

# Alternatives to Zeroes



**In the past, students were given a mark of zero for:**

- Incomplete homework
- Late assignments
- Missing assignments
- Non participation in class activity
- Cheating

**Problems with this Practice:**

- A mark of zero is often an **inadequate reflection** of student learning.
- A zero is **skews the overall average** for the negative (outlier).
- A zero is often given to as a **consequence for learning behaviours**, not a learning outcome, essentially serving as a punishment for infractions. (T. Guskey)
- Although often intended to motivate students, a zero can have the opposite effect on students, instead **causing some student to give up**.
- If a grade or mark is intended to provide information about performance, **a zero offers no feedback or suggestions for improvement**.

**Suggestions for Supporting Our Teachers and Our Learners**

Students certainly should learn to accept responsibility for their actions and should be held accountable for their work. (T. Guskey) But alternatives to a zero mark can increase motivation and encourage students to complete work in a timely manner. In addition, the school is viewed as supporting its learners, rather than punishing. Suggestions for how this could be implemented in your school are provided on Table 1.



<b>Suggestions for Your School</b>	<b>How This Might Look in the Classroom</b>
<b>Make a Plan with the Students</b>	Discuss your concerns with your students. Enlist their help in making a plan for late or incomplete work. Ask: What will happen if ...? What will our policy be?
<b>Time and Support Sessions</b>	Set up classroom sessions or school-wide sessions which are mandatory for students who are late with assignments to give more <i>time</i> for learning, and more student <i>support</i> . These may take place at noon or after school, depending on your own needs. Because these sessions are not based on behaviour, they are a form of support, not punishment. In addition to the general needs, specific subject support could also be given during this time.
<b>Learning Contracts</b>	Develop contracts to offer students and teachers (and even parents) an opportunity to set some specific goals with clearly outlined expectations. Contracts also provide feedback about progress.
<b>Communicate with Parents</b>	Parents, teachers and students are all part of the “learning team” and as such, can be another form of support. Teachers or schools decide at what point parents should be contacted.
<b>Frequent Assessment</b>	Regular assessment of the outcomes and indicators throughout the course can help avoid the “all or nothing” at the end of the term.
<b>Student Meeting</b>	For students who struggle with handing in work on time, a meeting may reveal the reasons for not getting the work done. Your discussion might include other ways of assessing the outcomes.
<b>Planning for Alternative Assessments</b>	In order to provide timely feedback to students, teachers may need to hand back assignments to the general class before receiving all assignments. This can lead to copying and/or cheating. To help offset this problem, teachers need to plan for alternative assessments. If done in consultation with the students who have not handed in the work, discussion might centre on other ways of assessing content/skills. This might also provide an opportunity for planning to help avoid this problem in the future.
<b>The Excuse Book (see next page)</b>	This form allows students to track their own late assignments and make their own plans for handing in the assignment in consultant with the teacher. If the behaviour continues, parents or administration may be contacted for support. (from Lisa Diekert)
<b>Assign an I (incomplete)</b>	For students with reoccurring late or missing assignments, an Incomplete mark may need to be assigned. This clearly communicates that there is not enough evidence at this time to generate a mark for the course. Discuss this with your Administrator before entering an Incomplete mark.



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## The Excuse Book Sample

Please print clearly so your parent/guardian can read your excuse.

Date	Student Name	Assignment	Excuse/Reason	What you plan to do about your missing assignment. (Your Plan)	Handed in?
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*You must either submit the assignment OR write in this book.  
After three entries, I will contact your parent/guardian related to the missing assignments.*

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### Additional Resource Links/Publications

- [Damian Cooper](#)
- [Ken O'Connor](#)
- Thomas Guskey
- [Online Learning Contract Generator/Sample](#)

