

Don't Gift Failure: W-JCC Schools should reject 'equitable' grading reforms

By Steven Mains

As the school year begins anew in Williamsburg-James City County, our community is grappling with how to elevate education and restore student achievement to pre-COVID levels. SOL scores have risen since the pandemic lows of 2020-21, but they still lag behind 2018-19 highs, with persistent gaps for minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Amid this recovery, one proposed "fix" stands out: the "gifty-fifty," where missing work earns a 50% score instead of a zero. This approach, championed by education consultants and university Education Departments, promises "equity" but delivers failure.

While well-intentioned, these changes, under the umbrella of "equitable grading policies," undermine academic rigor, enable laziness, and fail to prepare students for real-world accountability. WJCC should reject them and foster true equity through high expectations for all—especially by rejecting proponents' unfounded claims that such policies aid falling-behind minority students and curb grading disparities.

Nationally, over half of K-12 teachers report their districts adopting at least one equitable grading element, like no zeros, no late penalties, or unlimited test retakes. In WJCC, similar pilots have unfolded over the past two years, including discussions in the June 2025 school board meeting about a uniform 50-100 scale, without any rigorous data showing improved student mastery.

Frontline educators overwhelmingly oppose these changes: A recent Fordham Institute survey reveals 81% view gift-y-fifty policies as harmful to engagement, including 80% of teachers of color and those in majority-minority schools. As one teacher stated, "Being given a 50% for doing nothing seems to enable laziness." Another called it "insulting to the students who work."

This opposition spans demographics and experience levels, with 56% of teachers deeming no late penalties detrimental. Views on retakes are divided, but teachers are often critical, feeling they foster procrastination.

Proponents argue these policies uplift disadvantaged students by eliminating "demoralizing" zeros, allowing recovery from setbacks tied to systemic barriers like poverty. But this rationale crumbles under scrutiny. Awarding partial credit for no effort doesn't instill responsibility; it inflates grades, where below-average work combined with some not attempted still earns a passing mark, leaving graduates unprepared for the work force. This is clearly not a race issue when 80% of educators of color reject it, underscoring that true equity demands high standards, not lowered ones. In WJCC, where Black students' math pass rates rose modestly to 57% in 2023-24 but trail White peers by over 20 points, the solution lies in proven, targeted supports like expanded tutoring and mentorship—not diluted expectations that accept the fiction that these students can't meet the bar.

The claim that traditional grading breeds disparities and equitable rules standardize for "bias-resistance" also overreaches. Proponents suggest no-zeros clarifies grade expectations, but that's a separate issue. Teachers have always had flexibility to tailor grading schemes; imposing blanket rules removes teacher discretion, stripping educators of tools to motivate and adapt. Teachers favor bias-minimizing tools like clear rubrics that don't abandon rigor: 59% endorse including participation for engagement, 44% support homework grading. Excluding these elements removes educators' leverage, promoting procrastination and even cheating.

The harms extend further. Inflated GPAs mislead parents, future teachers and potential employers about struggles, complicate college admissions (favoring those with extracurricular luxuries), and erode trust in schools. As our children's test scores remain below pre-COVID levels, these policies evade accountability rather than drive improvement.

WJCC has superior alternatives:

- Maintain high expectations via traditional grading, augmented by proven supports like tutoring and data-driven interventions that fueled recent SOL gains.
- Urge the school board to prioritize mastery through effort over minimum grades.
- Embrace evidence-based reforms: Clear expectations and accountability align with the 71% of teachers insisting grading should set high standards for everyone.

"Equitable" grading teaches that deadlines and effort are optional—wrong lessons for life. It fails true fairness, not-so-subtly implying minority students need relief from standards to succeed. Three years post-COVID, with scores climbing slowly but still in a hole, WJCC must focus on what works, not embark on unproven experiments.

Parents, teachers, and residents: Contact the school board and attend their meetings. Demand educator-backed, data-proven approaches. Our children's future demands it.

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