

# Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

## No Such Thing as “Extra Credit”

“Extra credit” is a practice that has been around almost forever. So, suggesting that it be abandoned is, in many instances, like bringing up politics at a family reunion – it can elicit strong feelings and even heated words. However, it is another one of those practices that can skew a grade to the point of providing misleading information. Consider the following scenario.

*Alice is a good student in most subject areas, but she struggles in science class. This past quarter they had been doing lots of work in the area of energy; they did numerous experiments with light and sound, then moved on to thermal energy. Alice first had difficulty understanding energy in the form of waves, and later was baffled when asked to calculate changes in energy. She was confused even further when it came to distinguishing conduction, convection, and radiation. She did poorly on her assignments and assessments and was upset that her grade for the quarter would be a “D,” so asked the teacher if she could do some extra credit. The teacher agreed, and told her to write a paper – a minimum of five pages, plus bibliography – on a famous scientist. Alice is a good writer, so she turned in a really good paper and earned enough extra points to raise her grade to a “C.” Alice’s parents knew she wasn’t confident about science, so when they saw her report card, they were really pleased to think she had at least an average understanding of the subject area – which, of course, she didn’t.*

The problem with the above scenario is that the “extra credit” was not related to the topics Alice was struggling with, and for which she supposedly was being held accountable. The situation would be different if the teacher had told Alice her grade would go up **if she could demonstrate a higher level of achievement** in what was expected, which was the outcome and components about energy. Had Alice done whatever it took – extra reading, some projects, one-on-one discussions – to finally demonstrate a better understanding of the energy concepts, then by all means she should receive more points. However, these aren’t “extra” credit points – they are simply “credit” points. In some instances points are added to what was earned previously; in many instances, the new points *replace* the original low scores. Either way, Alice is finally getting “credit” for the expected learning, because she has finally demonstrated that learning.

In years past, teachers across the country have awarded students extra credit points not only for an off-topic assignment within the subject area, but often for things in no way related to academics! Teachers have awarded extra points toward a student’s academic grade for such things as cleaning chalkboards, getting their parents to come to Open House, bringing donated items for a food drive, passing out classroom supplies, and so forth. Remember – the purpose of a grade is to *communicate how well a student is performing* according to *curriculum* expectations. Therefore, points used to determine a grade must be based on performance expectations for the curriculum – and nothing else. When a student can demonstrate a higher level of performance (achievement), then points can be awarded accordingly so that students receive proper *credit* – not *extra* credit – for their learning.