From Degrading to De-Grading
Finally, there is the question of what classroom teachers can do while grades continue to be required. The short answer is to do what they always do: the difficult work of promoting learning, inspiring students, and creating a learning environment that is rich and challenging.

If parents worry that grades are the only window they have into the school, we need to assure them that alternative assessments are available. Grades can’t substitute for reports, portfolios, and other evidence that traditional grading often fails to provide.

Administrators should be prepared to respond to parental concerns, some of them completely reasonable, about the prospect of replacing grades. Administrators should remember that evidence that traditional grading undermines excellence. “Are you just trying to spare the self-esteem of students who can’t make the grade?” asks a recent article in the New York Times. And, if not self-esteem, is there some other purpose? “It’s purely a form of teacher control,” a principal in the article suggests.

Oddly, when educators are shown that it doesn’t have to be this way, some react with suspicion instead of relief. They worry about “parent pitchforks,” and are suspicious of new methods. But, when faced with unalloyed evidence of genuine improvement, most parents respond with enthusiasm.

Here is the good news: college admissions is not as rigid and reactionary as many people think. Here is the better news: even when that process doesn’t seem to have its priorities straight, high schools don’t have to be dragged down to that level. If you have the will to stop this madness, you have the power to stop it.

For centuries, grades have been used to evaluate students. They have been the means by which educators have attempted to measure learning in schools. Grades have been a de facto instrument of control. But even to the extent this instrument works (which is not always), we are obliged to reflect on the negative effects of grades, and to move to replace grades with more informative (and less destructive) systems of assessment.

Grades spoil teachers’ relationships with students. Consider this letter, which could have been written by a teacher in your district:

To maintain that this proves something is wrong with the kids – or that grades are simply “necessary” – suggests a lack of imagination. As a society, we can do better. And we should be able to do better. The question is whether we’re willing to change.

In any case the premise of this argument is erroneous: traditional grades are not mandatory for admission to colleges and universities. (See Sidebar A.) The main objection to alternative assessment is that it cannot substitute for grades. But, as the following section will demonstrate, grades are not essential. Grades are not necessary.

In the past 20 years, researchers have conducted a significant number of studies to determine whether grades influence student performance, achievement, and motivation. They have found that grades do not, in fact, improve student achievement. In fact, the evidence suggests that grades may actually have a negative effect on student performance and motivation.

This finding is particularly significant because it challenges one of the most widely held beliefs about the purpose of grading. Traditionally, grades have been viewed as a means of promoting learning and motivating students. However, recent research has shown that grades actually have a negative effect on student performance and motivation.

Therefore, it seems clear that grades are not necessary for educational purposes. In fact, it seems clear that grades are detrimental to educational outcomes. So why do we still use them?

One reason that we continue to use grades is that they are easy to implement and easy to understand. They provide a simple and convenient way to assess student performance. They also provide a convenient way to compare student performance. However, research has shown that grades are not an effective way to assess student performance. They are not a valid or reliable way to assess student performance.

Grades are also not necessary for administrative purposes. They are not necessary for tracking student progress or for making decisions about promotion or graduation. In fact, recent research has shown that grades are not effective for these purposes either.

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