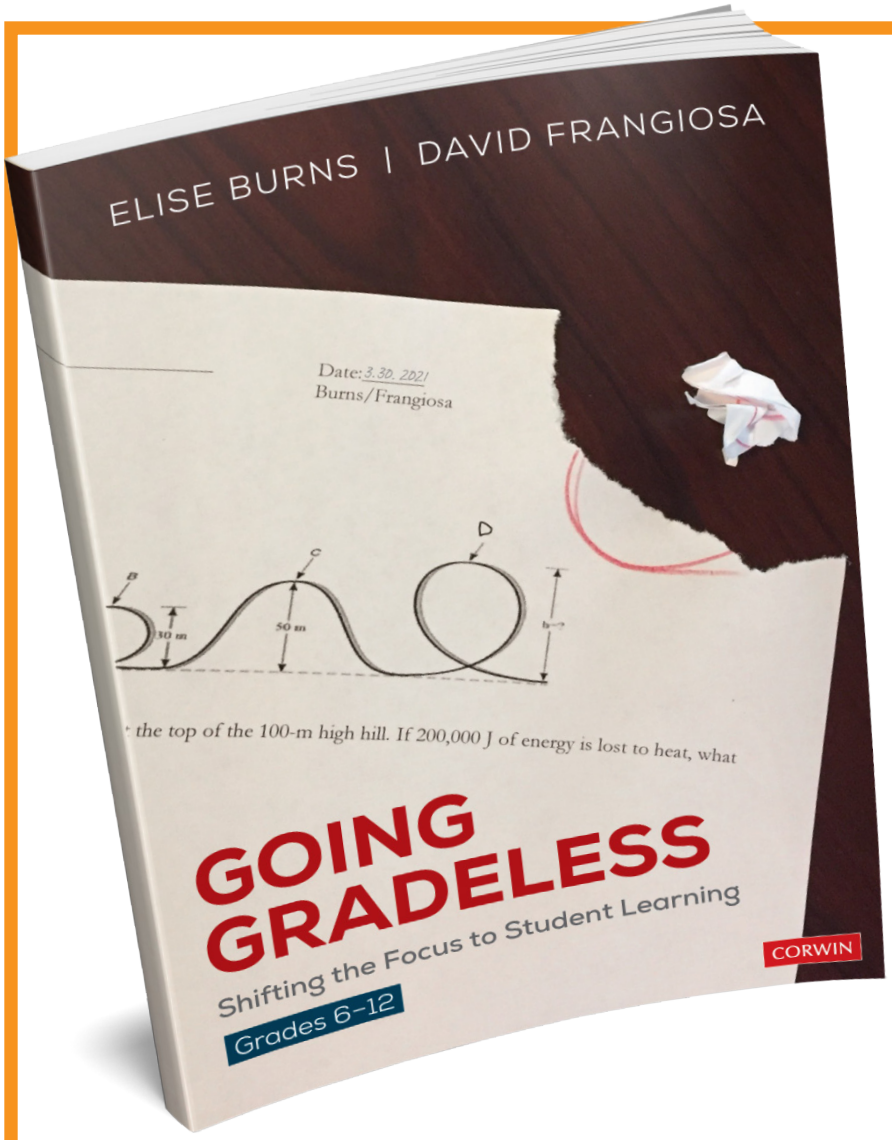

Thank you

FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Going Gradeless* by Elise Burns and David Frangiosa.

LEARN MORE about this title, including Features, Table of Contents and Reviews.

CORWIN

A Discussion About Equity

In schools around the country, access to education is not equal for all students. Much of this inequality centers on race, learning ability, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Stakeholders in many districts are trying to create a healthier, more open system in which learners feel safe, heard, and represented. While we certainly do not have an easy answer to any of these issues, one factor contributing to and exacerbating these inequities is traditional, compliance-based grading. We will touch on some of these points as we believe that our approach can be one way to create a more welcoming, supportive, and ultimately productive environment. Going gradeless can be a practical way to create meaningful change while taking into account the student's contexts and needs. With this approach IEP (Individualized Education Program) accommodations are less visible, in turn reducing the stigma of receiving educational supports. Students are not penalized for late or incorrect work during their development, which reduces the inequity that arises between students who can and those who cannot afford tutors, or between students who don't get parental support at home and those who do. Our approach is flexible and adaptable, and with some serious thought you can address many classroom situations, from the most homogeneous to the most heterogeneous.

The issues of grading equity and racism are intractably intertwined. Although we are aware of the inequities that exist as a result of biases and racism, we are not experts in that field. As to not doing any unintended harm to those discussions, we will leave that to the experts who have the knowledge and resources to provide impactful professional development that can hopefully lead to lasting positive changes in education. If you your district is looking for this type of training, please contact the experts listed in the box on the next page.

Our focus will be specifically on how going gradeless can help our students who are traditionally seen as our highest achievers and our most striving learners. We have personally seen some significant improvement with students who have learning or social issues, and have a previously demonstrated lack of engagement or ability. In addition, there are significant benefits to the upper levels, albeit for different reasons.

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First, think about the special education population, even those students who may not be classified but are striving learners for any reason. By the time we see them in high school, the primary obstacle is often their history of academic failure and subsequent resignation regarding any possible better outcome. Do you know students like that? How many times have you said to yourself, "If only they would just try!" or "Why do they give up as soon as they hit anything even moderately difficult?"

These students have been so used to "being bad" at school that often their defense is to quit before they even try. When we take away the constant grading (aka ranking), we are able to focus instead on individual student progress. So if we can simply tell them that they are doing well and get them to engage at whatever level they are, we have succeeded! And once we have clearly identified a progression of skills and understood our values and goals as educators, we could communicate to a student, "Here is where you are now. Great job!" and continue with "Here's the *one* next thing you need to do in order to progress." Moving one rung up the ladder at a time is attainable. If you do that often enough, the student will gradually gain in confidence and improve, moving slowly but surely toward the top of the ladder. One may argue that that is what an IEP is designed to accomplish. Our contention with that is it creates a system that identifies the student as the problem that needs to be provided for or fixed. Students who are placed in this box are acutely

aware of it. It affects their attitude, approach, and ultimately success in school. There is nothing wrong with any student. The system is just not designed to meet their needs. A traditional grading model is centered on high-achieving students, with a focus on giving grades to sort students. A feedback-oriented assessment model has proven benefits for striving learners (Chapter 3) while not negatively affecting high-achieving students. The other benefit of this approach is that all students can engage with the same material without designation of academic ability. It meets all students where they are and celebrates their individual progress.

If you've had a long enough career, you might have noticed a gradual but systematic lowering of standards as our classes diversify and testing requirements expand. Contrary to what you might expect, without grades we get a markedly better quality of work by the end of the year than we ever used to get using the traditional method of grading. This is even more apparent in the "lower-level" courses, where the students we teach typically do not have the mathematics skills (or the confidence) to do Physics at all. Their focus on learning, and not earning grades, encourages them to try, which is leading to improved outcomes (Chapter 8). We have observed this, and students are also reporting it in the end-of-course survey.

> *It was the only class I actually enjoyed learning in and didn't just want to chillax and mingle with peers, like I actually enjoyed learning. Plus the system is great for kids who weren't super groomed in school.*
>
> *Overall I find this class to work better for me than the usual system in all my other classes.*
>
> *I enjoyed this class and the grading system. There was a lot less stress to get things done extremely fast, which allowed me to relax and learn a lot.*
>
> *I found this class to be different from the rest because it wasn't as much stress to get that grade and it was more of a let's improve on what you did wrong, and I really liked that.*

How does this apply to the gifted student? We often lock academically talented students into a box of striving for grades that gives them no freedom to actually think. Our best students will usually do anything you tell them to do in class, but give them an open-ended task and they are lost. Why, if they are so intelligent, do they have such anxiety? This is an issue we could explore for pages and pages, but let's just say that creativity has been trained out of them, so all they do is complete assignments without much independent thought; our Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes are packed with compliant students whom we love and reward for their excellent behavior (aka obedience). Why do we claim that this is inequitable? Because the current rampant level of anxiety is tied to self-worth and there are undue pressures on these "good" students. Are we serving them

well, equipping them with the tools they need for success? If students have been taught that speed of computation, perfect recitation of facts, and following directions are the ingredients for success, then what happens when they get to a place where none of those are possible avenues of approach? Assuming that these students have ambitions to enter a professional field, can you think of a single career that wants a robot filling the seat of a creative problem solver? Doctors, lawyers, advertising executives, investment bankers, computer scientists, engineers, teachers, nurses, artists, financial advisors, car salesmen, and so on all need to be flexible thinkers, who take input and evaluate possible solutions, picking the best one for the situation at hand. At both ends of the spectrum, we don't provide the coaching and expectations for students to be creative problem solvers—whether because we think that they cannot, they will not, it's not expedient, or it's just not part of the curriculum. So either way, we are serving neither our historically highest nor our lowest achievers with the traditional approach.

According to Jo Boaler and Carol Dweck (2016), authors of *Mathematical Mindsets*, one can achieve equity in one's own classroom in several ways. There are two in particular that are relevant to our approach. By offering high-level content to all students regardless of their past, you send the message to all students that you believe in their abilities to learn and grow (and that they should too). By eliminating numerical grades until the end of the year, you do not penalize students for trying and failing. This means that students can put forth their best attempt at every moment, flounder and misstep, and reset when necessary and they will be able to do well in the end, regardless of the pace at which they get there. Because the types of assessments will shift due to your focus on skills, you can encourage students to think deeply by providing time for hands-on experiences, projects, real-life applications, and collaboration (Boaler & Dweck, 2016). The assessment questions can be more advanced since it's not going to matter if student responses are perfectly correct. You will be looking for clear demonstration of skill application. In Chapter 6 we will provide several concrete examples as well as student sample work.

We have found that the nature of the classroom changes. We can focus less on students having the right answer and look for positive attributes of their work that will lead them along the improvement progression. When a student gets stuck and is unsure where to start (a project or a question), together we can examine the rubric and say, "Look at the Beginner level. Can you do this?" Usually Beginner level is "trying," and usually they acknowledge that of course they can do that. Then can you move to the one thing you need to do in order to get to the Developing level? After that there is usually a mini checklist in the Proficient level that they can use as a support or some notes that they can open up for help. But we have to show them that they cannot fail as long as they simply try. Students with a history of failure need additional encouragement. The more I can say, "You can do this, I believe in you, and growth comes with effort and hard work," the more effort students make and hard work

they do. It is our opinion that while we cannot change the world's ills single-handedly, if we can demonstrate true fairness by deeply believing in the abilities of *all* students, then that will have huge impacts in the future.

Last, we need to discuss homework. Many people have written extensively on this matter (e.g., Khan, 2020; Kohn, 2007), and it's a topic that we struggle with mightily on several levels. They posit that homework should be either completely eliminated or its nature limited to reflection and/or inquiry projects. Students do not have the same resources at home, whether material or emotional. For example, we each have a daughter. These girls have distinct advantages when working on homework because we have the time and ability to lend assistance. If we don't know something, we have the resources to figure it out, ask for help, or hire a tutor. And we are home every evening, available for support. What happens to someone whose parent doesn't get home until very late due to work, does not have the educational background themselves to help, does not have the financial resources to hire help, or cannot even put food on the table to nourish the brain and provide energy? What if the student has to work or babysit or is living in an environment in which study is impossible due to violence, cultural traditions, or other perceptions? Our gradeless approach enables us to reduce the amount of homework considerably and also to introduce choice about the type of homework required. There is no penalty for lateness or noncompletion. The consequence is inherent loss of practice and less opportunity for feedback. If a student doesn't hand something in or hands it in late, we only care because of our end goal for him or her to improve. If they don't complete it, we can't provide feedback. If it's late and we haven't graded the rest of the class's work, we accept it. But if we have graded the assignment, we simply mark it as done but give no feedback, unless the student comes to talk to us personally. No student has ever argued that it's fair for us to play catch-up when we are simply going to collect something else imminently and give more feedback on the same set of skills. And, of course, we have a conversation about the value of the practice as aligned with the student's self-stated goals. In the end, it's all about the conversation, reaching the student wherever he or she may be. This feels like true equity and a simple, consistent way to differentiate your classroom.

In my opinion the most coherent way to offer equitable education, regardless of socioeconomic background, gender, race, or age, is to create a culture in which it is safe to take risks, to be oneself, and to have honest conversations about failure and growth. Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly*, says, "We won't solve the complex issues that we're facing today without creativity, innovation, and engaged learning" (p. 196). She lists "honest, constructive, and engaged feedback" as one of the essentials for healthy school cultures. Specifically,

> today's organizations are so metric-focused in their evaluation of performance that giving, receiving, and soliciting valuable

> feedback ironically has become rare. It's even a rarity in schools where learning depends on feedback, which is infinitely more effective than grades scribbled on the top of a page or computer-generated, standardized test scores.
>
> The problem is straightforward: Without feedback there can be no transformative change. When we don't talk to the people we are leading about their strengths and their opportunities for growth, they begin to question their contributions and our commitment. Disengagement follows. (p. 197)

One thing that our model allows us to do is have these conversations, over and over again. The elimination of grades is not enough. To create opportunities for growth, it is clear that the teacher must model and normalize the discomfort of learning. We need to help the learner appreciate how that is completely normal and healthy when learning is a productive struggle. We need to solicit feedback in the same way we provide feedback. This openness to criticism is hard to take, but if all we do is tell the students to change and we don't, they will rightly see us as hypocrites. We need to learn how to give feedback in a way that inspires growth and engagement; grades clearly do not. And to reduce anxiety, that ubiquitous presence for so many of our students, we need to let them know that when they are learning, it is *normal* to be uncomfortable. If they find it to be easy, then they aren't learning anything much at all!