As a classroom teacher I really never looked forward to grading my students. The grading process was always a struggle between being fair and realistic or truthful and discouraging. I wanted to be nurturing and supportive of my students’ efforts, however it was painfully clear that many of them were functioning far below grade level.

How can teachers fail students when they are obviously working to do their very best? There-in lies the dilemma; how do we grade our students without causing them to give up? Do we hold them accountable to the same standards as students in general education classes or do we make allowances and provide accommodations because they are in a special education setting? They are not usually in competition with their age peers. So why hold them accountable to the same goals and standards?

We are responsible, according to federal laws, for holding our students accountable to the goals set forth in their individual education plan. It would also be wise to check into the rules and culture of your schools’ grading policy. Guidelines pertaining to grading policy may be available at the district office level as well. However, teachers can make report card time a positive, productive and nurturing experience by involving the students. By asking students questions such as, “What did you find interesting?” and “What did you find too difficult?” or “What activities were enjoyable?” Older students can be asked what they would do differently or in what areas do they need more help? These types of questions are very supportive and provide the teacher with more valuable information about each student. This type of conversation moves the grading process away from competition and comparative evaluation to a formal norm to a more collaborative and inspirational opportunity.

If the student is having difficulty in a specific subject area it is important to identify the causes, provide the necessary modifications, and develop strategies which will remediate and enhance the student’s ability to comprehend the subject or skill and become more successful. Teachers can utilize this time to reevaluate the student’s needs and develop a new plan with specific strategies, objectives and a timeline. This is an opportunity to set priorities and provide incentives for successful learning to occur. If possible, teachers can provide a grade that recognizes accomplishment toward meeting the goals in the IEP. Our goal is to encourage continued effort and success on the part of each student. If the student has failed to meet the standards or the goals, then teachers need to re-evaluate and set more realistic goals or develop different strategies to promote student learning. Learning to persevere and always trying to do one’s best comes from positive learning experiences and supportive comments from those we respect and trust. Failure and negative comments do not produce an “I can do it” attitude. Failure and negative comments often breeds humiliation and usually results in a downward spiral in effort, enthusiasm, and self-esteem. And this result is not what we want for our students.

By caring more, risking more, and setting realistic goals we can make a significant difference in the lives of our students. Providing a variety of educational opportunities to be successful is the first step in offering our students a chance to optimize learning and to develop positive self-esteem for a lifetime of success and happiness.