

The Language Arts Department at Molalla High School has begun to transfer the power of learning to its rightful place: with the student. We, along with many of the other departments, to varying degrees, have moved from a traditional grading system to what is commonly known among educators as proficiency grading (also called standards-based grading).

Hence, students, teachers, and parents involved with the High School are undergoing a paradigm shift that intends to shred the familiar, and replace it with common sense.

This tempts the question: if common sense is coming, what have we been doing all these years? Fair enough question.

French philosopher Albert Camus writes in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus":

"The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. The [gods] had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."

By and large, that is what grading systems, and therefore public education across the nation, have been doing. Sisyphus is the student, the rock is their course work, and the top of the mountain is grades and points. This is what we are tearing apart. Committed and uncommitted students alike roll the rock up the slope, and when it slips—whoops! An F! Failure. Go back down to the bottom, child, and push the rock back up the hill.

Virtually everyone is familiar with the impact that getting one or two poor grades on assignments has on the morale of students at any age. It's discouraging, especially when you know you are condemned to spend the rest of the term catching up. And it can be backbreaking when the student has worked hard up to that point.

Of course this analogy exaggerates the previous grading methods, because we all know that many students have thrived in it. But those students are often learning how to work the system in order to get the desired mark—an A. This is a nice skill, but the analogy for that group is more like the carrot and the stick method to get a mule to move.

What does makes this comparison to Sisyphus further appropriate is that it creates an eerily similar mindset and academic culture for the less engaged students. Sisyphus and the struggling student have reason to wonder: *why am I doing this?*

Research is clear: a student needs to believe he or she can succeed if they are going to do the work. According to Robert Marzano, educational research guru, if a student answers "no" to the question, "Can I do this?", then it is "almost a guarantee that they turn off."

As teachers, we know this to be true. The grades D and F inform the student that he or she will spend the rest of the term toiling to make up for past inadequacies. Even if that student worked hard for that grade, the effort is discounted so greatly that it's no wonder students "turn off."

"Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world, whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the [bottom]."

Sadly, most of education over the last 90 years has operated on this premise. Now, in most MHS courses, the promise of common sense grading is as follows:

Using proficiency grading, students are given opportunities to show that they can perform certain skills or demonstrate knowledge, and if at first they don't succeed, they may try and try again.

As fellow Language Arts Department member Shawna Sipp wrote, "Students should never be penalized for practicing skills. The process of learning is not reflected in the grading system; proficiency grading represents what a student knows and can demonstrate at their highest level."

For example, a student might practice her skills in comprehending a piece of literature. She may receive a score that will range from zero (0) to four (4). If she gives her best effort after one attempt, her score may be a 2, which comes close but does not meet expectations (a 2 out of 4 is not proficient).

She will be given multiple opportunities to improve that score, and if, later in the term, she earns a 3 (which signals proficiency), then the 2 never happened. It is left in the wake of her hard work, and if she wants to *exceed* expectations, then she is free to pursue a 4-level skill.

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Joe, can we "box" this near this portion of the article? If you need me to streamline it, let me know.

One Model of Proficiency Grading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A score of 4 demonstrates above average work (previously known as an A or B+);</li><li>• A score of 3 demonstrates solid work (previously known as a C);</li><li>• A 2 = means the skill has not been demonstrated, but the student is working at it and is close (previously a D);</li><li>• A score of 1 mean the student is still a couple steps away, but not all is lost (previously an F).</li></ul>

- A score of zero doesn't really exist until the end of the term, when it is evident the student has chosen not to try.

And the departure from the familiar and cumbersome "F" should be evident: if a student receives a 2, it is now a signal that she will be rewarded for her efforts with an opportunity to improve her skills.

Previously: "I failed. I don't think I can do this?"

Now: "I'm not there yet. I can do this."

Rather than going to the bottom of the mountainside, the student gets a new rock at the very spot that it slipped and rolled to the bottom.

Her efforts are not wasted and punished; they are given credit and rewarded.

One MHS teacher who is embracing the paradigm shift said, "It really makes me think, 'What have I been doing all these years?'" This is a teacher with 25 years experience whose commitment to teaching is universally unquestioned.

But Camus' essay deviates from the analogy in that he challenges the notion that Sisyphus is necessarily miserable with his condemnation of tedious labor. He suggests at the end that: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

That is easy to say about a man in a myth generated 2700 years ago.

Try telling a teenager in contemporary America that he should imagine himself happy to prove his worth over and over following a D or an F (or both!). Try telling them not to be discouraged, another assignment is just around the corner.

And really, never mind this person being a teenager; anyone would be discouraged to see the rock roll down the mountainside after all the effort it takes to get it half-way up. It's common sense.

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If you happen to be a parent of an MHS student who has questions about anything in this article, please address me here in this forum—The Molalla Pioneer. I am happy to answer any questions about this article as the writer or a teacher. I am solely responsible for its contents.