



Failure Is Not an Option for Missouri School Districts—but Is That a Good Thing?

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Imagine that you're a professor at a large university and this spring you're teaching one of the big freshman seminar courses – 518 students. Your dean comes to you and says, "Look, I know these freshmen come with all different skill levels, but I need their parents to keep paying tuition, so you need to find a way to make them all look like they succeeded in your class."

Okay, I guess you would start by grading on a curve. Then, you would want to make sure that there is a lot of extra credit available. Finally, you would give credit for things like showing up, finishing, and being ready to take another class the next semester.

So, here's what you might come up with for a grading scale:

- Two tests worth 16 points each, with two ways to earn up to 12 extra credit points on each of them, and one test worth 8 points with up to 6 extra credit points.
- Three homework assignments worth a total of 10 points, but with two ways to earn up to 7.5 points of extra credit.
- Showing up at least 90 percent of the time gets you 10 points, but there's up to 7.5 points of extra credit if you show up more than you did the last time.

- Finishing gets you up to 30 points – almost as much as the tests! And, there’s up to 24 points of extra credit. Plus – and this is the kicker – you can finish in one semester, or take an extra month, an extra two months, or even finish in two semesters, whichever works out best for you.
- Finally, proving (through a variety of ways) that you’re ready for the next class, is worth 30 points, with up to 22.5 points of extra credit.

Now, to get an A, a student needs to get at least 84 of the “real” 120 points—but since there are 90 extra credit points to work with, a student really just needs 84 points out of a possible **210** to get that A.

Great news! At the end of the semester, you give out 512 A’s (86 A+’s with perfect scores!), 5 B’s, and just one C. That ought to keep the parents happy. As far as they know, everyone learned an A’s worth of material.

This is effectively the grading scale that the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) uses to hold schools and districts accountable. It’s called the APR, and it’s loaded with opportunities for extra credit. Let’s just look at academic achievement, the area we’d all probably agree is most important. Districts are evaluated out of a possible 40 points, divided among math, reading, and social studies. However, a district can get up to 30 extra points if students show growth or progress in these scores. That means to get a “perfect” score, a district only has to get 57 percent of the possible points available to it. That’s a heck of a curve.

There are four other areas in which schools earn points, and those areas are rife with the same problems.

So what does this mean, practically speaking? Using this scale, Kansas City got 82.9 percent of the 120 points, even though, on average, almost half of their students scored “Below Basic” across grades and subjects. The district clearly topped up its score with various extra credit opportunities. St. Louis Public Schools got 78.5 percent of its points, again with almost half of students scoring Below Basic. In the Ferguson-Florissant school district, just 3 percent of 8th-grade students scored Proficient or above in mathematics, and yet the district received 92.1 percent of its APR points.

Kids are more than the sum of their test scores, and accountability systems should consider more than rates of proficiency. But getting students proficient in grade-level subject matter should count for something. And a system that gives passing grades to 512 out of 518 school districts with academic achievement all over the map is not an accountability system at all. It’s a way to make everyone feel good.

About the Author



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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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