

## **How grading systems affect academic excellence**

Grading systems play an essential role in a student's pursuit of academic success by providing an evaluation of their performance. However, while these systems assist students and teachers in identifying areas of improvement, it is crucial to scrutinize them for their effectiveness in fostering academic excellence.

In Kenya, the grading starts from zero to 100, denoted by letter grades ranging from A to E. Students are rated on a 12-point numeric scale from the highest to the lowest. This system aids the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in different learning areas, while their teachers assess their performance progress and focus on the areas that need improvement.

Some critics might argue that grading systems have potential adverse effects on students' motivation and self-esteem. Historically, schools ranked students with more emphasis on grades achieved which at times, overshadowed the true essence of learning to learn and led to unhealthy competition among students and schools.

With this in mind, it is important for schools to adopt grading systems that track progressively each learner's competencies incrementally. These systems should focus on identifying strengths and weaknesses, enabling students to focus on areas that require improvement and alleviating unnecessary pressure.

Additionally, the transition from the traditional letter-based grading to a Grade Point Average (GPA) approach will play a significant role in fostering a healthier learning environment and shift the focus from comparison with peers to individual growth.

Another benefit of the grading systems is that it assists teachers in customizing teaching methods based on the students' learning competencies such as quick learner, average and slow learners. This classification can help teachers tailor their teaching methods and strategies to suit the different learning styles and preferences of their students, ultimately enhancing their learning outcomes.

Acknowledging the need for improvement, the Presidential Working Party for Education Reforms (PWPER) in Kenya recommended modifications to the grading system. The Ministry of Education (MoE) subsequently introduced a new system for the 2023 KCSE results, aligning with global practices that blend both summative and formative assessments.

An analysis of data from the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) revealed a noteworthy increase in learners joining institutions of higher learning from 173,345 in 2022 to 201,133 last year. By focusing on core subjects like English, Kiswahili, and Mathematics, and allowing flexibility in choosing other areas of strength, the new grading system acknowledges the diverse learning styles and aptitudes of students and aims to provide more accurate assessments of students' literacy and numeracy skills.

In contrast, the former grading system computed all seven subjects, lowering chances of learners performing better. This system provided for exams that were primarily summative for certification and placement, contributing to school dropouts and low transition rates to tertiary institutions.

Using grading systems to pinpoint a student's areas of focus should not rest solely on the shoulders of teachers. Schools should seek advisory input from experts in grading or establish a team of experts in curriculum. For instance, at Makini Schools, we have the Central Academics Team also known as the Curriculum Leadership Team that comprises a group of educators and administrators responsible for

overseeing curriculum development and offering advisory on the grading system used for effective learning.

Schools should broaden their focus beyond merely grading the students; instead, they should delve into the underlying reasons behind learners' performance. This approach allows teachers to help students identify factors contributing to low grades and help them improve rather than worrying over performance. This shift in perspective not only contributes to effective grading but also encourages healthy competition that reflects a student's true abilities.

In conclusion, grading systems are indispensable tools in the educational landscape, providing guidance to students and teachers in the quest for academic excellence. Schools can enhance the learning environment by implementing grading systems that prioritize personal development and alleviate unnecessary pressure. The recent changes in Kenya serve as a noteworthy example of how well-designed grading systems can positively influence education, underscoring the significance of continuous improvement in the sector.