

Can We Get Beyond Letter Grades?

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Even when school structures and teaching methods have been transformed, letter grades may remain a sacred cow.

Here's a quick quiz I know we can all get an *A* on. What letter grade does Tim deserve if he gets the following scores on three assessments: 82 percent, 85 percent, and 88 percent? If you said Tim deserves a *B*, you might be right in the traditional sense—but what if I told you Tim was reading text and that his teacher was assessing his accuracy? And that any accuracy score below 90 percent indicates this text is not a good match for Tim as a reader (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996)? Is a *B* accurate? Is a letter grade accurate at all on this assessment? During the last 20 years, many schools have created more challenging curriculums and developed practices to differentiate instruction. It's time to bring our reporting and marking systems in line with our updated education practices. This means breaking away from letter grades.

Facing Letter-Grade Attachment

Four years ago, as the new principal of Lindemann Elementary School in the Detroit suburb of Allen Park, Michigan, I led an effort to review the report cards used in the Allen Park public schools. At the time, Allen Park used a variety of report cards for elementary students, including a traditional-style report card dating from the late 1960s that allowed teachers to write a letter grade and a comment code for each subject.

During our deliberations, our team came to believe that a report card should be an opportunity for teachers to both report to parents how much progress their child is making toward mastering specific standards and inform them about the child's skills and weaknesses. We realized that an overarching letter grade for each content area met neither of these two goals.

We devised a comprehensive standards-based report card that showed parents specific targets spelling out the skills on which students were being assessed. We derived these targets from our district's curriculum maps, which were linked to the Michigan Department of Education's curriculum. For example, the study of the state of Michigan is part of the 4th grade curriculum for both Allen Park and the state department of education. Allen Park's 4th grade report card includes the target “demonstrates an understanding of Michigan's past and present.”

Although teachers and parents had few problems converting to a standards-based report card, conflict surfaced around how to mark student achievement on the card. We felt pressure from teachers and parents to leave in place the traditional letter-grade marking system. Parents and teachers viewed letter grades as an intrinsic part of the way in which schools do business, as necessary as a trained teacher and a clearly articulated curriculum. Our team repeatedly heard that students need letter grades to motivate themselves, parents need letter grades to determine how their children are performing, and teachers need

letter grades to clearly articulate each child's level of academic achievement. This process prodded me to reflect on my practices as an educator and my assumptions as a school leader. After attending a professional development event led by Thomas Guskey, reading some of Guskey's writing (2001) and pondering my basic tenets as an educator, I realized that the practice of giving letter grades stands in direct opposition to the goal of informing parents about their child's learning. Letter grades perpetuate four myths regarding education. *Myth 1: Letter grades are mathematically valid representations of student achievement.* I vividly remember my algebra teacher saying, "I don't give grades; I report the grades you earn." But does a grade evolve only from the student's actions? In truth, the final percentage a student earns is the result not only of student effort, but also of numerous instructional decisions the school and teacher have made. The curriculum chosen by the school, the instructional strategies implemented by the teacher, the kinds of assessments used, and even the weight given to each assessment all affect the final score.

Choosing a cutoff score and stating, "Sue will receive a *B* in my class because she averaged 87 percent during the course of her study" is a gross oversimplification of a complex academic process. Boiling it down to a formula and a letter grade implies a false level of certainty and validity.

Myth 2: Letter grades motivate students to do better. Students will value what the people they care about value. If a parent consistently reinforces the value of grades, the child will want to please that parent by getting good grades. But if significant adults instead value "doing your best" or "following the rules," that is what the student will value and strive for. Letter grades are no motivator in themselves.

My own childhood provides a powerful example. In my family, it was one thing to come home with a *C* on a report card, but much worse to come home with a mark indicating a problem in citizenship, such as "Does not follow directions in class." My family emphasized following the rules and being a good citizen.

Myth 3: Letter grades show how a student is doing with reference to normed expectations. In one 5th grade math classroom in my school, there are 18 students. One quarter, 14 students received *As* and four received *Bs*. This might look like grade inflation, but my school has created a culture—through high-quality teaching and strong parent involvement—in which students routinely exceed traditional expectations and state standards. I firmly believe that all the students who got these *As* deserved them. But what useful information could a parent glean from that *A*? Traditional letter grades do not enhance a parent's understanding of a student's achievement or learning, nor do they usually provide insight into the child's true understanding or the degree to which he or she has mastered the curriculum or kept up with peers.

Myth 4: Letter grades are appropriate because most adults got letter grades as children. During Allen Park's report card review process, parents who were against eliminating traditional letter grades argued that "if it was good enough for me—and I turned out fine—then it's good enough for my child."

Many adults learned in childhood mainly through a lecture format, with a teacher imparting information to be absorbed by the student. But there is now a

substantial body of evidence suggesting that lecture is not one of the 10 most effective instructional strategies (Marzano, 2001). Most educators and parents now believe that students learn best by exploring and interacting with a subject as a community of learners. In short, our understanding about learning has evolved over time—as should our grading systems.

Allen Park: The Rest of the Story

Three years ago, all Allen Park elementary schools began to move to a standards-based report card. The new marking system offered teachers an opportunity to denote both the level and rate of students' progress. Standards-based cards were phased in gradually, with 2nd and 3rd grades adopting them the first year, 4th and 1st grades in the following year, and all elementary grades getting on board this past year. At least half of the school districts in Michigan currently use standards-based report cards in elementary school, although our middle and high schools use letter grades almost exclusively.

Unfortunately, the chains of tradition were stronger than reasoned argument. We were unable to completely remove letter grades, and they are still part of Allen Park's 5th grade report cards. We compromised: A student still receives a letter grade for each subject in the curriculum, but that student's progress on each individual standard in that area is noted with a letter code, indicating meeting grade-level expectations (M), steadily progressing toward grade-level expectations (SP), gradually progressing toward grade-level expectations (GP), or Not adequately progressing toward grade-level expectations (N), rather than a letter grade. These cards are so comprehensive that many teachers use them as a guide for their parent-teacher conferences.

Although the revised cards facilitate more meaningful communication to parents, the arrangement still perpetuates the idea that letter grades are a necessity. I believe that educators need to carefully reflect on our values and begin—or continue—to question the wisdom of treating letter grades as indispensable.

References

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