The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement (**)
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Only extraordinary education is concerned with learning; most is concerned with achieving; and for young kids, these two are very nearly opposite.

I. Introduction

A. Concept some suggest we should figure out what our educational goals are, then check in periodically to see how successfully we have been at meeting them. Assessment thus would be an indispensable servant of learning, critical in the early years today because the quality of the educational experience is what is in the end being assessed.

B. Consider the student who becomes frantic when he gets a 92 instead of his usual 100. We usually see this as a problem with the individual and conclude that such students are just too hard on themselves. But the real problem isn’t grade inflation—it’s grades, which by their very nature undermine learning. The proper occasion for outrage is not that too many students are getting A’s, but that too many students have been led to believe that getting A’s is the point of going to school. Specifically, research indicates that the use of traditional letter or number grades is reliably associated with three core problems:

1. Students feel compelled to perform. Their interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward

2. Students tend to view learning as a chore. When kids are encouraged constantly to think about how well they’re doing in school, the first casualty is their attitude toward learning. They may come to view the tests themselves—the stories and science projects and math problems as means to an end—what matters is the grade, and not much else.

3. Students try to avoid challenging tasks. If the point is to succeed rather than to stretch one’s thinking or discover new ideas, then it is completely logical for a student to want to do whatever is easiest.

II. The Problem of Standards

A. The goal of some students is to acquire new skills, to find out about the world, to understand what they’re doing. When they pick up a book, they’re thinking about what

B. The important point isn’t what level of performance qualifies as failure (a 92 versus a 40, say). It’s the perceived pressure not to fail, which can have a particularly harmful impact on high-achieving and successful students.

C. If we are primarily interested in collecting information that will enhance the quality of learning, then traditional report cards are clearly inferior to more authentic models. Unhappily, assessment is

D. The implications of taking seriously these concerns about grades and tests obviously would be enormous. But even this critique doesn’t get to the bottom of what’s wrong with the current approach to

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