

What's In a Grade?

Forward-thinking teachers, school administrators, and policy makers rarely achieve legitimate consensus on big issues in education. They stake claims on all sides of critical questions facing schools across the country. From the length of school days to which subjects are most important to the best way to prepare students for the modern workplace, competing experts present theories, statistical data, offer first-person testimony, and write persuasive reports to advocate their various points of view. They present reams of evidence to school boards and government officials to lobby for the allocation of tax dollars support to their priorities. Everyone wants to help students get what they need to succeed in life. Everyone sincerely believes in the validity of their claims. Everyone means well. This presents a conundrum: when decision-makers consider all the facts and perspectives before them, it seems tough to discern right from wrong, good from better, better from best, and above all else, it seems impossible to determine what will work from what won't.

There is, however, one area where virtually all competing perspectives dovetail into what appears – for lack of a better term – to be broad agreement: traditional letter grades are on their way out the schoolhouse door.

This begs the question: if the traditional A-F letter grade system is a relic of the 20th century, then what will replace it?

The answer: [competency-based education](#).

We'll expand on what that means in a moment. First, we'll give a quick summary on why competency-based education is ascendant, and letter grades are fading.

The Assessment Problem

At first blush, alternative approaches to education seem attractive to almost everyone. Student-directed learning? Popular, logical, and proven effective. Project-based learning? Popular, logical, and proven-effective. Vocational education designed to prepare students for the 21st century workforce? Popular, logical, proven effective, and supported by the business community. All these methods appear positive and practical. Parents like their personalized elements, teachers like the level of engagement they engender in even the most resistant students, and employers like the idea they can hire motivated eighteen-year olds with job-ready skills ready to hit the ground running and infuse fresh energy into the workplace.

So, what's the catch?

Assessment.

The traditional assessment cycle goes like this: teachers present material. Students work on class assignments, do homework, take a quiz or two, then take tests at the end of a chapter, halfway through a semester, and at the end of a semester. Then, every year – depending on the district – they take standardized tests. The grades on these tests are final: with some variation in terminology, students are placed somewhere on a scale of *Excellent* to *Failing*. Their grades dictate what happens next. They move on, they repeat, or they remediate. Scores define the course of their academic careers.

New approaches to education eschew this traditional assessment system for the following reasons:

- It doesn't assess mastery over a subject, only the ability to memorize the information necessary to pass a test
- It doesn't assess the communication and interpersonal skills necessary to succeed in the workplace.
- It doesn't assess practical application of classroom knowledge
- It fosters unhealthy obsession with letter grades while de-emphasizes real understanding of subject material
- It encourages students to take shortcuts to get high marks
- It creates an atmosphere of competitive judgment that can hinder an open and inquisitive learning environment

Those are just a few. Seasoned educators can go on all day about the limits of this model. Which makes for a compelling reason to look for a new assessment model – especially when we consider the current A-F model was [first conceived in 1877 at Harvard University](#) and implemented at Mount Holyoke University in 1897.

Our grading system – as the kids would say – is not only *totally last century*, it's *totally 19th century*. Not to mention it's steeped in Ivy League elitism – but that's another subject for another article.

What's the Answer?

Most of us agree the system needs an overhaul. We get the new approaches seem to make more sense than the old approaches. But most of us who grew up with the old ways scratch our heads and wonder about things like this:

When a group of students presents a final project on the frog population in the stream running behind the middle school, how do you grade that? Sure, they're doing biology, but can they write out the Krebs Cycle from memory like everyone had to thirty years ago?

When a student spends half their junior year of high school working for a small business that produces solar panels, how do you grade that? Sure, they're studying engineering and physics, but can they pass an AP physics exam?

When a student or student group builds a website from the code all the way up to the graphic interface, how do you grade that? Sure, they're studying computer science, graphic design, and copy-writing. But how will that help them get a good grade on the SAT?

The problem is not them. It's us: we have to change the way we think about education in general, and grading in particular. Quoted in a [recent article](#) in the online magazine Edutopia, Headmaster Scott Looney of the Hawken School in Cleveland, Ohio, elucidates the reason we need to shift our thinking in a new direction – one that goes toward students getting muddy in streams and away from counting hours in desks:

“The grading system right now is demoralizing and is designed to produce winners and losers. The purpose of education is not to sort kids – it's to grow kids. Teachers need to coach and mentor, but with

grades, teachers turn into judges. I think we can show the unique abilities of kids without stratifying them.”

[In a report](#) published by the National Education Association (NEA), pre-eminent educator Alfie Kohn further describes the need for progressive reform of our grading system:

“The research quite clearly shows that kids who are graded – and have been encouraged to try to improve their grades – tend to lose interest in the learning itself. That’s why the best teachers and schools replace grades (and grade-like reports) with narrative reports – qualitative accounts of student performance – or, better yet, conferences with students and parents.”

Competency-Based Education

The good news is that cutting-edge educators have a solid blueprint for what competency-based education should look like. And they didn’t start yesterday: they’ve been at it for close to a decade. In 2011, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning hosted a [Competency-based Education Summit](#), where participants [outlined a solid definition of competency-based assessment](#):

1. Students must advance based on mastery.
2. Competency must include explicit, measurable, transferable learning goals that empowers students.
3. Assessment must be meaningful and create a positive learning experience for students.
4. Students must receive differentiated instruction based on individual needs.
5. Learning outcomes include application and creation of knowledge alongside development of important skills and dispositions.

The movement has taken hold across the country. As of Spring, 2017, the following states have enacted legislation that prioritizes competency-based education:

- Michigan
- Nevada
- South Carolina
- Utah
- Florida
- Illinois
- Utah
- Idaho
- Iowa
- Maine
- Ohio

In addition, school boards in the following states have implemented plans to adopt competency-based grading and learning systems:

- Connecticut
- Vermont
- Oregon
- New Hampshire
- Rhode Island

Progress is never simple, though. Scott Looney, the Cleveland-area Headmaster mentioned above, recognized a possible glitch in the new movement: when high schools move away from GPAs and letter grades and present transcripts in a new format, this may affect how college admissions officers read and form yes/no, accept/don't accept judgments on applicants. To address these issues, he formed the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC). The group now includes 157 schools, ranging from well-established New England prep schools and new-mold online learning academies. Their initial goal was to convince colleges and universities to accept these new-look transcripts, and not penalize students who apply to college without a standard looking GPA-based record.

It worked.

With the help of the [Great Schools Partnership](#), the MTC got buy-in on competency-based transcripts from over 70 major colleges and universities in New England alone. For a complete list of these schools, [read this report](#) published by the New England Secondary School Consortium. This is what parents and students want to hear: it means once students leave a high school steeped in competency-based education, their experience will transfer directly to college, and they won't have to play catch-up their entire freshman year.

The Future of Education

Education in the United States appears to be turning a corner. Though we're still stuck in a cycle of standardized testing that drives public education policy, we're coming to realize there's more to learning than grades, and more important criteria than instructional time to consider when promoting a student from one grade to the next. A system based on competence and mastery will ensure students don't simply slide by doing the bare minimum to get a passing grade. They'll be required to demonstrate practical skills and understanding. They'll be required to learn collaborative communication skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century workplace. And if we're lucky, the powers that be will also read articles like [The Missing Piece: Emotional Literacy in Education](#) and work to design a comprehensive system that serves the whole student and creates a nation of lifelong learners excited about education from their first day of kindergarten to their last day of high school, college, graduate school, and beyond.