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The Case Against Grades

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There is always something or someone to blame in our struggle for education reform. Sometimes it's the "bad teachers" who get the blame. Other times it's standardized testing, insufficient funding, or slow-moving bureaucracy. I blame grades. Grading students, from A to F, has become synonymous with education itself.

A 2002 study at the University of Michigan found that 80 percent of students surveyed based their self-worth on academic performance—more than cited family support as a source of self-esteem. A 2006 study at King's College showed adolescents with low self-esteem were more likely to have poor health, be involved in criminal behavior, and earn less than their peers. Since it is overwhelmingly poor students who are prone to bad grades, a self-reinforcing loop is created. Poverty leads to bad grades and low self-esteem, which leads to more poverty and social dysfunction.

In its earliest forms, education was a Socratic practice of self-knowledge; an isolated act of enshrining religious traditions; or, most commonly, an informal transfer of skill on the homestead, with parents teaching children how to plant, harvest, raise livestock, or practice some craft passed through generations. That all began to change in 1792 when William Farish, a tutor and soon-to-be chemistry professor at Cambridge, became an early advocate of evaluating student performance through quantifying test results. A century later, the logic changed into a letter-based scale first seen at Mount Holyoke College in 1897. By the 1930s, the ABC approach had been adopted by a wide group of schools and universities around the country.

These changes coincided with the rapid expansion of compulsory education in America. Grades were the foundation of this expansion, providing data points for a system in which one person would get a corner office and another would be lost to a life flipping burgers or changing motor oil. If you want to succeed in life, stay in school, get good grades.

The catch is that fear of negative outcomes has been repeatedly shown to be a major impediment to learning. A survey of students at the University of Cape Town found that stress and fear of failing tests led to "classic symptoms of procrastination and avoidance," confusion and low self-esteem.

John Taylor Gatto, a one-time New York State Teacher of the Year turned fierce education critic, proposed an education system built around "independent study, community service,

adventures in experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, [and] a thousand different apprenticeships." Schools built on these values have flourished in the margins of state-funded, graded education throughout the 20th century. The most famous example is the Montessori schools, noted for their lack of grades, multiage classes, and extended periods where students can choose their own projects from a selected range of materials. The schools have educated many of today's wealthiest entrepreneurs, including Google's Larry Page, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Wikipedia creator Jimmy Wales, and business management legend Peter Drucker.

Free schools have taken the gradeless structure even further, treating the school as an open space where students are not only allowed to self-direct but are given equal responsibility in the organization and rule-making of the school itself. The Summerhill School in England is one of the most recognizable and longest-running, founded in 1921 by A.S. Neill. Summerhill is built around the idea of creating stable, happy, and compassionate humans capable of filling any role in society—a janitor being no less a success than a doctor. In place of dedicated courses, students are free to follow their own interests while teachers observe and nudge them toward new ways of thinking about what they're drawn to. Students with an interest in cooking, for instance, might learn the basics of chemistry by way of thickening a sauce. Those drawn to playing soccer might learn to improve their game with some fundamental principles of Newtonian physics.

Abandoning grades would be a massive shock, but holding onto them has not forestalled decay, from waves of school closures for poor standardized test results to the trillion-dollar debt guillotine awaiting college students who'll struggle to win unpaid internships for all their hard work. Eliminating grades would not singlehandedly bring salvation. There is a whole new world of challenges and complications in a classroom without pedagogy and rank. But it would be an ideal place to start anew, to stop motivating students, teachers, and underperformers with the fear of being flunked, fired, or shut down. Without that dysfunctional ranking we could instead form a child's education around his or her eagerness to discover, contribute, and share.