

Making the Grade: When Do Kids Deserve A's?

Across the country, schools and parents are engaged in a great debate: Should kids get A's for doing their homework, being on time and all-around good behavior? Or should top marks go only to students who master the material?

By Peg Tyre

When Vicki Madden of New York City saw her son Sam's fifth-grade report card, she was dismayed—and more than a little confused. Last year Sam had received 3's and 4's (on a scale of 1 to 4) in social studies, which was one of his favorite classes. But this time, despite getting 3's in the subcategories for knowledge and analytic skills, Sam's overall grade was a 1. "I asked myself how he could master the material and still fail," says Vicki, 51, a social studies teacher at a school for 6th- to 12th-graders. "It didn't make sense."

After talking with Sam, who was equally perplexed, Vicki arranged a meeting with his teacher, who explained that he was doing fine on tests, but performing poorly when it came to completing take-home assignments. "She made it clear she was grading him for his work habits—not on what he knew about the subject," says Vicki. She and husband Jim, 48, a painter, started planning how to help Sam turn things around. A weekly homework checklist—what was assigned, what was completed and when—was e-mailed back and forth between the Maddens and Sam's teacher. Vicki and Jim agreed to monitor their son more closely, and question him if something was turned in late or incomplete—or not at all.



Illustration by William Duke

Their efforts paid off: On his next report card, Sam's overall social studies grade was a 3. "It was a huge relief," says Vicki. Still, she wishes that his school's grading system were different. "Teachers have so many students and so little time to communicate. It would be better if report cards were more direct and clear about kids' academic progress," she says. "The way it is now is a mystery, and it took digging and valuable time for us to identify Sam's problem and fix it."

Around the country, parents of elementary, middle and high school students are going through a similar guessing game. Sometimes kids get poor marks because they simply aren't at the level they should be. But just as often, who gets an A, or an F, has pretty much been left to the discretion of the classroom teacher. It may come as a surprise, but few schools keep track of how instructors hand out grades or have tried to develop a standardized approach.

That may soon be changing. As states and school districts come under growing pressure from the federal government to provide detailed evidence on what kids are learning, how much and how quickly, they're also rethinking the way they assess students.

In recent years administrators and educators in New York, Maryland, Kentucky, Minnesota, California, Texas and Florida have implemented new formulas. According to education researchers, many more districts nationwide are launching grade-reform programs in middle and high schools. "We've been studying and thinking and talking—on school boards, in our classrooms and in our community—about these key questions," says Anita Davis, assistant superintendent of the Oldham County school district outside Louisville, Kentucky. "Who deserves high marks? What standards are we judging kids on? Most important, what goal are we trying to move students toward?"

Flawed Logic

Just what makes an A student? The answer has changed over time. Historically, American schools were charged with creating citizens who could reason, read and do arithmetic well enough to hold a job and to function responsibly in a democratic society. In the last 20 years, though, educators have sought to measure achievement as well as nonacademic factors like attitude, responsibility, respect and work habits—while maintaining a tradition that allows teachers to assign only a single mark per subject. That has given rise to what Thomas Guskey, Ph.D., a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky, calls "the hodgepodge grade." At present, most teachers hand out marks based on test performance and, at least in part, on homework assignments. But in many classes, other factors come into play—attendance, extra-credit projects, whether a student brings sharpened pencils to class or remembers to get permission slips signed—and the exact formula is left up to individual instructors. "Hodgepodge grades combine so many diverse elements of performance," says Guskey. "Problem is, they make it impossible to determine how well a student is learning the course material."



Illustration by William Duke

They can also lead to rampant grade inflation. Earning top marks for being an eager beaver can seem harmless in early elementary school, but middle and high school students getting B's for C-minus work often hit rough waters once they enter college. "They play by the rules, move ahead each year and eventually graduate, only to find they're not prepared to do freshman-level work," says Barnak Nassirian, spokesman for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. According to ACT, which administers standardized college admissions tests, only 25% of high schoolers scored well enough to achieve a B in college in math, science, reading and English. Currently, nearly one in three college students require remedial instruction to relearn what they should have mastered in high school. "Hodgepodge grading becomes a devastating and potentially costly problem for college freshmen," says Nassirian.

Equally tragic, the inverse is also true. Smart kids who are chronically disorganized, don't participate in class or hand in homework late—but who actually are learning a great deal—are given poor grades. Over time, their view of themselves begins to dim, and they shut the door to higher education by not applying for college. "They don't think it's for them," says Nassirian. "That's because their report cards have told them they're not college material."

Changing Course

In an effort to bring report cards into line with the new goals of education—identifying which kids are learning, and how much—many schools are switching to standards-based or mastery grading. All states now mandate that schools teach certain curriculums—and 45 have begun implementing a national list of education standards known as Common Core. "Schools are realizing if you don't have standards-based grading, you can't measure—or communicate—how well students are learning the material, as opposed to merely being exposed to it," says Ken O'Connor, author of *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* (Allyn & Bacon). Most of the new programs work this way: Homework doesn't count toward the main "knowledge" grade, which is determined primarily by scores on end-of-unit tests, and a separate mark is given for work habits and more subjective measures like attitude, effort and citizenship. The key, says Guskey, is to separate the product (what kids learn) from the process (their attitude and ability to function smoothly in the classroom). Either of those skill sets might require improvement, but teachers, parents and students can zero in on what needs work only if the two are evaluated separately.

Switching to the mastery method, though, can be trying. In a 2010 survey of six school districts by education researchers at the University of Kentucky, teachers reported that it demands more focus and effort. The main grade is not based on "impressions" teachers have of students but must be grounded in test data and carefully calculated. After a school district in Potsdam, New York, changed its formula to one under which homework counts for only 10% of grades, 175 parents and community members signed a petition in protest, saying the new system encouraged laziness. In the real world, they argued, effort counts.

When Kentucky's Oldham County school district started standards-based grading, parents were concerned when they saw their kids' marks drop. And some students who were heavily involved in athletic programs found they had to shift tactics to keep their grades up so they would remain eligible to play sports. In the past, they might have simply handed in an extra-credit assignment to buoy a flagging grade, but under the new system they had to buckle down and study in order to do well on classroom exams.

Fortunately, though, most schools with standards-based grading allow students to retake tests. The point is to master the material, and not necessarily on the first try. "We heard from parents who didn't think it was fair when their kid got an A right off the bat while a neighbor's kid got one after retaking an exam," says Anita Davis. "We realize that all children do not learn at the same rate. What we do expect—and insist on—is that they all learn."

Moving Forward

Districts that have adopted mastery grading say it is changing the way teachers and parents talk about students—for the better. David Krenz, the school superintendent in Austin, Minnesota, which rolled out the system a few years ago, said conversations can now focus on what students need to learn. "Before we started this, a teacher might complain to parents that their child slumps in the back of the classroom and never brings a pencil," says Krenz. "Now the discussion is about the fact that she doesn't know how to calculate slope, and parents, teachers and administrators can put their heads together to figure out how to help."

A standards-based system also allows teachers to spot hidden talents that often go undiscovered, especially among kids who are unwilling or unable to fit into school culture and are bogged down by behavioral issues. "Before we switched to mastery grading, you could be a really smart kid who received a C because you had unexcused absences, or maybe an F because you were caught cheating," says Jeffrey Erickson, assistant principal at Minnetonka High School in suburban Minneapolis. These days, grades for the district's 4,000 middle- and high-schoolers are largely based on periodic assessments (there are four during a nine-week course). Quizzes and homework count for no more than 15%, and skipping a class or nonacademic factors like attitude and participation have no impact on report cards at all. But far from excusing bad habits, officials record every instance and respond accordingly. Flub a test? Teachers contact parents at home. Fail to turn in a take-home assignment? Students make it up by attending classes before or after school, during lunch or over spring break. Skip a class? Your B may remain intact, but an administrator will contact parents within 36 hours and impose immediate consequences.

Most controversially, grades are not affected even if a student is caught cheating on an exam. Instead, parents are called in for a conference and the student retakes the test—several times, if need be—until he passes. "The lesson we drive home is this: 'You cheated. That's wrong. And we are going to help you understand that it's wrong and get to the root cause of why it happened,'" says Erickson. The result, he adds, is that students rarely cheat twice.

The first year after Minnetonka implemented mastery grading, students got 7% fewer A's—what Erickson calls "a market correction." Since then, marks have been on an upward climb. And there are other signs that kids

are learning more. In the last five years, ACT subject test scores at Minnetonka have risen, as has the number of kids who are named National Merit Scholars. The percentage of those who pursue the rigorous International Baccalaureate degree is also increasing. And underachievers are reaping benefits as well. In 2009, 147 students at Minnetonka High received F's; two years later, the number was 54. The program has become a model—nearly every week, school administrators from other districts and states call to find out how they did it. "I think we are really grading kids based on what they know, not on how well they 'do school,'" says Erickson. And that, he says, benefits everyone.

Three Steps to Better Grades

Cal Newport, author of *How to Be a High School Superstar* (Three Rivers Press) and founder of the popular advice blog Study Hacks, offers these tips for kids:

1. **Disconnect.** Seriously, disconnect. Unplug the cable that connects your computer to your modem, wrap it around your cell phone, and give this bundle to your mom, telling her how long you will be studying and when she can hand it back to you. Students hate his advice, but it absolutely works. Once you get used to working without distractions, two wonderful things happen: Your work gets much better and takes about half the time.
2. **Follow the fortnight rule.** Put a calendar in a public place in your house and write on it all your deadlines, tests and due dates. Every morning, check what's on for the current day. Then—and this is the important part—look two weeks ahead. If anything is scheduled, make a day-by-day plan for it and mark the steps on the calendar. This is a smart way to spread out your workload and tackle it more efficiently.
3. **Never highlight.** The most efficient students all study the same way: They try to explain concepts out loud in complete sentences—without looking at notes—as if lecturing a class. If you can do this, you're done reviewing. This is much harder than what most kids do, which is highlight textbooks and reread their notes silently again and again, but it leads to better comprehension and requires much less time.

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