

Designing a "Report Card" That Communicates

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THE TRADITIONAL grade reporting system using A, B, C, D, F has been variously labeled "one of the greatest obstacles to effective education" (6:305) and "the most destructive, demeaning, and pointless thing in American education" (12:49). Yet the system remains, despite some current movements to alternative schemes, the most widely used method of reporting teacher evaluations of students to parents (8:22; 10:72).

Though there are several reasons the five-category system has entrenched itself in our schools (particularly at the secondary level), outstanding among them is the system's extraordinary simplicity. The scheme is easy to use, stores compactly, and, unfortunately, adapts itself to almost all forms of teaching and all subject matter areas. It is this very adaptability that defeats the system (5:158).

In the words of Nolan Estes, Dallas School Superintendent: "When a student comes home with a B, it doesn't really communicate anything to the parent" (2:59).

What, then, are some alternative ways of reporting to parents?

What Are the Alternatives?

The alternatives seem to fall into five broad categories, each containing numerous variations: (a) systems based on the five-category scale—A,B,C,D,F—or modifications of that scale; (b) percentage or numerical ratings, listed, graphed, or charted; (c) checklists of behavioral objectives, character traits, progressive performance steps, or

This author looks at some of the qualities needed in constructing a more effective and supportive "reporting" system.

some other evaluative criteria; (d) written evaluations; and (e) conferences (4:207, 292-307; 5:160-78; 8:21; 11:108-24; 12:49).

Each of these methods or systems for reporting to parents has its own strengths and weaknesses. For instance, systems based on the five-category scheme tend to fall short in terms of defining exactly what is being evaluated (10:77). The pass/fail or credit/no credit modifications may be hard to live with since they force an absolute judgment not necessitated by the five-category system (4:304-306; 11:35). On the other hand, blanket grading—giving everyone in class a B, for example—is an easy system to use, but one devoid of any real meaning (4:307).

Percentage grades *look* accurate, but they fall short because scores are not comparable; teachers simply cannot standardize their tests (11:28). Variations such as graphing and charting run the risk of being unwieldy and hard for parents to understand. Like the report card *Time* magazine referred to as "The Dallas Monster," they may "look more like a page from a company audit" and require a "28-page manual" to decipher them (2:59).

Checklists may be easier for parents to understand, but sometimes they tend to become simplistic and rigid or, equally detri-

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mental to communication, long and pica-
yune. Checklists can also be a problem to
maintain as permanent records.

Some parents favor written evaluations
because they tell them more about their
child's progress or achievements (4:297;
9:36). But written evaluations do have
drawbacks. They are more subjective than

other reporting methods, and not all teach-
ers will take the time necessary to write
meaningful, individualized evaluations
(4:294-95). Written evaluations, too, are
cumbersome to maintain and create extra
work for the record keepers of the school.

The one-to-one parent-teacher confer-
ence is one of the best ways to communicate

(Trial use of this card for the Oliver
School authorized by the Superintendent of
Schools for the year 1919-1920.*)

THE OLIVER SCHOOL
Lawrence, Massachusetts
Report to the Parent

For the period ending.....19....

* Child's Name

I. The Day's Work:

1. Very good work in
2. Good work in
3. Fair work in
4. Poor work in
5. Growing better in
6. Not trying hard enough in

II. The Things That Make a Good Citizen:

1. The school likes for his/her
2. Things that has done or helped to do, in or out of school, which have been good for the School and for the City:
3. His Her teacher and classmates think he she would be a better citizen if he she were

III. Time Lost Since Last Report:

1. Number of days since last report
2. Days Absent
3. Times Tardy
4. Times Dismissed

..... Teacher.

* Reprinted from: Blanche A. Cheney. "The Lawrence Plan for Education in Citizenship: The New Basis for Rating Children." *Journal of Educational Method* 2 (8): 338; April 1923.

A WORD TO PARENTS

This report is sent home every two months, so that fathers and mothers may know how their children are getting along in school. This report tells more than the story of what they are doing with their books. It tells what kind of boys and girls they are. It tells what kind of young citizens they are. It tells the good habits they have, and the good habits they need to get. It tells how faithfully they have stayed on the job during the month. It tells, in a word, what kind of men and women they are growing to be. That they grow to be the best kind of men and women is the most important thing in the world to you and the most important thing in the world to us. That is what parents and schools are for: to bring up boys and girls to be good men and good women. It is a big job: too big for the parent alone and too big for the school alone. We must work together. We are trying to help you, and you must try to help us. Take an interest in your children's school. Talk to them about it. Ask them questions about it. Get them to tell you how they are learning to be good citizens. Read their reports every time they come. Find out just what the teacher means by what she has written in them. If your children are doing well, let them know that you are pleased. If they are not doing as well as you think they can, ask them to try harder for your sake. Come and see us, or ask us to come and see you. There is nothing we are not willing to do. For these children are *our* children—yours and ours *together*. They have the makings in them of fine men and women. It would be a shame to have any of them go wrong because either of us have not done everything in our power to bring them up right. Please sign your name here:

.....(Parent)

clearly about a student, but its greatest limitation is time—when to get together with a working parent; where to find the time to see a parent of every student. Also, this reporting method must inevitably be linked with some other system for the maintenance of records (5:180-84).

The problems encountered in creating a viable means of informing parents about their children's school work are myriad. No system seems to be totally without its problems. It follows, therefore, that a good reporting scheme—one that effectively communicates to parents—must be developed either by blending together existing methods or by inventing a totally new one.

What Is an Effective Report Card?

But what should an effective report card contain? What should it show about the student? About the subject or class?

Here are some suggestions:

1. *The report card should show the basis for evaluation.* The goals or objectives of the teacher and the school should be linked with the reporting instrument. Skills students are expected to develop should be stated. Other criteria used in determining the evaluation or rating (for example, deportment, promptness, effort, attitudes) should be given (1:106; 3:86; 5:158-59; 7:61; 10:77).

2. *The report should show the student's*

1. Donald J. Brown. *Appraisal Procedures in the Secondary Schools.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

2. "The Dallas Monster." *Time* 103: 59; February 18, 1974.

3. Richard M. DeMott and Ronald Fistler. "Reporting Continuous Progress." *Education of the Visually Handicapped* 5: 86-92; October 1973.

4. Howard Kirschenbaum, Sidney B. Simon, and Rodney W. Napier. *Wad-ja-get? The Grading Game in American Education.* New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1971.

5. James Lewis, Jr. *A Contemporary Approach to Nongraded Education.* West Nyack, New York: Parker Publishing Co., 1969.

6. George Mannello. "Grades Must Go!" *Educational Record* 50: 305-308; Summer 1969.

performance. Progress according to ability, quality of performance, and teacher evaluation of the student's effort should be recognized. Positive characteristics and performances need to be included (5: 158-59; 7:61).

3. *The report should be direct and clearly stated.* For effective communication, there should be conformity of terms and symbols, and words open to widely varied interpretations should be avoided. The report format should be designed to facilitate record keeping, avoiding an increased administrative/clerical workload. Most of all, it should be easy for parents to read and understand, not filled with educational jargon that may limit effective communication (5:158-59, 185).

4. *The report should provide options for teacher and class differences.* A teacher should be able to make a written comment if necessary. Differences in curricula for different subjects should be taken into account (7:61).

Across the country, schools are beginning to take a serious look at their evaluation reporting methods. Some are designing and testing new kinds of "report cards." Granted, the road to more effective communication is not an easy one. But it is a road that schools must take if what teachers put on report cards is really to mean something to the parents of their students.

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12. "Whadjaget?" *Time* 100: 49; November 27, 1972. □

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