



***On Your Mark* by Thomas Guskey**

Think you might want to read this book?

Are you ready to overhaul everything you thought you knew about assessment? In [*On Your Mark*](#), Thomas Guskey asks us to unpack the philosophy of why we give grades at all. Then he challenges us to rethink percentages, bell shapes, letters, and just about every other detail that goes into the singular number or letter that we use to holistically represent how a student is doing. I would encourage you to

dive in...but if you do, you will need to be open and honest about your current practices and how they might improve.

What would Socrates ask?

- What would happen if we reported out on learning without letters or numbers?
- Do we report out on learning to communicate achievement, help students self-evaluate, identify talent, or provide incentives for learning?
- “The one basic question is this: Is my purpose to *select* talent, or is it to *develop* talent?”
- In what ways do current reporting systems accurately represent learning?
- What if all grading in a school was uniform, so students knew exactly what their grades represented?
- How well do we report out on student growth?
- What if we reported out on each skill learned instead of holistically by class?
- Do we intentionally display the purpose of the report card at the top?
- Is it better to adopt from others or design assessment practices for each school from scratch?
- Do percentage grades make sense for rote/foundational learning?
- Will there be times when student growth/learning can't be measured?
- Is it possible to merge rubrics, report cards, and transcripts?
- What if we eliminated all compliance grading?
- What if we focused on the learning and never point deductions for being late or not following guidelines?

Research

- Ample evidence demonstrates, for example, that most teachers receive little training in effective grading and that unintentional bias often influences teachers' grade assignments.
- Large samples of teachers in both English and math consistently give a wide variance of grades to the same work turned in.
- Five to seven categories are generally considered optimal in terms of reporting out on learning. Four is seen as too restrictive and Eight as too detailed to really be meaningful.
- Ranking students may actually diminish student motivation to work hard.
- “A grade of A, for example, may mean the student knew what was intended before instruction began (product), did not learn as well as expected but tried very hard (process), or simply made significant improvement (progress).

Concepts

- Three typical problems with grading and reporting reform:
 - 1- too much emphasis on form instead of function (worry about what the report card will look like in later stages)
 - 2- lack of understanding of the change process
 - 3- an overemphasis on the report card alone
- Method always follows purpose in change.
- Percentage grades are the most difficult to justify or defend from a procedural, practical, or ethical perspective.
- Plusses and minuses generally don't offer increased accuracy in reporting.
- Letter grades really represent "a hodgepodge grade that includes elements of achievement, attitude, effort, and behavior" and "a confusing amalgamation of highly diverse measures that is difficult to explain and rarely presents a true picture of students' academic proficiency".
- Three criteria for grading:
 - 1- Product- standards-based or performance-based approach
 - 2- Process- taking into account responsibility, effort, and work habits
 - 3- Progress- focusing on how much students have grown
- Alternatives to averaging grades:
 - 1- Most recent
 - 2- Most comprehensive
 - 3- Most relevant to course goals

Quotes from the author

- "Report cards, the primary device educators use to communicate information about student learning to parents and others, look much the same today as they did a century ago. All that has changed is that in earlier times, teachers completed report cards by hand, and today they use computers."
- Instead of being concerned with selecting the talented few, we must be committed to developing the unique talents of all students.
- To succeed in tearing down the many old traditions associated with grading, we must have new traditions to take their place. But we must ensure that those new traditions are based on solid evidence of their effectiveness. In particular, we must be certain that our new traditions support student learning and enhance students' perceptions of themselves as competent learners.
- Being unaware of the accumulated knowledge on grading and reporting, most teachers base their classroom grading and reporting practices on what they remember from their personal experiences in school.
- The result is immense variation among teachers in their particular grading policies as well as the endurance of traditions that have remained unquestioned in schools for decades.
- The best report cards clearly communicate what students were expected to learn and be able to do, how well they did those things, and whether or not that level of performance is in line with expectations set for this level at this time in the school year.
- Percentage grades give the illusion of precision to imprecise and often highly subjective judgments of students' performance.

- Grading on the curve thus denies students the opportunity to work together and to help each other attain valuable, shared learning goals.
- Rank ordering the students in every graduating class has nothing to do with developing students' talent. Rather, it is unquestionable about selecting talent.
- (When you do class rank) Excellence is not defined in terms of specific, challenging, and rigorous learning criteria. It is defined in terms of a student's relative standing among classmates.
- To provide an accurate summary of students' performance, teachers must begin by looking for consistency in the evidence gathered. If that evidence is consistent across several indicators, then deciding what grade to assign is relatively straightforward.

Quotes from others

- "School administrators have been using with confidence an absolutely uncalibrated instrument." - I.E. Finkelstein

Implement tomorrow?

- Ask your fellow educators if they feel they are tasked to *identify* or *develop* talent and see what conversations follow.

Organizations/schools working on answers

- [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#)

Gateways to further learning

- [Being at the head of the class isn't same as having an inside track on life](#)-Chicago Tribune
- [The Case Against Grades](#)- Alfie Kohn
- [Are Letter Grades Failing Our Students?](#)- National Education Association

Referenced books with the potential to impact leading and learning in education

Author(s) Last Name	Title
Arnold	<i>Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians</i>

The applicability of this book to education is



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