

**ORAL CONCOURS 2013
ANGLAIS - LVII****When 'Grading' Is Degrading**

[...] For the past three decades, one administration after another has sought to fix America's troubled schools by making them compete with one another. Mr. Obama has put up billions of dollars for his Race to the Top program, a federal sweepstakes where state educational systems are judged head-to-head largely on the basis of test scores. Even here in Texas, nobody's model for educational excellence, the state has long used complex algorithms to assign grades of Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable or Unacceptable to its schools.

So far, such competition has achieved little more than re-segregation, long charter school waiting lists and the same anemic international rankings in science, math and literacy we've had for years.

And yet now, policy makers in both parties propose ratcheting it up further — this time, by "grading" teachers as well.

It's a mistake. In the year I spent reporting on John H. Reagan High School in Austin, I came to understand the dangers of judging teachers primarily on standardized test scores. Raw numbers don't begin to capture what happens in the classroom. And when we reward and punish teachers based on such artificial measures, there is too often an unintended consequence for our kids.

I went to lunch recently with a fine history teacher, Derrick Davis, who is better known in my neighborhood as the basketball coach at Reagan High. He has a particularly wide vantage on the decline of Reagan High, which opened in the 1960s as the pride of the city, complete with consecutive state football championships, national academic recognition and a choir that toured Europe.

When he graduated in 1990, the yearbook still showed a significant number of white faces mixed in with larger black and smaller Hispanic populations. Parents could see from the annual state report that 82.4 percent of 11th graders passed all the standardized tests, just a tenth of a percentage point below the district average.

In 1994, the state education agency started applying its boilerplate labels, which became shorthand for real estate agents. Reagan High was rated "Academically Acceptable," the second-lowest grade. Families of means departed for the exurbs, private schools and eventually charter schools.

Even so, returning as a teacher, Mr. Davis had high hopes for No Child Left Behind, the federal education reform legislation enacted in 2002 with bipartisan support led by President George W. Bush and Senator Edward M. Kennedy. The law turned a powerful spotlight on the second-class education being provided for poor kids in places like East Austin. Finally, the truth was out. In that sense, Mr. Davis believed at the time, "No Child Left Behind was the best thing that happened to us."

But that was hardly the case: instead of rallying a new national commitment to provide quality public education for all children, the reform movement led to an increasingly punitive high-stakes competition for standardized test scores, school grades and labels. Within just a few years, Reagan High fell to "Academically Unacceptable." [...]

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