Epilogue

A Return to Mallory's School

Jesicah, a principal of a middle school in Southern California, was one of a packed room of teachers and principals attending Mallory's presentation at a statewide education conference. Mallory shared how she and I had worked together for two years to introduce her teachers to more equitable grading practices and to support them through their skepticism and stumblings. The final PowerPoint slides of Mallory's presentation showed not just how student performance had improved, but how much the teachers valued the opportunity to examine traditional grading and explore more equitable approaches. "She and her school were light years ahead of all of us. They were actually doing what we all know is right but don't know how to do it," confessed Jesicah. After the presentation she approached Mallory to learn more, asking her "to teach me everything you know." They spoke for a while and scheduled a time to continue the conversation later by phone.

When they spoke a week later, Jesicah was surprised to learn that Mallory was transitioning to a different role, but she encouraged Jesicah to apply for her position. Jesicah had been principal of her school for seven years, but the opportunity was too good to pass up. "I was going to leave my school only if I really felt like I was walking into a place that understood what equity is about. Hearing Mallory and seeing the work that was started, I knew I could jump there." Jesicah was selected to be the new principal of Centennial College Prep Middle School, and she continued Mallory's efforts to improve grading over the next three years.

Today, five years after Mallory first decided that equitable grading needed to be a priority, and now under Jesicah's leadership, these are the school's "agreements" for grading—policies that the entire faculty affirmed by consensus two years ago and have continued to affirm annually:

CCPA's Grading Agreements

- All assignments, assessments, and final grades are on the 0–4 scale.
- No extra credit is available or awarded.

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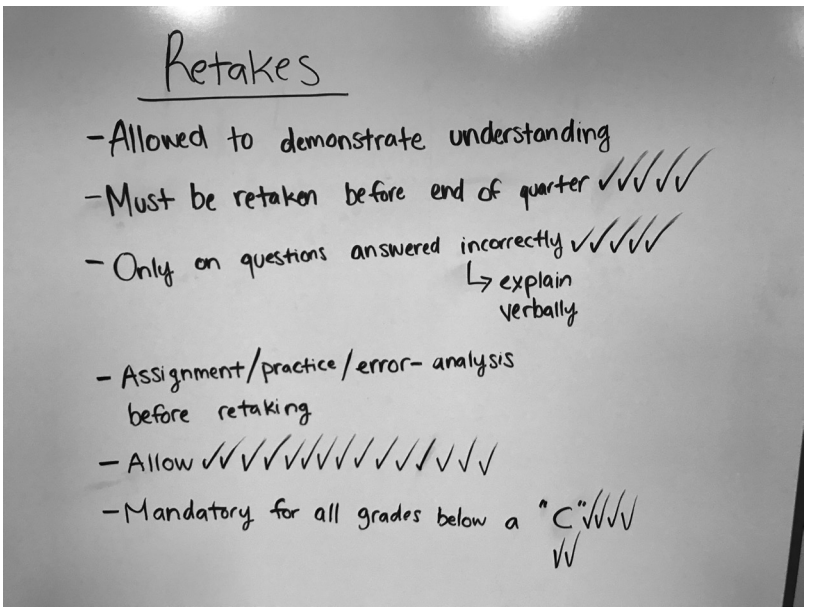
- Student grades are not affected if work is submitted late.
- Retakes are available to any students when they have received support and demonstrated that they have a stronger understanding. Those grades replace earlier scores.
- Summative assessments are weighted between 90 percent–100 percent of a student's grade.
- All assignments in a grade book are explicitly linked to a standard.
- All nonacademic performance ("soft skills," timeliness of work, etc.) is not included in the grade. Students are instead given feedback verbally, with written notes, or through an online feedback program which students and caregivers can access.

THE EQUITABLE GRADING POLICIES AGREED UPON BY CONSENSUS AT JESICAH'S (AND MALLORY'S) SCHOOL.



In addition, most teachers have organized their grade book to be standards based (see chapter 12).

Mallory's belief that improving the equity of grading would be a powerful lever, not just to raise student achievement but to improve teaching and learning schoolwide, has proven true under Jesicah's leadership. Teachers design assessments specifically to determine a student's level of standards mastery. With grades based entirely on performance on the standards, plus standards-based grade books, teachers can easily analyze their classes and determine for each student which standards haven't yet been mastered. As Jesicah explains,

"The buzzword nowadays is 'differentiation.' but how do you actually do that when you have a whole bunch of fluff in the grade books, and all you're really doing is differentiating for the compliant and the noncompliant child, rather than the child who has learned the standard and who hasn't?"

Jesicah's teachers also appreciate that their grading practices don't mandate that every assignment get a grade and be inputted into the grade book; they can instead use the time to make informed decisions about the next day's lesson.

Students' experiences have changed just as markedly. With the expectations so transparent, caregiver–teacher conferences have been transformed into student-led conferences. Instead of teachers telling caregivers, "Your child has a B. They need to make up some work," students lead a thirty-minute conversation with their caregiver, walking them through portfolios and sharing how that work earned them their grade. Every teacher has weekly office hours when students can receive support and do retakes. Students at the school continue to increase their scores on California's standardized assessment each year, and at faster rates than the state's average.

The school's commitment to equitable grading has even affected the process for hiring teachers. Teacher candidates are asked in a panel interview to respond to a scenario:

A student enters your class without a pencil, hadn't done the homework, and doesn't complete the classwork. When you ask the student to go to the board and solve a problem, the student does it entirely correctly. What do you do?

The panel—comprised of Jesicah, other administrators, and teachers—listens to whether the candidate focuses on the student's noncompliance for not bringing a pencil or not submitting homework, or instead identifies that the student has mastered the content and needs to be challenged.

Though many schools speak the language of equity, Jesicah describes how the school's grading practices put equity into action:

"Our grading policies recognize that when students are coming into sixth grade, where they are academically is really based on the quality of their last three teachers and not anything else. To have a grading system that penalizes students based on whether they had a strong teacher or not seems very unfair. Everybody has a different starting point and we need to recognize that.

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"Kids really appreciate and recognize that we see learning as a continued process and not an end-all, be-all. If a kid has a really horrible first quarter, they can still pull themselves out. There is no teacher who is saying, 'Sorry, you have an F, there's no chance for you at this point.' Do we have any kids like that? Oh my gosh. That's half our students!"

Jesicah still has concerns: Despite the consensus on grading policies each year, there remains variance among teachers (for example, some teachers weight summative assessments at 100 percent, while others keep it at 90 percent—a very slight variance, but still a variance). Jesicah and her staff impress upon their students that their school's grading policies aren't the norm yet in high schools, and she isn't sure if their grading practices affect students in high school (she's planning some alumni panels to find out). Despite the inevitable transition in grading that students will face entering high school, Jesicah is resolute: "At the end of the day, grades need to be about course content mastery. That's going to set them up for success more than being able to understand how to work a grading scale. Grade scales and policies are going to come and go, but I'm more focused on: 'Do you actually know the content you need in order to be successful in high school?'" In fact, in Jesicah's vision, her middle school students are learning how to advocate for equitable grading in whatever high schools they attend—to ask for the opportunity to continue learning and to retake an assessment, to persuade teachers to grade them based on where they end up, not average their performance over time—in other words, to be graded accurately, without bias, and in ways that motivate them to learn intrinsically.

To make our classrooms and schools more equitable is to challenge some of the fundamental designs and purposes of our Industrial Revolution–era schools. Our century-old grading policies were never meant to accurately describe student performance, to be resistant to our implicit biases, or to motivate students intrinsically. Those schools and their grading systems were designed to assimilate students into the needs of the factory, to manage their behavior, and to sort them efficiently to replicate existing hierarchies. To change our grading to be more equitable is to align our schools, our teaching, and our students' learning experiences with what we now believe: that students must never be privileged or punished based on their environment and histories, that every child can meet expectations and that we truly empower students when we intrinsically motivate them to learn.

There are lots of reasons to avoid the practices in this book. We don't have the energy, the time, the resources, the support. It will never work; the pushback will be too great. It will be too confusing. Caregivers will never allow it. It's pushing a boulder uphill; I'm the only one who is trying this. Other schools won't understand it; it will put our students at a disadvantage. The traditional system is too powerful.

All this may be true. All initiatives, particularly those that promote equity, are too frequently sidelined. It's certainly easier to not push against the way things are, even when we know that by not pushing, we tacitly perpetuate a status quo that is unacceptable. If we truly want to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps, we have to pursue equitable grading in spite of the challenges. I am reminded of a quote by Edward Everett Hale, a Unitarian minister of the nineteenth century:

> *I am only one, but I am still one.*
>
> *I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something I can do.*

Hopefully this book fortifies you, provides you with the language, the research, the arguments, and some ideas that equip you to take the first step, to broach the conversation with colleagues, to reach out to school and district leadership, to expand your web of belief, and to try a new grading practice—to not refuse to do something that you can do.

I conclude with a quote by Zac, a high school social studies teacher: "I've moved away from thinking of grading as a carrot or a stick; grades should be a mirror." The equitable practices of this book have helped Zac and other teachers understand that grades shouldn't be used as a behavior management system; grades should clearly reflect what students know, accurately and without bias. I would take his metaphor one step further: Grading practices are a mirror not just to students, but to us, their teachers. Each teacher's grading choices—whether to offer students redemption or a single chance, whether to reward students or punish them based on prior educational experiences or environment, to invite biases or restrain them, to describe in a grade only what students know or to include how they behave, to make students dependent on our judgments or empower them to self-assess and connect their behavior to their achievement—all of these choices reflect who that teacher is and what she believes. At the end of this book's Prologue, Lucy, an eighteen-year teacher, confesses after learning about these equitable grading practices, "*I look at what I have been doing and I have to do things differently.*"

When you look at how you grade, what does it reflect about who you are and what you believe? And what do you have to do differently?