

The Grading Controversy: How Do You Meet It?

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Education must begin to provide students with a variety of opportunities and to help them realize the impact of being held responsible for their actions. When evaluation becomes an actual part of life's fulfillment, satisfaction, and enrichment, it will emerge without controversy.

EDUCATIONAL controversies may come and go, but student evaluation will stay with us as a burning issue. Report cards are probably the single greatest written communication link between schools and parents. Yet, this same reporting system often creates needless anxiety, shame, or disappointment for many students and parents. Many well-meaning educators and parents have not yet discovered that grades as such do not accurately reflect growth. Others simply refuse to recognize the need for improving our archaic evaluation systems and vehemently resist any form of change.

Conflicting Perceptions

Parents often perceive and use grades as a status symbol or as a basis for comparison. They quickly review the honor roll and may even "ground" their child for failure to achieve that list of distinction. Many

parents are deceived by a belief that grades are a strong motivating factor to learn. This fallacy continues in spite of much evidence that far greater and more beneficial learning takes place through the development of self commitment based upon personal meaning. Regardless of any research which can be quoted about the negative aspects of grades, they are still with us. As one mother stated, "I don't care whether grades are good or bad, at least I can understand them." Her statement can easily be understood if we briefly review society's usual classification systems. In everyday life we tend to rate movies, appliances, and cars. At the same time we grade steel, wood, meat, and eggs. Society identifies with labels, rating scales, and the grading of its products. Educators have allowed and encouraged the use of these concepts even though they are contrary to the very essence of our knowledge of human uniqueness.

Teachers and administrators who are resisting changes in the grading system have very specific reasons for justifying their stand. They consider the time necessary for developing and implementing alternative forms of assessing and reporting grades as a major factor. Historically, the evidence is

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clear that grades came about primarily because educators simply wanted a more efficient reporting procedure, not necessarily because they wanted to help the student.

Today with computerized reporting systems, students are rebelling at this efficient process claiming it is an impersonal, dehumanizing practice. The problem of developing alternative reporting procedures which parents can easily understand always ranks high on the list of teacher concerns. External pressures from any combination of parents, administrators, teachers, and boards of education are usually perceived as insurmountable. Other factors such as loss of classroom control, the motivation issue, and accountability are frequently identified as primary reasons for maintaining grades.

Students are caught in the crossfire of adult emotions and intellectualizing. Too often we overlook their feelings and desires, even though it is they who are most directly affected by the whole grading issue. For students, grades are not really controversial, they are an emotional reality!

A significant number of students view grades as a means to an end, a goal to be achieved. For them, school is conforming to meet the expectations of teachers who continually praise them for their efforts and reward them generously. Many are college bound and are determined to establish a good record. For the academically talented, the grades achieved are immediate reinforcements.

Another group of students perceive grades as highly restrictive. They see them as another one of the factors which prohibit them from exploring personal interest or enrichment topics. As Ann, a bright ninth grade student, informed me, "I really want and need to learn to type but I'm all thumbs and scared to death of timed tests. If I'm lucky, I might get a 'D' and I can't risk anything less than a 'B'." This example has been repeated to me hundreds of times during the past five years.

To compound the problem, junior and senior high schools are continually expanding their course options for students. Allowing for personal choice is a great idea, but stu-

dents in this group find the option-loaded curriculum frustrating. Their desire to explore is great, but the pressures for good grades often smother their innate quest for learning. When parents and teachers proudly proclaim that grades are vital as a motivating force, this is the group that suffers most from that proclamation.

A third segment of the student population finds grades repulsive. For these students, grades are not challenging, they are a direct threat. Our schools are filled with these students who are forced to attend classes and return home at night labeled a failure. The absurdity of this educational practice brings to mind a vivid recollection of a teacher saying to a ninth grade student, "After you hurt inside a little more, you will realize the importance of passing and get angry enough with yourself to do something about it." Students and parents are beginning seriously to resist this kind of professional attitude.

Educational Impact

In spite of the variety of perceptions and debates over the relevance of letter grades, no significant departure from this system has been made. With rare exception, elementary schools still have categories—only with new labels. Some secondary schools have allowed "credit/no credit" and "pass/fail" courses to emerge. This is only tokenism and does not even begin to recognize and to remedy the situation. Teachers and computers continue to find grades efficient as long as schools and universities are able to work wonders with them. For example, grades justify honor awards, financial aid, and college acceptance without anyone really having to know the student. Grades provide such accurate data that schools can determine their senior "rank in class"—even with class enrollments of close to 1,000 students!

Over-zealous educators who feel inspired to "do something about letter grades" often become their own worst enemies by failing to take the school community through the entire developmental process. They provoke controversy. Their eagerness to improve assessment is exceeded only by their insensitivity to the

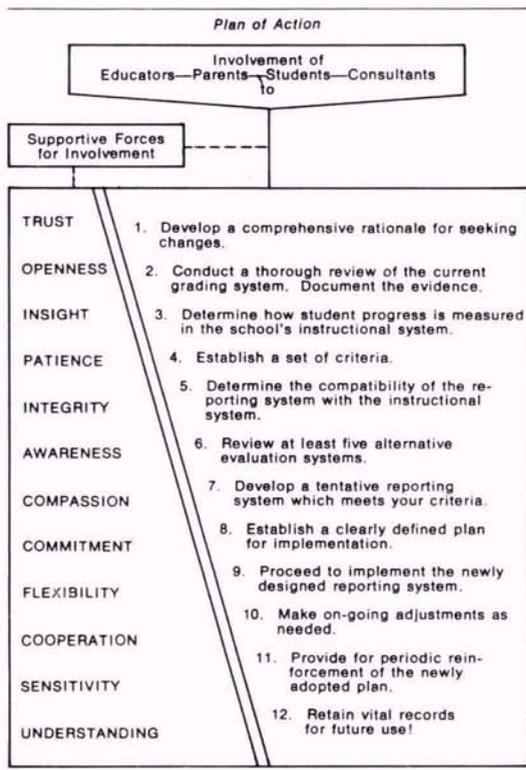


Figure 1. Building a Sound Foundation for Changing the Grading System

feelings and perceptions of parents. There is always an emotional reaction to change. Some welcome it, while others may fight it, encourage it, fear it, or even deny it exists. Educators must know precisely why they are changing their evaluation methods and be sensitive to the emotion which parents attach to them.

Changes Needed To Achieve Goals

Educators need to be concerned with helping students develop in the areas of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. All three areas are lifelong growth continuums which must be applied to the educational goal of serving the needs of mankind. Under this concept, evaluation must be an on-going assessment of growth. Content and process when applied to attitudes, knowledge, and skills have an entirely different assessment connotation.

Has the knowledge been acquired? Has the skill been developed? Is the student's attitude consistent with the aim of education?

Evaluation becomes an acknowledgment of competence as opposed to subjective and irrelevant labels. This educational process emphasizes what an individual can do and not the countless tasks which a student is unable or unwilling to master. It emphasizes a greater need for education to provide students with a variety of opportunities and to help them realize the impact of being held responsible for their actions. The paramount difference is to change assessment from its current stance of judging and labeling human uniqueness to a role of diagnosing, redefining, and reinforcing goals. This transition can occur within a three to five year period if schools plan carefully and prepare for the controversies which are bound to arise.

Coping with Changes in the Grading System

The first step in coping with the controversy of grades is to develop within the staff and community an awareness that evaluation is an ever evolving concept. This allows for creative exploration of improved assessment methods as opposed to a firm entrenchment of defending the status quo. The second step is to develop a course of action. Figure 1 briefly outlines the basic steps which are vital in building a sound foundation for changing the grading system.

The challenge is clear. Evaluation is and should be a part of learning. We have often used it as a tool to coerce, confine, undermine, control, inhibit, or punish. We should use evaluation to assess, acknowledge, compare, decide, encourage, adjust, or define. The grading controversy need not continue. It is time we realize that the issue before us is far greater than mere grades. It is a part of societal attitude toward life. If evaluation becomes an actual part of life's fulfillment, satisfaction, and enrichment, it will emerge without controversy. This can and will occur. Indeed it is already happening. It will take a continued massive effort by dedicated educators to make it a reality for each student. □

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