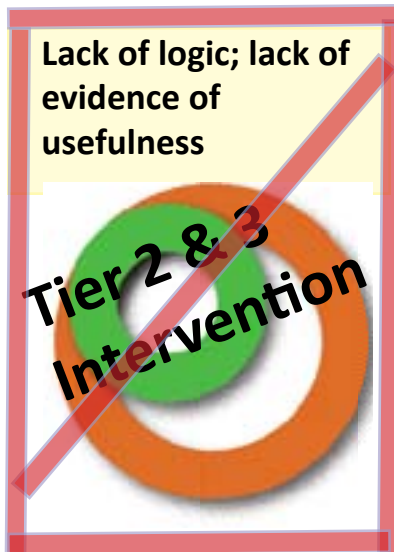


Lowering Course Grades

A Traditional Discipline Consequence

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In the past, schools have occasionally implemented policies in which students' course grades on report card or transcripts are lowered in the event of behavioral infractions, inappropriate classroom behavior, and unexcused absences (Wolowelsky, 1989). This was used as an alternative to, or supplement to other disciplinary consequences such as suspension. However, some states have invalidated this policy because it has been seen to violate the school's standards for grading, in which grades are expected to reflect academic performance (Wolowelsky, 1989). While this strategy has been utilized in the past, there is little research regarding its use.

What is meant by lowering course grades?

Although many elementary schools may have separate grades for the academic and the behavioral or citizenship component of work in school, that is rare at the secondary school level. Since the criteria for citizenship grades at the elementary level would include student behavior as a component, these grades may be low when student behavior is a problem. However, at the secondary level when there is only one grade given per course of instruction for each quarter or semester, some schools have chosen to lower otherwise earned academic grades in a course based on the students behavior during that time period. This could be done either by the teacher of that subject who would be giving the grade, or could be done by an administrator, and it could be done retroactively by making changes in previously earned course grades.

What do we know about lowering course grades?

A keyword search was done using the terms "lowering grades", "lowering grades as a disciplinary consequence", "lowering grades as a punishment", and "lowering course grades", using EBSCO, PsychINFO, and Academic Search Premier. The only searches that yielded results were the search of "lowering grades", which yielded 39 articles, and the search of "lowering course grades", which yielded one article. Of the 40 articles that were recovered during the search, only 9 related to the topic of course grades in school. Among those 9 articles there was only one article relating to lowering student grades as a disciplinary consequence for non-academic misconduct.



Many of the reasons why retention in grade level, and demotion to a lower grade level are counterproductive might also apply to lowering student course grades. These methods (demotion and retention) have been implemented as behavioral consequences in the past but have yielded little empirical research to support their use either as a punishment or as a behavior changes strategy (see the Strategy Brief on Grade Retention and Demotion for more information on this topic). Several cases of lowering students' report card grades have been taken to court based on the notion that "grading on factors other than academic performance is unconstitutional" (Hobbs, 1992: 204). Past instances of lowering grades often involve reducing the students' grades by a letter grade or percentage during the students' suspension or not allowing students to take exams during their suspension, thereby lowering their academic grades.

In the majority of cases, the court has sided against the school board, mandating that students should be allowed academic credits that were lost or lowered (Hobbs, 1992). Schools have also attempted to lower students' grades based on truancy and tardiness; however, these policies are also often revoked. Corollary actions in which students' academic grades are increased due to positive behaviors are also viewed as inappropriate (Wolowelsky, 1989). Overall, most scholars are in ubiquitous agreement that discipline strategies for nonacademic misconduct should be separated from and not include the lowering of academic grades (Hobbs, 1992). Although academic research in this domain is scant, these legal considerations underscore the ineffectiveness and ethical problems with lowering students' grades based on their social and emotional behaviors.

Conclusion

The act of lowering a student's course grade has been utilized by schools in the past; however, in the eyes of the court this is seen as unconstitutional. Students' grades are supposed to be a reflection of academic performance and should not be raised or lowered according to non-academic misconduct. Therefore, schools must consider taking alternative action in the face of student misbehavior.



Lowering Course Grades is a traditional disciplinary consequence which lacks logic, and which may violate the law. It is without evidence regarding effectiveness in changing student behavior.

No endorsement of its use should be implied in this Brief!

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References on Lowering Course Grades

Hobbs, G.J. (1992). The legality of reducing student grades as a disciplinary measure. *The Clearing House*, 65, 204-205.

Wolowelsky, J. (1989). Reducing Grades as a Means of Imposing Discipline. Retrieved from http://www.lookstein.org/articles/grades_discipline.htm