

A, B, C, D.....

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Let me ask you a few questions:

Can you hit a baseball? Can you catch a baseball?

Can you run? You can?

Have you ever played baseball, then?

Once a year at the school picnic? Great!

In that case, I'm going to put you on the ball field tomorrow with the Toronto Blue Jays in front of 10,000 fans in the stadium and half a million on TV. We'll see what happens when you come up to bat. We'll pay you according to your results. If you hit a home run, we'll pay you \$5000. If you hit a triple, we'll give you \$4000. If you hit a double, \$3000, a single, \$2000. If you hit a foul ball, we'll say nice try. If you strike out, you will get nothing. Now perhaps you object by saying it's not fair to put you in the major leagues. You're hardly major league caliber. You know you won't do well. Why, even the best players make a hit less than half the time. You don't want to go out on the field and embarrass yourself.

Yet we ask our struggling students to play in the majors and get paid that way, too. Too often, we have "one size fits all" grading. Struggling students not allowed to experience success in this way may simply give up. A student gets an A, a B, a C, or a D based on an "objective" test. We believe in individualized instruction, but what about individualized evaluation? Schools may say a struggling student who has not attained all the aims of a particular grade level should receive a lower grade to indicate his relationship to an absolute standard in order to be "fair" to all students. If a student meets the objectives set out for him in a program tailored to meet his needs, is it "fair" to give him a low mark because he has not attained someone else's objective?

Grades are really a very subjective and abstract way of reporting progress. Parents (along with some principals, teachers and students!) like to think that a grade represents a student's absolute relationship to an absolute standard. Of course, that's not true. Grades are not objective measures due to factors such as the teacher's selection of test questions and even his or her selection of instructional techniques, not to mention the teacher's ability to communicate knowledge and understanding! Thus, a report card showing only percentages or letter grades doesn't really tell anyone very much. Depending on the teacher's inclination and philosophy, Johnny could be getting an A for memorizing a certain body of knowledge, or for the ability to analyze and problem solve, or for handing in all his assignments, or for being a good boy in class, or for trying hard.

An anecdotal report card, perhaps even combined with a checklist of skills, is a much more accurate indicator of precisely what a student knows. Such a report card would be based on a variety of assessment factors such as observation, teacher-made tests, assignments, classroom interaction and student self-reports. Yes, it will still be somewhat subjective, but it will present a much truer picture of a student's progress. A

checklist indicating, for instance, that Johnny can understand various vowel sounds and combine them with consonants to make new words is much more useful than an A to both his parents and any teacher trying to determine proper placement for Johnny.

If a school system insists on using a traditional report card to report progress, a teacher must become quite creative in order to help students experience success. Grades should be reported based on the objectives for the individual student, not some “objective” measure, since as we have already shown, such “objective” tests do not exist. In this way, an intellectually challenged student could achieve an A, while a gifted student might only achieve a B. This kind of grading pits a student against himself, rather than others. Research has shown that school grades are not an accurate predictor of success in life. What IS an accurate predictor is how the student has responded to the challenges he has been given. Many an A student has discovered himself floundering at higher education levels because A’s had come so easy that he never learned to work for improvement. Students with lesser gifts often plow ahead of the A students in real life because they have had to work hard for the grades they achieved.

The whole question of grades needs to be carefully evaluated in terms of what we are trying to report. We should be trying to paint an accurate picture of what Johnny is actually achieving and the challenges he is experiencing along the way. Every child can be successful and as educators we want them to feel that success by having it accurately reflected on their report cards.