

Dear Students and Parents,

After much reading and reflection over the past few years, I have decided to use *feedback and revisions only* in our class, with no letter grade entered until the end of each term. Several years ago, I encountered the work of Ruth Butler who examined the three types of feedback teachers give:

- Grades alone
- Both grades and comments
- Comments alone

The results of Butler's research might seem counterintuitive: the students who showed the most growth were those *who received comments alone*. Even grades paired with comments—which at face value would seem to be the richest form of feedback—was just as ineffective as giving grades alone. When a grade is paired with feedback, most students ignore the feedback and focus only on the grade. As a teacher of English language arts who prides himself in providing quality feedback, this finding is particularly disturbing. However, it didn't surprise me: frequently a student who receives an assignment back looks at the letter grade and then puts it away without reading the comments. This remains true even though, for most of my career, I have allowed students to revise and improve their scores on assessments. Something about the letter grade causes learning to stop.

Much of this confirms the findings of other researchers like Carol Dweck, whose book *Mindset* introduced the world to the concept of growth mindset, and Daniel Pink, whose book *Drive* argued that extrinsic rewards and punishments actually stifle creativity, higher-order thinking, and intrinsic motivation. Since I hope to engender the dispositions of growth mindset and intrinsic motivation in my students, I want to eliminate any practices that work against students developing them.

To this end, students will receive written and verbal feedback about what they did well and what they can do to improve. We will be using the online portfolio platform, [Seesaw](#), as a way of curating student work and tracking student progress toward learning targets. Throughout the term, students will have opportunities to assess their own and other students' work, to make improvements in response to feedback, and to elicit and receive new feedback—all of which has been shown to aid students in becoming more engaged and effective learners. The feedback cycle is not unlike the process used by coaches to prepare players for an upcoming game or meet. Coaches don't put a score on the scoreboard during practices; that only happens in the game. Up until that "moment of truth," coaches do everything they can to develop players in the skills and concepts they will need to succeed. To grade or rate them sends the subtle message that their current achievement is fixed. This is the exact opposite mentality that is needed to sustain growth and improvement. The goal is to "keep the conversation going" as long as possible.

### **How a final grade is determined**

At the end of each term, each student and I will look at the evidence together and use the [Descriptive Grading Criteria](#) to decide on a letter grade representing the student's most consistent level of performance. Emphasis will always be placed on more recent levels of performance, rather than focusing on earlier attempts where students might have been still learning the skill or concept. This will be entered into the grade book as the student's "summary grade" for the term. As a placeholder, we will start with a "preliminary grade" the student selects until the end-of-term conference.

Please know that I realize the important role grades play in college admissions and scholarships, and that not having a frequently updated grade in the gradebook can create anxiety for students. To avoid any surprises, I want to be abundantly clear what a student must do in order to receive an "A" for the class. Please watch this video "[How to Get an A](#)" so to be sure you are putting yourself in a solid position to support the grade you have earned!

### **What parents can do to help**

I encourage you to follow your student's progress on our portfolio platform, Seesaw. Please start by downloading the free Seesaw Family app or access Seesaw from a computer at [app.seesaw.me](https://app.seesaw.me). Seesaw's social media-style stream allows you to see the items your student adds, and listen to/read feedback they've received individually or as a class. You don't need to be an expert to guess whether your student is demonstrating their best skills consistently. You can encourage them to submit work on time so as to benefit from timely feedback, make clear and frequent improvements from one assessment to the next, and consistently produce work exemplary work. Here's where you can sign up:

- 1st Hour: <https://app.seesaw.me/s/489-663-61>
- 4th Hour: <https://app.seesaw.me/s/338-966-91>
- 6th Hour: <https://app.seesaw.me/s/157-404-49>

Please always feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns as we go through this process. My hope is this approach will allow students to have greater awareness and ownership of their learning. They will know what they need to improve and how to improve it.

Sincerely,

Arthur Chiaravalli

P.S. Also, check out some of these resources if you are interested in finding out more about the science, theory, and practice of this approach:

- [How one weird finding changed my perspective on grades](#)
- [Calah Alexander: How giving grades to children inhibits learning \(Aleteia\)](#)
- [Dylan Wiliam: Is the feedback you're giving helping or hindering?](#)
- [Carol Dweck: The power of believing you can improve \(TED Talk\)](#)
- [Daniel Pink: Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose](#)
- [Daniel Pink: The puzzle of motivation \(TED Talk\)](#)
- [Joy Kirr: Feedback in lieu of grading in ELA](#)
- [Dr. Tae: Can skateboarding save our schools? \(TED Talk\)](#)