

On Late Work...

Picture this. You ask your 12-year old son to take out the garbage one morning. He agrees to do it. That evening, you see that the garbage has not been emptied and you ask your son to please empty the garbage. He again agrees to do it. It's now after dinner and the garbage has still not been emptied. At this point, what do you do? You could just empty the garbage yourself. It would get done and it would be easier, at least in the short term. Doing so, however, has just taught your son that if he avoids it long enough, he'll get out of doing it because you'll end up emptying the garbage yourself. He is now less likely to empty the garbage again without compulsion.

Or take our situation in our own work places. If our boss gives us an assignment and we don't meet the deadline, it's not like he'll just opt us out of the assignment and do it him/herself. We'll still have to do it and deal with whatever consequences come our way. In truth, there is very little in the real world that has hard and fast deadlines. When people miss deadlines, they are still required to do whatever it is they're supposed to do, but there's usually some kind of imposed consequence, fee, or extra work. Even when us educators miss a deadline, we still have to do the work.

The traditional grading system doesn't see it that way. The teacher sets a hard and fast deadline and when some students don't meet it, they are opted out of it – they simply don't have to do it anymore and the student is given a zero. The consequence is that the student loses an opportunity to learn, but is never allowed to or is actually discouraged from doing and learning from the assignment. Sometimes teachers will accept late work with a penalty on the grade like a score reduction of 10% on the first day, 20% on the second day, and so on. Or worse, some teachers will deduct 50% off of all late work so that the best a student could hope for is an F on their late assignment. Some educators think that if we use grades as a motivator (or as a punishment), then students will be more inclined to get their work in on time. That only works for those that are actually motivated by grades and, in reality, late work isn't typically a problem for those students. Such late work policies assume that students don't do the homework as a form of rebellion. That's not always the case. A host of things contribute to the situation: family events or responsibilities, overbooked schedules, sickness, momentary forgetfulness or a lack of organization, and sometimes even a lack of knowledge where the student doesn't know how to do the homework. We all get busy and we forget things. It shouldn't be a surprise that students are sometimes in the same boat as we are. The consequence should never be that they just don't get to take advantage of the learning opportunity an assignment provides and school systems should never discourage students from doing late work through point-reduction policies.

Here's the main problem. If the work assigned by teachers helps students learn and master important concepts, then why are we taking off points for missing a deadline and why are we allowing students to opt out of their assignments just because they didn't meet a deadline? Which is more important: the deadline or the learning? The answer for any self-respecting educator has to be that student learning is the primary concern. The solution is simple. There must be something in place to help students take advantage of the learning opportunities class assignments and homework provide.

At South Hills, that solution often comes in the form of ZAP – Zeroes Aren't Permitted. Simply put, when students don't turn in an assignment on the due date, they can be ZAPped. Once ZAPped, the student has that evening to get the homework done and turned in the next day. If it's still not completed, the student grabs their lunch and heads to the Learning Center where that assignment is waiting for them. The student then has a working lunch to finish the assignment and turn it in. Once it's complete, the student can return to finish lunch with friends. While there is a punitive element to it (students lose social time with friends), students can take advantage of learning opportunities in time for the learning to help them on the upcoming quiz or test while also helping to prepare them for the next concept. ZAP doesn't work for every assignment since it's limited to one 25-minute period of time during lunch, but it does help students take advantage of the learning that comes from assignments and homework either by completing it during lunch or meeting the deadline to avoid ZAP. Last year, there were a total of 6,057 ZAPs. Or in other words, there were 6,057 learning opportunities that were taken advantage of that may have otherwise been lost.

So what about those assignments that don't work well for ZAP like projects or essays or labs? At South Hills, students can turn these things in for full credit as well – even when they miss the deadline. The trick is to do it as soon as possible so students can keep up with the learning. Waiting until the end of the quarter may not adequately prepare students for tests or quizzes, but that said, we care more about the learning – even if it is late – than the deadline. However, if a student needs to re-take a quiz or test, they may be required to finish these longer projects, essays or labs since those learning opportunities will help prepare them for the re-take. We'll talk more about re-takes in a future communication.

There are occasions where teachers will set final deadlines intermittently during the quarter. This is usually because the concepts being learned now need to be mastered for students to understand the next concept. When this happens, teachers should be communicating these deadlines to both students and their parents. Otherwise, most final deadlines will be some time the week before midterms and the end of the quarter.

In summary, students can turn late work in without penalty to their grade because we care more about the learning opportunity assignments create than the deadline. And let's face it, the world is full of exceptions to deadlines – they just sometimes come with consequences (like, for example, fines and more paperwork when we miss the tax filing deadline). Most late work is due before the last week of the quarter, though there are exceptions when the concept being learned is necessary for students to understand the next concept.

As always, if you have any questions about our transition to standards-based grading, please give the main office a call at 801-412-2400 or contact me, Ben Jameson, via email at ben.jameson@jordandistrict.org.

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