

Why Grades Should Reflect Mastery Not Speed 6-10-2013

By Ryan McLane

I am the principal in a grades 7-8 school, perhaps the last venue where we try to give kids second, and sometimes third, chances. This happens mostly with discipline, but also with academics, because this is the last time when a kid's grades do not really matter. What I mean by this is that I am unaware of any college or employer that has ever requested a transcript from a student's junior high school.

My teachers and I are currently having discussions about grading practices, standards-based grading, and everything in between. I do not know that we will ever adopt a truly standards-based grading system, but I believe we are on our way to making our grading system more meaningful.

The first thing we attempted to clarify was what exactly is a grade? If I were to look in my grade book and see that Johnny has a B, what picture does that actually paint? That B *should* tell me that Johnny is pretty proficient. He obviously has some flaws, but I would venture to say he is fairly well-versed in the subject at hand.

The question is, however, what actually went into that B? Unfortunately, a teacher's grade book is one of life's greatest mysteries. Did Johnny do well on tests, but fail to turn in some homework assignments, thus dropping him to a B? Possibly worse, did he do poorly on his tests, but those deficiencies were masked by Johnny's reliable turning-in of homework or participation in class? Perhaps worse yet, did Johnny's grade increase because he brought in a box of tissues or earned some other type of extra credit? I firmly believe the problems of the American education system are not the result of years of poor teaching practices. They are the result of years of poor grading practices.



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Now I am not looking to debate the relevance of homework. There are experts out there who can cite research and data to both support and refute the importance of homework, and I have no desire to wade into that discussion. It is also not my intention to debate the merits of high-stakes testing. What I hope to bring to light is what a grade really is.

Ideally, Johnny's B should tell me that Johnny has a good handle on things and will likely do well on any standardized test in that subject. Realistically, I have no idea what Johnny's B means. To fix that problem, I suggest we make sure Johnny's grade reflects what he knows and is not influenced by factors such as discipline or responsibility. Those should be separated.

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I believe it is our responsibility to make sure all students are learning the content and skills that are required of them. I am a big believer in reteaching and reassessing. It is more important that the child *learns* the material than *when* the child learns the material. If a child takes an assessment (I dislike the word "test") and fails because he or she does not know the topic, that child receives a low grade. So far, that is fair. However, simply putting that grade in the grade book and moving on is the exact reason why public schools are in the position they are in today. This process begins early in a child's education when a child never learns the necessary skills, and then continues to fall further and further behind. It would be my hope that a struggling student receives

additional instruction and is reassessed and that his or her grade is updated to reflect the new knowledge gained.

At my school, many teachers will have a brief discussion with students before or after class to identify a problem, and teachers will give suggestions on looking at the content from a different angle. Sometimes a student will come to school 10 minutes early for the reteaching portion of his or her day, and then the student and teacher will work out a convenient time to reassess what's been learned (or not learned). We have built two daily intervention periods into the school day (around lunch time) for all students to assist in this endeavor. But it still brings us back to the original debate of grading based on what's been learned versus *when* it was learned.

When I share this view with other educators, the No. 1 response I get is that it is not fair to the kids who got it the first time to allow kids to be reassessed.

Really? I missed the part in education school where they taught us that a grade's primary purpose was to compare and rank students. It was my understanding that a grade is a tool that tells us about an individual's level of mastery. If that is the case, then it is unfair if we do not reassess that individual.



The second-most-common response, and one gaining some momentum lately, is that by giving students extra supports, we are not preparing them for college because there will be no opportunities for a redo there. That is probably correct, but what is more important for us to teach our students: deadlines or the actual skills they will need to be successful? I argue that it is the latter. I understand that deadlines and a sense of responsibility are important skills to learn, but not at the expense of learning the primary skill that was at the heart of the assignment, project, or assessment in the first place.

So how do we fix the grading system? If we are going to continue to use the traditional 100-point grading model, then we need to make grades more meaningful and more

reflective of what students have mastered, not how compliant they have been. We need to get to the point of looking at a student's grade and knowing exactly what it means. We can do that by basing students' grades on their levels of mastery. If we can identify the students who need help simply by looking at our grade book, we will be able help those students rather than just passing them along. I am not a proponent of just passing them along. I am a proponent of fixing the problem.

I have two daughters, and they both enjoy playing golf. It would be nice if they made it to the LPGA Tour (I'm really not *that* dad, just trying to prove a point). But it is more important for them to learn the basic skills than it would be to learn those skills on the lightning-quick greens of Augusta. So I choose to take them out to the local public course. My detractors might say: "Well the greens on the LGPA Tour are not that slow. You are not preparing them to be successful." I think most people would look at that viewpoint and find the logic flawed. I wish more people saw it that way in education.

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