

Grading

The issue of issuing grades has always been paradoxical in many ways, even though it is essential to the conducting of the business of schools. For one thing, more of our students need to realize in their early years that grades do count. That D in Latin I freshman year can have an impact on college acceptance in the senior year, at least at the most competitive of colleges who need excuses not to accept students who are perfectly qualified to do the work and be successful. On the other hand, grades, like SAT scores, often have little bearing on success in life. There is an old saying that A students end up becoming teachers or preachers, and B students end up working for the C students. The wisdom in the truism, of course, is that it is the non-scholastic attributes of individuals that often pay the biggest dividends in life: confidence, amiability, sense of humor, perseverance, ability to get along with other people, team-orientation, etc.

Many leading independent schools refuse to rank their students, the somewhat supercilious attitude being that to rank our students would harm those in the bottom half of the class, since our bottom is better, some would argue, than most everyone else's top. (Our version of Lake Wobegon's assertion that all the students are in the top half of the class.) Paradoxically, the very same schools who "refuse to rank" often "weight" grades in honors or AP courses to give relative advantage to those students in terms of GPA: e.g., a B--normally a 3.0--in AP Spanish is reported as a 3.1. ISACS holds that weighting grades is unwise as it "overcompensates" for the rewards that already occur: Teachers often give higher grades already in honors and AP courses and colleges often re-compute grades to give them more weight.

We struggle as teachers with the notion of the "bell curve": Should we in fact have a wide distribution of grades in each class? Can all of our students, on the other hand, be B (above average) or better, by definition? If average grades across all departments remain in the C+ to B- range, should a school take pride in the fact that inflation has not completely undermined the currency of our grades and that grades still mean something? Or is the school (or department) placing its students at a competitive disadvantage, given the currency of the realm is less valuable elsewhere?

While most students at independent schools work hard to achieve respectable grades, respectability, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Often the strongest of students become desperate and dejected whenever a quiz grade, much less a marking period grade, falls below an A: For some students, anything less than an A is an F. Although those high personal standards, of course, result often in success in college and scholarship choices, one wonders as a parent, would one choose academic and college placement success at any cost for one's child, or at some point does the cost become too high?

Of course, the teacher in me wishes we had a few more of the students who worried about the B- and a few less of those who were satisfied with the C-. Even on this score, however, we know that grades are only a poor substitute for the motivators that finally are important: a desire to learn, a need to know, a drive to excel. That these attributes manifest themselves sometimes more frequently on the athletic field or on the stage are telling realities for us in the classroom. Sometimes, we coach better than we teach; sometimes our lessons are dull when compared to the thrill of competition or the exhilaration of performance. But mostly, the girl who will shoot baskets for hours but shirk her history reading or the boy who will practice his lines for the school play until the sun sets but then balk at forty minutes of math drill tell us by actions rather than words that for now, basketball and drama are more fun, more accessible, more engaging than studies. The promise we make to them is that one day, if they keep at it, the reading and the research and the independent thinking about important subjects will be just as engaging or more so than the sports or the drama or the music. This is why we make students study, and why we use grades as the carrot and the stick, hoping that one day the student will have both the skills and the desire to do so on his or her own.

See also: Ranking

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