

## Report Cards: Do They Make the Grade?



**Is the traditional A-B-C-D-F report card meeting the grade? Is a skills checklist a better way to go in this age of standards and accountability? Does a narrative report card help settle debate over what letter grades actually mean? This week, Education World explores the pluses and minuses of a variety of report card formats.**

A child brings home his report card, and his parents are happy to see A's in English, math, and science. The proud parents share their good news with relatives. They use those grades to compare their child's performance to that of other children in the neighborhood.

A lot rides on the child's grades, but little thought is given to a larger question: What do those grades really mean?

Unless a school district has a strict set of curriculum goals for each classroom -- and the teacher adheres to those guidelines -- there is no way for a parent to accurately know what those letter grades represent.

Another complaint against the traditional A-B-C-D-F grading system is that some teachers grade against standards and others compare students within the classroom. Little Johnny

might get a B in English, but does that mean he can read or write according to grade level?

## **AN EMOTIONAL ISSUE!**

Many school districts are re-examining their current approaches to report cards and grading. And, as any school administrator can tell you, the search for the "right" report card can become a very emotional issue.

Some school districts are attempting to support the A-B-C-D-F grading system by adding a narrative to the report card. In other systems, the narrative approach has been adopted for use across the primary grades; letter grades are not introduced until third or fifth grade.

Other school districts have dropped the traditional report card in favor of skills checklists. Those checklists detail the various skills (standards) required within the curriculum at each grade level. A check next to a skill indicates that the student has mastered that skill. This method has found opposition in some districts, though, as parents seek a simpler, more concrete way of gauging their child's work at school.

## **BUT WHAT DOES AN A REALLY MEAN?**

"There is always a lot of clamor when report cards get changed," Paul Houston, executive director of the [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org) American Association of School Administrators, told Education World. "Parents are used to the grades because that is what most of them got, and they think they mean something."

"The fact is that an A is very subjective depending on the teacher," said Houston, "but parents like the security of what appears to be an objective measure." Letter grades give the appearance of assessment without really doing so, he added.

Houston drew an analogy between letter grades and golfer Tiger Woods by comparing Woods's A game in golf to Houston's own A game. "If Woods's game became the standard for every golfer, most every other golfer would be an F golfer and would take up tennis," he said.

"On the other hand, if we are realistic and make adjustments based on ability, then what does an A mean?" Houston added. "Better just to acknowledge that he plays a game not normally

seen on this planet and my game has the following strengths and areas needing improvement."

Houston believes the traditional system is limited and that it must include other measures and systems, including samples of student work, standardized tests, and narratives. "I have always thought effort should also be a part of the report," he said.

Report card change usually comes about because of the limited nature of traditional systems, Houston said. But, he added, many school districts eventually return to traditional grading methods because of political pressure or parent dissatisfaction.

"Grades were with us long before the accountability era," Houston told Education World.

"Today there is much more pressure to show results, and so grades are caught up in it.

"Grades create an expectation that there are certain specific expectations that should be met at certain times," he added. "That does not track with reality and can harm a child's motivation at the very time we should be improving it."

## **TRADITIONAL GRADING A 'GRAY AREA'**

"Traditional grading is something that some parents think that they understand. But those grades must be combined with a more detailed picture of a student's progress," said Pamela Chandler, a teacher at Sequoia Middle School in Redding, California.

Chandler told of an administrator who suggested giving two grades for each subject, one based on effort and progress and another indicating the grade level equivalency that a student is working at. "That would give students who are working their butts off recognition for how hard they are trying, yet not 'cheapen' the A work of a student who is working at or above grade level," she said.

Chandler admits that traditional grading does bring with it a certain "gray area," because each teacher has a different idea of the meaning behind those grades.

"Some teachers put more weight on effort than others, so that students who are below grade level in skill could conceivably receive an A if they work hard," Chandler added. "Others give no

A's or B's to students who are below grade level and A's only to those students working at or above grade level.

"Someone looking at the grades in kids' records really and truly do not know what those grades mean," she added.

## **NARRATIVES ARE WORTH THE TIME**

Although Chandler still sends home report cards with traditional grades on them, she also offers parents other proof of students' progress. For example, she sends home students' writing samples so parents can see how students' writing skills are improving.

"I conference with each kid before I send those reports home," Chandler told Education World. "It is wonderful to see their reactions when I show them the progress they have made."

"Kids can't wait to take these home and share them with their parents," she added. "To me, these reports give a much clearer picture of where a student has been, where they are now, and what direction they need to go in the future."

Chandler wishes she could send detailed reports home more often, but the time factor makes that impossible. If she had smaller size classes, she believes, the communication between parent and teacher could grow.

"Another benefit of this type of reporting is that I have seen students' degree of effort increase directly as a result of knowing this type of information," she said.

## **MAKING NARRATIVE REPORT CARDS WORK**

The Carroll County (Maryland) school district piloted for three years a new report card that included narratives. But that report card didn't have the approval of all teachers and parents, according to Margaret Pfaff, the district's director of elementary schools, curriculum, instruction, and staff development.

"Our goal was to try to provide parents with more specific information regarding their child's progress as it relates to our system's essential curriculum," Pfaff told Education World.

"Though the report card contained a lot of valuable information, it was very cumbersome for teachers and too complex for parents."

Pfaff believes a narrative type of report card is far more valuable than traditional report cards, but time got in the way. By trying to meet everyone's needs with the new report cards, she said, the district created a "monster."

"The issue is simply that letter grades do not accurately represent a student's progress nor do they convey much meaning. Letter grades are very abstract to young children and do not reflect their development level or performance," Pfaff said.

## **PARENTS RELATE GRADES TO THEIR SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE**

"Our parents objected to the newer report card because they felt the ratings were too abstract," said Pfaff. "Parents relate grades to their schooling experience and seem to think that letter grades do have meaning."

In addition, Pfaff said, many teachers felt more comfortable with letter grades because they feel they can more easily justify them with individual scores on tests.

"They prefer to have something concrete to share with parents," she said.

## **COMPUTERS TO THE RESCUE**

More and more, computers are creeping into every aspect of school life. Many teachers are using computers to ease the time burden associated with figuring grades and filling out report cards. Grading software is helping many of them. But computerized programs for reporting grades limit the choices for educators. Computers, to date, are not able to take into consideration some of the more subjective elements of grading.

The Hermiston (Oregon) School District piloted a new electronic report card program last year. The program is based on the state's benchmarks, according to John Sipp, a Title 1 teacher in the system. A committee designed the format for the program and then translated it into an online, interactive format.

"There are still a few teachers who are not comfortable with the new format, and there were some parents who weren't sure of

Computer grading programs are easing grade-keeping burdens for some teachers. Read more about it in these related stories from the

it, but with some preliminary explanations, most have adapted well to the new report card," Sipp told Education World.

"The major advantage of the new card is that it makes grading more objective, and thus more of a snapshot of where the student is in comparison with the state standards," said Sipp. The report card is based on a curriculum continuum that outlines on a quarterly basis each of the skills that students are working on, he added.

The report cards are completed electronically. The teacher just logs on to the server and types in a password to view a list of students linked to grade cards that are ready to be marked. Not only is it faster than the old method, Sipp said, but it also has the advantage of being easy to find at any time. No more losing the cards in your desk drawer!

Administrators like the new electronic report card because they have easy access to all students' report cards at any time. The cards are part of a network, so individual student information can be downloaded from the student's school or state records. That saves a lot of typing for the school secretary or teacher.

Though the new system might have added a little work for teachers, Sipp said, it has helped many teachers focus on what needs to be taught.

"With the push toward statewide standards, a change in the way grades are reported is inevitable. We can either fight the change or work with it to give our students the best chance of meeting the standards," he said.

## SMOOTH TRANSITION

Julie Litton, a fourth-grade teacher in Indiana, made a smooth transition to a narrative report card. In the 1996-97 school year,

Education World archives.

\* [Posting Students' Grades Online Keeps Parents in Touch and Kids on Their Toes!](#)

Education World writer Sherril Steele-Carlin talks with educators who have been posting their students' grades online for some time.

\* [Grading Software: Sorting Through the Choices](#) Education World writer Sherril Steele-Carlin weeds through the grading software choices so you don't have to! Included are links to the best grading software online and tips for choosing the right software to meet your needs!

\* [Teacher-Created Web Sites Link Home and School -- Virtually!](#)

Education World technology editor Linda Starr shares the stories

she phased out the traditional reporting in language arts only. The experience, she said, has been less than earthshaking.

"When I explain the reporting system to new fourth-grade parents, they are not taken aback, but take the change in stride," she said, also citing an internal survey that shows more than 90 percent of parents favor the summary style of report card.

However, she joked that she "cringes and goes into deep depression" when it is time to do report cards. It takes her on average about 24 hours to put the information into the computer and get it printed.

Litton said even though traditional grades are very general, if parents want to see what work the student has done, they can follow along on a nightly basis with their child's homework to find out.

"I really don't see how summary evaluation will help keep children from falling through the cracks," added Litton. "Someone who reads the summary will still have to become involved. Schools are going to have to provide for those students who do not qualify for special services. Any type of reporting system is not going to be a panacea for deliverance of services to special needs children."

## **SUCCESSFUL WHEN EVERYONE IS INVOLVED**

Grant Wiggins, an educational consultant at [Relearning by Design](#), has found the most successful transformations of the report card occur when all the stakeholders are consulted on the decisions.

"Too many report card changes focus on what teachers want, but the card is for parents," Wiggins told Education World. "Establishing focus groups and looking at alternatives -- that is the best strategy."

Wiggins believes districts need both a summary and a traditional report on students' progress.

of teachers who have seen the possibilities for using the Web to connect to parents! She includes tips for making connections to parents on school and classroom Web sites!

"Everyone recognizes the disconnect between modern assessment, standards, and report cards -- report cards haven't kept pace with state and national standards and the use of rubrics," he added. "Furthermore, grades without some standards for grading represent nothing stable or clear -- they don't explain what the student did to earn the grade."

What is the point of giving a grade if the children are not developing at the same rate and starting from the same place? Wiggins wonders.

"It is much better to report where students stand on developmental continua, with either comments or symbols stating where the performance stands in terms of grade level standards. We care as much about progress as achievement in younger grades," he added.

Wiggins believes people favor traditional grading because it provides a "bottom line" for their children.

"All report cards are meant to provide feedback and guidance. Anything that advances both is a good thing. But the student is a different audience than parents -- we need to make sure reporting reflects this," he said.

Wiggins does not think a summary type of report card will stop future students from falling through the cracks. "The reporting process cannot help kids. Only better teaching, coaching, and counseling can do that," he said.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- [Report Card Reform](#) and [Report Card Redux](#) These articles from the American Association of School Administrators review alternative ways of reporting student progress, ways that usually find favor among educators but create doubts among parents.
- [Letter Grades Are Returning to Students' Report Cards](#) This article describes how one community decided to return to traditional report cards.

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