

Getting Rid of Grades: Case Studies

January 2010

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By Alfie Kohn

Given that most schools still send home report cards with letter or number grades, and most teachers still put these letters or numbers on students' individual assignments, you would never guess that most studies of the effects of grades find that they're destructive in multiple ways.

*For nearly a century, in fact, educators have been pointing out that grades don't make sense and aren't necessary to provide feedback or even evaluation. Max Marshall's *Teaching Without Grades* and Howard Kirschenbaum et al.'s *Wad-Ja-Get* have been around for some 40 years – and an impressive batch of journal articles were making the same point well before that. *Making Sense of College Grades*, by Ohmer Milton and his colleagues, came out 25 years ago. All of these sources are still enormously persuasive – and all-too-relevant – today.*

As for the research studies: Collectively, they make it clear that students who are graded tend to differ from those who aren't in three basic ways. They're more likely to lose interest in the learning itself. They're more likely to

*prefer the easiest possible task. And they're more likely to think in a superficial fashion as well as to forget what they were taught. (For summaries of the relevant research and arguments, see the books *Punished by Rewards* and *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, the article "From Degrading to De-Grading," and the lecture DVD "No Grades + No Homework = Better Learning.")*

These three unhappy outcomes (diminished motivation, preference for challenge, and achievement) appear to result from grades, per se. When consultants offer elaborate assessment strategies, their premise is that teachers need only change the way they handle grading, tweaking the methods or the criteria. But this is a fool's errand. Some even insist that new techniques will ensure that we are "grading for learning." To paraphrase a '60s-era slogan, this is rather like bombing for peace.

The question, then, is how we can summon the courage to get rid of letter and number grades, replace them with reports of students' progress that are more informative and less destructive, and help parents and students to recognize the value of doing so.

It's always helpful to know that (and how) others have already done this. At The Berkeley School, for example, principal Janet Stork decided a couple of years ago that she simply couldn't justify giving grades to middle school students. Her first step was to call public and private high schools in the area to make sure her kids wouldn't be penalized for having transcripts devoid of grades. These schools assured her it would not be a problem. Stork then presented that information, with verbatim quotes from admissions directors, to her faculty and board as well as to parents and students – along with a summary of what research shows about the negative effects of grading. Balanced against the powerful reasons to stop giving grades, she argued, there was nothing other than fear or tradition to argue for

continuing to do so. She encountered some resistance from students, who for years had been told, in effect, that the whole point of school is to get the best possible marks – a very different objective from, say, understanding ideas. Stork found that those conversations with students became productive learning experiences in their own right.

After the first year without grades, she reports, more graduating students who were heading to selective private high schools were accepted by their top choices than ever before. When she checked in again with those admissions officers, they told her that her school's narrative reports and accompanying materials offered "a far richer understanding of our students" than a GPA could provide. Stork adds that some of the high school folks told her they wished they, too, could go grade-free but were deterred by "the pressures from colleges." She replied that they had more leverage than they thought, particularly if high schools got together and spoke to college admissions officers just as she had spoken to them. [Sadly, Janet Stork, an uncommonly courageous and erudite educator, died in April 2010 at the age of 55.]

What about schools whose administrators are unwilling to do what The Berkeley School did? Teachers have the power to neutralize much of the destructive impact of grades by making them as invisible as possible for as long as possible. This can be done, first, by never putting a letter or number on any individual assignment (only a comment, when time permits), and second, by allowing students to decide on – or at least participate in deciding on – the final course grade.

David Noble, a college instructor, argues that teachers may dismiss these options, finding it easier to rationalize their traditional grade-oriented teaching by pointing out that they're required to give grades, rather than investigating ways to minimize the harm that grades do within their classrooms. Grades are actually convenient for teachers, he

argues in this article, a fact he had to acknowledge before deciding to stop using grades in his own classroom.

The ability for forward-thinking teachers to make a difference even in backward-thinking schools isn't limited to those who work in universities. After a year of experimentation that he describes as "liberating," Jim Drier, an English teacher at Mundelein High School in Illinois, is now teaching all of his classes, including an AP class, without any grades. The reaction from those around him has been varied: it was "an adjustment" for the students (particularly those in the AP class), his principal was "very enthusiastic," and his department chair was "tepid at best." Drier sent a letter home to parents explaining exactly what he was doing and why. Rather than offering students comments and grades on their papers – which a fascinating study by Ruth Butler (offered as "Example 2" in this article) has shown to have no positive effect – he offers comments instead of grades, and the result has been "meaningful, rich conversations." At the end of the term, he meets with each student to determine what grade he should turn in after they review the coursework together.

"Only a few of my colleagues know about what I do," he says. "Our departmental meetings are focused on Power Standards, Shared Curriculum, Common Assessments, improving test scores, and other stuff that makes me sad to be an educator. Those who know what I'm doing are either skeptical or envious." Drier says his next challenge is to build on his success at creating classes that are about learning by securing permission to eliminate the final course grade as well – either by replacing it with an end-of-term narrative or offering the course on a pass/fail basis.

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