Measuring What Matters: It's Time to Rethink Traditional Grades

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For a long time, I thought that a lifelong career as a Jewish high school educator would prepare me to sail through parenting my own teens when they reached the age of my students. I couldn't have been farther from the truth. Instead of my work experience shedding light on my parenting, my parenting experiences heightened some of my most deep-seated concerns about the Jewish day school system. One child coasted through high school, defaulting to doing the least amount of work possible to get by. The other one fell prey to the pressures of high achievement and struggled with maintaining self-confidence in the face of imperfect test scores, report card grades, and GPAs.

For nearly a decade now I've been deeply immersed in the science of assessment. As a teacher, my grading systems weren't working for me, and as a parent, the traditional grading system wasn't succeeding in motivating my children to be better learners. I kept finding that the vaunted numerical average didn't represent who my students were or what they had achieved, and I struggled with the ethical implications of assigning scores to a student that would have a long- term impact on their success without involving them in the process. So it was deeply troubling to learn that for more than a century, since 1913, researchers have continued to find that the traditional grading system is seriously flawed. In fact, despite our very best intentions, research strongly suggests that our assessment practices actively harm the very students we seek to teach, support, and empower.

At its core, a research-based, effective grading system should stand on three pillars: grades should be accurate, objective, and motivating factors in the learning process. The 100-point system fails the accuracy test because it is prone to widespread inconsistencies both

between departments and across schools. In most schools, grades are used as a means of both punishment and reward, conflating academic performance with additional factors such as behavior and attendance. Yet the research repeatedly shows that using low grades as a behavioral consequence is ineffective. In the Jewish education space, educators, lay people, and even students have been speaking up about the issues of grading Torah learning. Their primary argument is that grades are incompatible with the goals of developing an intrinsically motivated love for and commitment to Torah and mitzvot. They are entirely correct, and, to their credit, many schools have incorporated elements of *lishmah* learning, ungraded learning for its own sake, into their programming.

As schools begin to notice the discrepancy between our goals and our grading system, it's important that we widen the lens and reflect on why and how we learn across the whole school day. Rather than deepening the divide between the two parts of the dual curriculum, we need to ask ourselves what it might look like if we focused on raising self-directed learners who valued the acquisition of knowledge and skills, rather than static test scores. For most assessment experts, it's not a binary choice between grades and no grades, but rather the development of a system that fuels growth and gathers richer evidence of learning.

While comprehensive reform requires systemic change, individual teachers can begin shifting their practices today. First, use grades to communicate progress, not as classroom currency. Avoid deducting points for behavioral reasons or even offering extra credit, because these practices obscure what students actually know and can do. Try to find alternatives to recording zeros for missing work. Second, honor formative assessment by using the data only as a reflection of the learning process either by excluding early attempts entirely from final grades or ensuring that later success replaces earlier struggles through decaying averages. Finally, invite

students into the assessment conversation through reflective tools, such as progress portfolios, narrative grade letters, or learning journey reflections, that provide students with both the opportunity and the language to articulate what they've achieved and which evidence demonstrates their growth. These practices, however, don't solve deeper structural issues: weighted averages remain an imprecise way to communicate learning, especially given inconsistencies across courses and teachers. They also don't address how siloing progress into discrete content areas fails to reveal what students can genuinely do with their knowledge. Still, they represent meaningful steps forward.

The path before us is clear. We are living in the educational equivalent of a Blockbuster moment. As I approach 20 years of teaching, it's undeniable that what once worked for our students no longer does. For more than 100 years we've relied on tradition instead of imagining how things could be different. Yet, as the AI revolution radically reshapes the job market, the teenage mental health crisis intensifies, and definitions of success continue to evolve, we've reached an inflection point. Now is the time for us to listen to what the research has been telling us. We need to rethink how we assess and how we report student achievement in a systematic and holistic way.

Jewish day schools, across the spectrum, are committed to providing high-level learning experiences in both general and Judaic studies while also nurturing the character growth and moral development of our students. Our assessment system should allow us to measure what matters. It should help students understand what success looks like and give them the tools to reach it. It should empower teachers to collect and use evidence to provide feedback, coaching students instead of judging and sorting them. It should enable families and external stakeholders to see growth over time, instead of reducing each student into a single number.

The work of articulating and implementing comprehensive grading reform is a tremendous undertaking. Like a row of dominoes, changing even one element of the system will have a vast and far-reaching impact on nearly every other aspect of teaching and learning. Making significant change requires challenging some deeply held beliefs and reexamining practices we've upheld for many years. There is also fear of backlash from teachers, parents, and students, as well as legitimate concerns about college admissions. But the Jewish day school community has a rich history of balancing innovation with tradition. My wish for us comes from Joe Feldman, whose encyclopedic text *Grading for Equity* informs much of my thinking about grading: "As we learn new ideas, let us be open, humble, honest, and forgive ourselves if we weren't aware that things could be different."