



Schneider, J., & Hutt, E. (2023). *Off the mark: How grades, ratings, and rankings undermine learning (but don't have to)*. Harvard University Press.

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In *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don't Have To)*, authors Schneider and Hutt delineate obstacles facing the American education system. Specifically, they highlight how grades and assessments have made learning a secondary goal to achieving a letter grade. The education system fails to reward a deep love of learning, and assessments often do not reflect a student's true understanding. Written for a wide audience including parents, policymakers, and educators, this book aims to show the immediate need for education reform to support student learning and points out the benefits and pitfalls of modern grading. As Schneider and Hutt acknowledge, there is a long road ahead to “fix” the education system and emphasize learning over grades.



The authors maintain that grades do not communicate the extent of student knowledge. Instead, they promote “gaming” in the education system. Grades are treated like a currency that can be traded for future opportunities, such as college entrance or good jobs. The emphasis on achieving good grades to pursue future opportunities has taken the focus of assessment away from documenting actual learning. Students lose focus on learning and translating those learning into their everyday lives because learning is not what is rewarded. This is reflected every time a student asks, “Is this going to be on the test?” The result is that grades can undercut motivation to learn. Students achieving high grades think to themselves “I don’t need to learn more since I’m doing so well.” Students pulling bad grades might feel demoralized and think “Why even try if my grades are so low?”

Standardized assessments such as the SAT and ACT distort student learning and—like course grades—have a profound impact that can shape the trajectory of a student’s entire life. If a student struggles one year and then conquers a subject the

following year, their GPA is still penalized for the faulty grade. Grade and assessment permanence fail to reflect student knowledge and only show a snapshot of where students are at a particular point in time. The incisive question is, “Why do we continue to penalize students years later for a subject they may have since mastered?” It is as though a grade is a mark that can never be erased.

Another issue with grading and assessments is that they favor a certain type of student over others. Not all schools and students are created equal, obviously. Students from poor backgrounds are more likely to grow up with less emphasis on good grades, while middle-class students are more likely to grow up in a culture fostering good grades. The modern grading system widens the opportunity gap between social classes. Importantly, for all these problems, the authors do not suggest rejecting grades entirely. Rather, the question is, “How can we emphasize learning, reduce their permanence, and still communicate student strengths and weaknesses?” To answer this question, the authors analyze the goals of assessment. According to the book, these are motivation, communicating short and long-haul messages, and school synchronization.

The largest difficulty with trying new grading systems is that they are not standardized. How can a student in a school that does pass/fail, or does prose reports on student success, apply to colleges that are accustomed to receiving letter grades and GPAs as representations of student achievement? Transcripts are so deeply entrenched into the education system that students without them will be put at a distinct disadvantage. A student without a transcript cannot apply to graduate school, or law school, or be monitored for good standing at their current school. The authors suggest the use of “digital portfolios” to deal with the shortcomings of grade transcripts. Digital portfolios will allow teachers to change student records which can place less emphasis on achieving a specific grade so students can focus on learning. These portfolios may take teachers more time than simple letter grades but will also allow them to explain students' depth of knowledge and attainments. As useful as such a system may be, the authors admit it would be impossible to implement without a government mandate.

Educators will find compelling explanations of the faults in the contemporary grading system and ideas for mitigating the damage of the current system. Widespread implementation of a system of digital portfolios is an ambitious but unrealistic short-term goal.

About the Reviewer

Jacob Hoekstra is a PhD student in entrepreneurship at Baylor University. With a deep love for educating others, he aspires to mentor and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurial thinkers. Originally from Minnesota, he enjoys creative pursuits like writing novels, poetry, and researching new teaching methods. He also spends time volunteering at food shelves and soup kitchens in his spare time. Jacob's research examines innovative teaching



methods and how they can foster creativity and resilience in entrepreneurial students, as well as the impact of local government policy on new firms. Jacob successfully started several small businesses and gained a background in healthcare supply chain management before discovering his passion for teaching. His curiosity and dedication extend beyond his research, as he is committed to creating meaningful experiences in the classroom and beyond for his students. Jacob's unique combination of industry experience, entrepreneurial ventures, and creative interests positions him to make a lasting impact on the academic and entrepreneurial communities he serves.



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