Grading: The Issue Is Not How but Why (*)
Grading: The Issue and Not Why
By Alfie Kohn

Why are we concerned with evaluating how well students are doing? The question of notice, no answer. As much as it leads us to rethink basic tenets of teaching and learning and to evaluate what students have done in a manner more consistent with our ultimate educational objectives. But set all approaches to the topic result in this sort of thoughtless reflection. In fact, approaches to assessment may be classified according to their depth of analysis of the topic, leading to questions fundamental assumptions about how we grade. Concern about the adequacy of the grading system, that is, the extent to which the current approach is translated into a system that is related to the reality of student learning.

Level 1: These are the most superficial concerns, like those limited to the practical issue of how to grade students' work. Here we find articles and books offering elaborate formulas for scoring assignments, compiling points, and attaching percentages to what students do in order to assign a final grade. (Portfolios, which are used nearly as a means of arriving at a traditional grade, might more accurately be grouped under Level 1.)

Level 2: Here educators call the above profound questions, concerning whether traditional grading really is necessary or useful for assessing students' performance. Alternative assessments, often described as "authentic," belong in this category. The idea here is to provide a richer, deeper description of students' achievement. (Portfolios of students' work are sometimes commended to us in this context, but when a portfolio is used merely as a means of arriving at a traditional grade, it might more accurately be grouped under Level 1.)

Level 3: Rather than grading grades alone and assessments — and challenge the whole enterprise of assessment — and specifically why we have come to do what we do. No matter how elaborate or cleverly designed an assessment strategy may be, the result will not be constructive if our reason for wanting to know how well students are doing is itself objectionable.

One reason for evaluating students is to enable them to sort out what they have learned. It is not only in the context of an educational setting, but also in many other areas of life, that understanding what has been learned and how well it has been learned can be instrumental in determining future actions. The trouble with the implicit assumption that students have a greater degree of "clarity of understanding" is that they don't know enough about themselves to understand the Excellence. (These critical issues don't put it quite this way, of course; they talk about "grade inflation." Interestingly, most studies suggest that student performance does not improve when grades contribute more strongly and represent a larger part of the student's overall academic record. Students who are graded on a curve and who obtain higher grades, as a result, may obtain an overall higher grade, but their performance is not generally characterized by higher levels of performance or better quality of work. These findings are consistent across a variety of subject populations, grades, and tasks, with the most consistent effect occurring in activities that require creativity or higher-order thinking. This effect is produced by the extrinsic motivators known as grades has been documented with students of different ages and from different cultures. Yet the findings are readily criticized by educators. Students have shown that they are more likely to think about what they will get on an assignment, the more well their desire to learn evaporates, and, ironically, the less well they do. Consider these findings:

- In a study that asked students to perform a task that required no creativity, students who knew they would be graded performed worse than students who knew they would not be graded.
- Even in the case of note taking, students were more likely to copy things they had heard than those who were told they would be graded.
- When Japanese students were told that a test would count toward their final grade, only a small percentage of the students — the subject — and less likely to prefer talking difficult questions than those who were told the test was just for monitoring their progress (Haga 1991).

Children told that they would be graded on their solution of anagrams chose easier ones to work on — and seemed to take less pleasure from solving them than children who were not being graded (Harter 1978).

As an article in the Journal of Educational Psychology concluded, "Grades may encourage an emphasis on quantitative aspects of learning, depressive emotion, faster failure of, and undermine interest (Butler and Lauer 1988)."

Grading Rationale III: Feedback

Supportive Assessment

1. Assessment of any kind should not be opposed. Getting children to become proficient at something is the only way they can do anything under their control in the testing world. Teachers should do all in their power to help students forget about them. Here are some practical suggestions for reducing the salience.

- Never give a separate grade for effort. When students seem to be indifferent to what they are being asked to learn, educators sometimes respond with the very strategy that precipitated the problem in the first place.
- Never give a separate grade for effort. For this reason, many of the suggestions that follow may seem counterintuitive at first.