

# The Case Against Grades

BY ALFIE KOHN

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*"I remember the first time that a grading rubric was attached to a piece of my writing. . . . Suddenly all the joy was taken away. I was writing for a grade—I was no longer exploring for me. I want to get that back. Will I ever get that back?"—Claire, a student*

Enough has been written about academic assessment to fill a library, but when you think about it, the whole enterprise really amounts to a straightforward two-step dance. We need to collect information about how students are doing, then share that information (along with our judgments, perhaps) with the students and their parents. Gather and report—that's pretty much it.

You say the devil is in the details? Maybe so, but I'd argue that too much attention to the particulars of implementation may be distracting us from the bigger picture—or at least from a pair of remarkable conclusions that emerge from the best theory, practice, and research on the subject: Collecting information doesn't

require tests, and sharing that information doesn't require grades. In fact, students would be a lot better off without either of these relics from a less enlightened age.

Why tests are not a particularly useful way to assess student learning, and what thoughtful educators do instead, are questions that must wait. Here, our task is to take a hard look at the second practice, the use of letters or numbers as evaluative summaries of how well students have done.

## The Effects of Grading

Most of the criticisms of grading you'll hear today were laid out forcefully and eloquently from four to eight decades ago, and the early essays make for eye-opening reading. They remind us how long

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## The Case Against Grading

it's been clear there's something wrong with what we're doing as well as how little progress we've made in acting on that realization.

In the 1980s and '90s, educational psychologists systematically studied the effects of grades. As I've reported elsewhere (Kohn, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c), when students from elementary school to college who are led to focus on grades are compared with those who aren't, the results support three robust conclusions:

- Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning. A "grading orientation" and a "learning orientation" have been shown to be inversely related, and every study that has ever investigated the impact on intrinsic motivation of receiving grades has found a negative effect.

- Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task. Impress on students that what they're doing will count toward their grade, and they will likely avoid taking unnecessary intellectual risks. They'll choose a shorter book or a project on a familiar topic to minimize the chance of doing poorly—not because they're "unmotivated" but because they're rational. They're responding to adults who have sent the message that success matters more than learning.

- Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking. They

may skim books for what they'll "need to know." They're less likely to wonder, say, "How can we be sure that's true?" than to ask "Is this going to be on the test?" In one experiment, students told they'd be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved.

Research on the effects of grading has slowed down in the last couple of decades, but studies still reinforce the earlier findings. For example, a grade-oriented environment is associated with increased levels of cheating, grades promote a fear of failure even in high-achieving students, and the elimination of grades (in favor of a pass/fail system) produces substantial benefits with no apparent disadvantages in medical school. More important, no recent research has contradicted the earlier "big three" findings.

### Why Grading Is Inherently Problematic

*A student asked his Zen master how long it would take to reach enlightenment. "Ten years," the master said. But, the student persisted, what if he studied very hard? "Then 20 years," the master responded. Surprised, the student asked how long it would take if he worked very, very hard. "In that case,*

30 years," the master replied. His explanation: "If you have one eye on how close you are to achieving your goal, that leaves only one eye for your task."

To understand why research finds what it does about grades, shift focus from educational measurement techniques to broader psychological and pedagogical questions. The latter illuminate

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misconceived assumptions that underlie the use of grading.

**Motivation:** While it's true that many students, after a few years of traditional schooling, could be described as motivated by grades, what counts is the nature of their motivation. Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, often undermines intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake. Many assessment specialists talk about motivation as though it were a single entity—and their recommended practices just put a finer gloss on rewards and punishments that lead students to chase marks and become less interested in learning itself.

**Achievement:** Two educational psychologists pointed out that "an

overemphasis on assessment can actually undermine the pursuit of excellence." That unsettling conclusion—which holds regardless of the quality of the assessment but is particularly applicable to the use of grades—is based on these researchers' own empirical findings as well as those of many others. In brief: the more students are led to focus on how well they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with *what* they're doing.

All assessment must be done carefully and sparingly lest students become so concerned about their achievement (how good they are at doing something—or, worse, how their performance compares to others') that they're no longer thinking about learning itself. Even a well-meaning teacher may produce students who are so busy monitoring their own reading skills that they're no longer excited by the stories they're reading. Assessment consultants worry that grades may not accurately reflect student performance; educational psychologists worry because grades fix students' attention on their performance.

**Quantification:** When people ask if it isn't important to measure how well students are learning (or teachers are teaching), I invite them to rethink their choice of verb. There is value in assessing the quality of learning and teaching, but that doesn't mean it's always necessary, or even possible,

to turn those things into numbers. Indeed, “measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning” (McNeil, 1986)—a realization that offers a refreshing counterpoint to today’s corporate-style “school reform” and its preoccupation with data.

To talk about what happens in classrooms, let alone in children’s heads, as moving forward or backward in specifiable degrees is not only simplistic because it fails to capture much of what is going on, but also destructive because it may change what is going on for the worse. Once we focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, thinking has been severely compromised. And that is exactly what happens when we try to fit learning into a four- or five- or 100-point scale.

**Curriculum:** “One can have the best assessment imaginable,” Howard Gardner observed, “but unless the accompanying curriculum is of quality, the assessment has no use.” Some people in the field are candid about their relativism, offering to help align your assessment to whatever your goals or curriculum may be. The result is that teachers may become more adept at measuring how well students have mastered a collection of facts and skills whose value is questionable—and never questioned.

Portfolios, for example, can be constructive if they replace grades

rather than being used to yield them. They offer a way to thoughtfully gather a variety of meaningful examples of learning for the students to review. But what’s the point “if instruction is dominated by worksheets so that every portfolio looks the same”? (Neill et al., 1995). Conversely, one sometimes finds a mismatch between thoughtful forms of pedagogy—say, a workshop approach to teaching writing—and a depressingly standardized assessment tool like rubrics.

### Improving Grading: A Fool’s Errand?

*“I had been advocating standards-based grading, an important movement in its own right, but it took a push from some great educators to make me realize that if I wanted to focus my assessment around authentic feedback, I should abandon grades altogether.”*

—New Jersey middle school teacher Jason Bedell

Much of what is prescribed in the name of “assessing for learning” (and “formative assessment”) leaves me uneasy: Recommended practices often seem prefabricated and mechanistic; the imperatives of data collection seem to upstage the children themselves and the goal of helping them become more enthusiastic about learning. Still, if it’s done only occasionally and with humility, I think it’s possible to assess for learning. But *grading*

for learning is, to paraphrase a 1960's-era slogan, rather like bombing for peace.

If I'm right—if all the research to which I've referred is taken seriously—then the absence of grades is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for promoting deep thinking and a desire to engage in it. It's worth lingering on this in light of efforts to sell us formulas to improve grading techniques, none of which address the problems of grading, *per se*.

- It's not enough to replace letters or numbers with labels ("exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," and so on). If you're sorting students into four or five piles, you're still grading them. Rubrics typically include numbers as well as labels, which is one of several reasons they merit skepticism.

- It's not enough to tell students in advance exactly what's expected of them. "When school is seen as a test, rather than an adventure in ideas," teachers may persuade themselves they're being fair "if they specify, in list-like fashion, exactly what must be learned to gain a satisfactory grade . . . [but] such schooling is unfair in the wider sense that it prepares students to pass other people's tests without strengthening their capacity to set their own assignments in collaboration with their fellows" (Nicholls and Hazzard, 1993).

- It's not enough to dissemi-

nate grades more efficiently—for example, by posting them online. In fact, posting grades online is a significant step backward because it enhances the salience of those grades and therefore their destructive effects on learning.

- It's not enough to add narrative reports. "When comments and grades coexist, the comments are written to justify the grade" (Wilson, 2009). Teachers report that students often just turn to the grade and ignore the comment, but when there's only a comment, they read it. Moreover, research suggests that the harmful impact of grades on creativity is no less (and possibly even more) potent when a narrative accompanies them.

- It's not enough to use "standards-based" grading. That phrase may suggest any number of things—for example, more consistency, or a reliance on more elaborate formulas, in determining grades; greater specificity about what each grade signifies; or an increase in the number of tasks or skills that are graded. At best, these prescriptions do nothing to address the fundamental problems with grading. In addition to the simplistic premise that it's always good to have more data, we find a penchant shared by the behaviorists of yesteryear that learning should be broken down into its components, each to be evaluated separately. And more frequent temperature-taking produces the

kind of disproportionate attention to performance (at the expense of learning) that researchers have found so counterproductive.

The term “standards-based” is sometimes intended just to mean that grading is aligned with objectives, in which case our first response should be to inquire into the value of those objectives (as well as the extent to which students were invited to help formulate them). If grades are based on state standards, there’s particular reason to be concerned since those standards are often too specific, age-inappropriate, superficial, and standardized by definition. In my experience, the best teachers tend to be skeptical about aligning their teaching to a list imposed by distant authorities.

Finally, “standards-based” may refer to something similar to criterion-based testing, where the idea is to avoid grading students on a curve. (Even some teachers who don’t do so explicitly nevertheless act as though grades ought to fall into a normal distribution, with only a few students receiving A’s. But this pattern is not a fact of life, nor a sign of “rigor” on the teacher’s part. Rather, it is a symbol of failure to teach well, to test well, and to have any influence at all on the intellectual lives of students [Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986].) This represents an improvement over a system in which the number of top marks is made artificially

scarce and students are set against one another. But here we’ve peeled back the outer skin of the onion (competition) only to reveal more noxious layers beneath: extrinsic motivation, numerical ratings, promotion of achievement at the expense of learning.

If we begin with a desire to assess more often, or produce more

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data, or improve the consistency of grading, certain prescriptions will follow. If, however, our point of departure is mostly about our desire for students to understand ideas from the inside out, or get a kick out of playing with words and numbers, or be in charge of their own learning, then we will likely end up elsewhere. We may come to see grading as a huge smoke-belching machine that constantly requires repairs and new parts, when what we should be doing is pulling the plug.

### **Deleting—or at Least Diluting—Grades**

“Like it or not, grading is here to stay” is a statement no responsible educator would offer as an

excuse for inaction. What matters is whether a given practice is in the best interest of students. If it isn't, our obligation is to work for its elimination and, meanwhile, do what we can to minimize its impact.

Replacing letter and number grades with narrative assessments or conferences—qualitative summaries of student progress offered in writing or as part of a conversation—has already been done successfully in many elementary and middle schools and even in some high schools. It's important not only to realize that such schools exist but to investigate why they've eliminated grades, how they've done so (hint: the process can be gradual), and the benefits.

Naturally, objections will be raised, but once students and their parents have been shown the relevant research, reassured about their concerns, and invited to participate in constructing alternative assessments, the abolition of grades proves not only realistic but an enormous improvement over the status quo.

Graduates of grade-free high schools are accepted by selective private colleges and large public universities—on the basis of narrative reports and detailed descriptions of the curriculum (as well as recommendations, essays, and interviews), which collectively offer a full picture of the applicant.

Moreover, these schools point out that their students are often more motivated and proficient learners, and thus better prepared for college, than their counterparts at traditional schools.

In any case, college admission is no bar to eliminating grades in elementary and middle schools because colleges are largely indifferent to what students have done before high school. That leaves proponents of grades for younger children to fall back on an argument I call "BGUTI": Better Get Used To It.

Individual teachers can help to rescue learning in their classrooms with a two-pronged strategy to "neuter grades." First, they can stop putting letter or number grades on assignments and instead offer only qualitative feedback. Report cards are bad enough, but the destructive effects reported by researchers (on interest in learning, preference for challenge, and quality of thinking) are compounded when students are rated on what they do in school day after day. Teachers can mitigate considerable harm by replacing grades with authentic assessments.

Second, although teachers may be required to submit a final grade, they're not required to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can participate in that process either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by permitting students to

grade themselves. If people find that idea alarming, it's probably because they realize it creates a more democratic classroom, one in which teachers must create a pedagogy and a curriculum that will truly engage students. In fact, negative reactions to this proposal ("It's unrealistic!") point up how grades function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a way to report information about performance.

Jeff Robbins, who has taught 8th-grade science in New Jersey for 15 years, concedes that "life was easier with grades" because they take so much less time. That efficiency came at a huge cost, though: Kids were stressed out and also preferred to avoid intellectual risks.

Initially, Robbins announced that any project or test could be improved and resubmitted for a higher grade. Unfortunately, that failed to address the underlying problem, and he realized he had to stop grading entirely. Now, he offers comments to all of his 125 students "about what they're doing and what they need to improve on" and makes abbreviated notes in his grade book. At the end of the term, he grabs each student for a conversation, asking "what did you learn, how did you learn it. Only at the very end of the conversation [do] I ask what grade will reflect it . . . and we'll collectively arrive at something." Robbins says he

almost always accepts students' suggestions because they typically pick the same grade that he would have.

Jim Drier, an English teacher at Mundelein High School in Illinois was relieved to find that it "really doesn't take that long" to write a brief note on students' assignments—"a reaction to what they did and

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some advice on how they might improve." But he never gives them "a number or grade on anything they do. The things that grades make kids do are heartbreaking for an educator"—arguing with teachers, fighting with parents, cheating, memorizing facts just for a test and then forgetting them.

Drier's final grades are based on students' written self-assessments, which, in turn, are based on their review of items in their portfolios. He meets with about three-quarters of them twice a term to assess their performance and, if necessary, to discuss the grade they've suggested.

A key element of authentic assessment is the opportunity for students to help design the assessment and reflect on its purposes



—individually and as a class. Notice how different this is from the more common variant of self-assessment in which students merely monitor their progress toward the teacher's (or legislature's) goals and in which they must reduce their learning to numerical ratings with grade-like rubrics.

Teachers report a variety of reactions to de-grading, not only from colleagues and administrators but also from students. John Spencer, a middle school teacher, concedes that "many 'high performing' students were angry at first. They saw it as unfair. They viewed school as work and their peers as competitors. . . . Yet, over time they switch and end up learning more once they aren't

feeling the pressure" from grades.

Grades don't prepare children for the "real world"—unless one has in mind a world where interest in learning and quality of thinking are unimportant. Nor are grades a necessary part of schooling anymore than paddling or dictation. Still, it takes courage to do right by kids in an era when the quantitative matters more than the qualitative, when meeting (someone else's) standards counts for more than exploring ideas, and when anything "rigorous" is automatically assumed to be valuable. We have to be willing to challenge the conventional wisdom, which in this case means asking not how to improve grades but how to jettison them once and for all. ■

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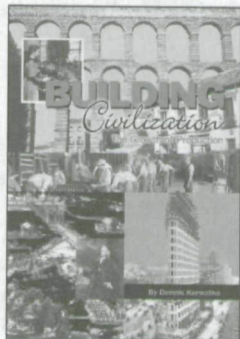
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