability to envision alternatives without explicit education about the equity implications of grading. Even instructional support staff, despite their proximity to students facing educational challenges, may support behavioral grading because they see behavior and academic success as interconnected in students' daily experiences.

These perspectives are not simply wrong or uninformed; rather, they reflect genuine tensions in educational practice that grading reform must address. The challenge for educational leaders lies not in dismissing stakeholder support for behavioral grading as ignorance, but in creating professional learning experiences that help all stakeholders understand how practices that seem reasonable from their individual positions can perpetuate systemic inequities when examined from broader justice frameworks. Reform efforts must acknowledge the valid concerns that lead stakeholders to support behavioral grading while providing concrete alternative approaches that address those concerns without compromising equity.

District and school leaders must recognize that effective grading reform requires more than policy changes (Khalifa et al., 2016; Link, 2019); it demands a comprehensive cultural transformation that addresses deeply embedded assumptions about student behavior, engagement, and academic performance (Griffin & Townsley, 2021; Townsley, 2024). This transformation cannot occur without sustained investment in culturally responsive professional development that goes beyond surface-level cultural awareness to provide educators with skills for recognizing implicit biases, understanding structural inequities, and adopting inclusive instructional practices (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

The results in this study underscore the critical importance of engaging all stakeholder groups in meaningful dialogue about grading purposes and practices. When teachers, parents, support staff, and even students maintain stronger agreement regarding behavioral grading while administrators advocate for its removal, the potential for sustainable reform diminishes significantly. These disparities suggest that current professional learning systems may not be adequately preparing all stakeholders to understand the equity implications of traditional assessment practices or to implement alternative approaches that maintain academic rigor while honoring diverse cultural expressions of learning and engagement.

Additionally, the significant difference between student perspectives and those of adult stakeholders regarding parent communication underscores the urgent need to center student voice in grading reform efforts. Educational policies and practices that fail to align with student experiences and perceptions are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes, regardless of their theoretical soundness or adult support (Charteris & Thomas, 2017). The finding that students show relatively high agreement with including behavior and attitude in grades suggests that young people themselves may have internalized traditional grading norms, potentially limiting their ability to envision more equitable alternatives without explicit education about the hidden costs of behavioral assessment.

Limitations

The descriptive nature of our survey data, while illuminating stakeholder perception patterns, cannot establish causal relationships or demonstrate that addressing these perception gaps will lead to the transformative outcomes suggested by our title. Our findings document what stakeholders believe about behavioral grading, but they do not capture the complex implementation dynamics that arise when districts attempt reform based on stakeholder input. The cross-sectional

convenience sample of 10 districts limits generalizability, and districts voluntarily engaging with GradingRx® may already possess greater equity awareness than the broader population of school systems. The aggregated data also prevents examination of variations within stakeholder groups by demographic characteristics or school contexts that may influence perspectives.

Our focus on three survey items captures only a narrow dimension of beliefs surrounding assessment and does not explore stakeholders' reasoning or willingness to support specific reforms. While we document concerning perception gaps, we cannot determine whether closing these gaps represents a necessary or sufficient condition for achieving equitable grading practices. Our contribution lies in documenting perceptual patterns that pose challenges for reform rather than in demonstrating solutions. The "disruption" and "equity advancement" in our title represent aspirational goals that our descriptive findings can inform but not accomplish independently.

Future Directions & Recommendations

Addressing the hidden costs of behavioral grading requires comprehensive, multi-faceted approaches that acknowledge the complexity of stakeholder perspectives while maintaining focus on equity and student success. District and school leaders must prioritize the development of transparent communication systems that facilitate ongoing dialogue between stakeholder groups and create opportunities for shared understanding of grading purposes and practices.

Professional development initiatives must move beyond traditional training models to embrace culturally expansive approaches that help educators recognize how their own cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions of appropriate student behavior and engagement. This training should provide concrete strategies for assessing student learning and participation in ways that honor diverse cultural expressions while maintaining academic rigor and high expectations for all students.

The systematic incorporation of student voice into the development of grading policies represents another critical component of meaningful reform. Students bring unique perspectives about how grading practices impact their learning, motivation, and educational aspirations that cannot be captured through the input of adult stakeholders alone. Creating formal mechanisms for student participation in grading reform ensures that policies and practices align with the experiences and needs of those they are intended to serve.

Additionally, district and school leaders must develop comprehensive feedback systems that enable ongoing monitoring of grading practices and stakeholder satisfaction. Regular assessment of stakeholder perceptions, combined with analysis of student outcome data, provides essential information for refining and improving grading reforms over time.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive stakeholder data illuminates complex dynamics surrounding behavioral grading practices and their implications for educational equity. Significant perception gaps exist among stakeholder groups across all dimensions of behavioral assessment, underscoring the multifaceted challenges facing leaders committed to grading reform (Link & Mitic, 2025).

Most concerning is that administrators consistently have lower agreement with behavioral grading practices compared to all other stakeholder groups, while parents, teachers, instructional support staff, and students maintain high support for traditional approaches that integrate behavioral assessments with academic evaluations. This pattern suggests administrative reform efforts may encounter significant resistance from those closest to classroom experiences, who may not recognize the hidden costs these practices impose on historically marginalized students.

However, these challenges present unprecedented opportunities for transformation. By leveraging comprehensive stakeholder insights, district and school leaders can develop more effective and equitable assessment approaches that honor diverse student experiences while maintaining focus on learning and achievement. The path forward requires sustained commitment to culturally responsive practices, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and systematic policy reform guided by equity principles (Gay, 2018).

Through our continued work nationwide, we remain committed to supporting educational leaders in this critical transformation. The stakes are clear: inequitable grading practices undermine educational promise for countless students, while equitable assessment approaches unlock opportunity for all learners.

Ultimately, disrupting the hidden costs of behavioral grading represents more than technical reform; it embodies a fundamental commitment to educational justice, recognizing diverse ways students demonstrate learning, engagement, and growth. This requires courage, persistence, and unwavering focus on creating educational systems serving all students with excellence and equity, even when challenging deeply held assessment and grading beliefs.

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APPENDIX

GRADING AND REPORTING SURVEY

Items 23 – 28 asked about the purpose of grades. Specifically:

“The purpose of grades is ...”

Q23 to communicate information to parents about students' performance in school.

Q24 to provide information to students about their learning progress.

Q25 to select or group students for educational programs (Honors and Advanced classes, etc.).

Q26 to provide incentives for students to learn.

Q27 to evaluate the effectiveness of school programs.

Q28 to recognize students' effort and responsibility.

Items 29 – 38 asked respondents to consider the sources of evidence teachers use in determining students' grades. Specifically, each item was stated:

“_____ should be used to determine students' grades.”

Q29 Major exams and unit tests

Q30 Major projects and presentations

Q31 Class quizzes

Q32 Homework completion

Q33 Class participation

Q34 Work habits and neatness

Q35 Effort put forth (work ethic)

Q36 Punctuality of assignments

Q37 Behavior or attitude

Q38 Extra credit