

Grading – Fact or Fiction.

This article describes the educational grading systems for the past hundred years and their effect on students. It examines the various grading systems what is their purpose and results

## GRADING - FACT OR FICTION

I wrote much of this article 1957 and recently did a follow up study to see what have been the changes in the grading procedures. My conclusions and recommendations are listed at the end of this article.

Introduction: Johnny received an A in history Suzie received a B in history Therefore Johnny knows more history than Suzie. This statement may be true, but it would be impossible to prove without additional facts. However, it would be safe to say that a board twenty-six feet in length is longer than a board twelve feet in length. What is the difference? In the problem with Johnny and Suzie there are: 1. no standardized basic units of measurements, 2. no equal base, 3, no specific objectives, and 4. the scores are not comparable. However, in the case of the boards a specific item is being measured, the length of the board. Both boards are being measured with an instrument which has standardized units of value. It would be naive to assume that the grading of an individual would correspond to the simple illustration used above.

At the present time schools do not use any standardized methods in grading student's achievement. Purpose of grading: Grades are used to provide parents and pupils with information regarding progress in the various areas. Some of these purposes are incentives to study, awarding honors, promoting, grade placement, grouping within grades, determining graduation, selecting vocations and certification to enter college, screening for admission to professional training, for permitting participation in extra-curricular activities, and-disciplinary action.<sup>3</sup> This list, like many others, illustrates the variety of ways in which grades are used. Sometimes the purposes become so numerous that they over shadow the real objective of grading. From an educator's point there can be only one real purpose for grading. That is to provide the pupil, teacher and parent with information which will help to facilitate the development of the individual to the maximum of his/her ability. Secondly, it must help the individual to know his/her abilities and limitations so that he may adjust his life on a realistic basis. Other purposes may be incorporated but only in a subordinate role.

The major problem of grading is that the schools don't know what to do. There is little if any comparability of ABCDF grades between schools or even within the same school.

Interpretations of these marks depend on knowing the achievement and ability level of the school giving the grades as well as what the local school standards of achievement means. Parent-teacher conferences are time consuming, but offer a partial solution to the elementary schools. However, they must be supplemented with written records for 7 administrative and guidance purposes. Parent-teacher conferences are of little value in high school or departmentalized situations as the teachers do not know the children well enough, and the sheer number of students and conferences makes the plan impractical.

Any effective and realistic grading program must be based upon desired objectives which the school program expects to achieve. These objectives should be developed by pupils, staff, and parents. Part of the objectives must be of a general nature, which will apply to all teachers regardless of curriculum area. Others must be related to outcomes which are peculiar or exclusive to each area of curriculum. Complete identification of each outcome and its delineation is necessary to insure reliable and comparable evaluation. The best way of stating objectives is in terms of desired behavior outcome. In addition to other forms used, a five point scale should be maintained for administrative and guidance purposes. Every school should analyze its grading problem and work toward a solution which will enable it to do a better job of educating its pupils. This can only be done through study, experimenting, research and work.

This section is a comprehensive analysis of grading procedures and rational. It is a rather detailed analysis of grading for the last 50 years. If you aren't interested please scroll down to my section on grading GRADDING 51 LATER.

The following is the analysis of grading in the 50 and 60's.

Methods of grading: At the present time three general methods of grading are commonly used. They are, according to Dr. Strang: 1. Marking only on a comparative basis. 2. Marking only on ability basis. 3. Marking on a dual system - both ability and comparative basis.

In 1947 William Wrinkle published his book *Improving Marking and Reporting Practices*, in which he reported the results of a survey of the marking and reporting practices of the schools for the preceding twenty-five years. His general findings were: 1. Many schools report grades by the use of a multiple point scale, using the letters A B C D F. 2. The greatest single innovation in marking practices has been the substitution of letter grades for percent grades. 3. Most schools in addition to reporting a letter grade also report on a variety of character traits by checking one or more items, in a printed list of undefined terms or statements. 4. Most of the departures from conventional practices have been made by elementary schools and very few by secondary schools. 5. Most schools send out reports each six weeks. 6. Few of the schools that have made departures from conventional practices, such as the use of informal letters, parent-teacher conferences, and the substitution of S and U for ABCDF. 7. The marking and reporting problem ranks close to the top of the concern of most schools and teachers, but since they do not know how to improve on what they are doing, they do not change.

A more recent survey of trends in grading and reporting was reported in the *Journal of Education* in 1954: "Methods of grading that are decreasing in the schools. 1. Unexplained single marks. 2. Competitive marking 3. Use of per cent marking Methods of grading that is increasing in the schools."

Grade may be defined as: .1. Grouping subjects into broad fields for grading 2. Listing objectives and skills to be accomplished in individual subjects 4. Include explanations of grades, reasons for lack of accomplishment, and suggestions for improvement. 5. Report special abilities, interest, and achievement 6. Include profiles of pupil's performance and objective achievement test data 7. Report of social and emotional development and behavior 8. Reports of individual's physical and health development 9. Individual personalized form letter reports 10. Describing the philosophy and purpose or organization of the school. 11. Parent-teacher conference as substitute or supplement to cards. 12. Joint parent-teacher revision of report forms.

Analysis of Conventional Methods of Grading: The function of grading and marking in most school systems will fall under the following categories: (1) administration, (2) guidance, (3) information and (4) motivation.

Administration: Grades determine whether a pupil has passed or failed, whether he should be promoted or retained to repeat the course, whether he should graduate. They provide a record for administrative purposes and are used in transferring a pupil from one school to another.

They are often used as a criterion for entering college or getting a job. 2 Guidance: Functional grade are used in guidance and counseling, in identifying areas of special ability and limitations, in deciding on the advisability of enrolling the pupil in certain courses, in restricting him from others, and in determining the number of courses and activities in which he might participate,

2. Information functions: Grades are the chief means employed by the school in giving information to students and their parents regarding the student's achievement, progress, and success or failure in his schoolwork. 3. Motivation and discipline functions: Grades are used to stimulate pupils to put forth a greater effort in their learning activities. They are used for the same purpose in determining eligibility for honors of many kinds, such as participation in school activities, eligibility to play on the team, membership in selected groups, and the winning of scholarships, etc.1 Grades would be a wonderful if they could fulfill these functions, but unfortunately they don't.

In fact, about the only function conventional marks accomplish is motivation. Even that is questionable in many cases. To better illustrate the value of our present systems of grading in relation to our fundamental purpose of grading, one will have to analyze the various methods now used. The A B C D F grades are the most prevalent and widely used system, both in elementary and high schools. The system is based upon a set of grades which indicate the achievement or progress of the pupil. Its use is based upon the assumptions that (1) the grade is an effective conveyor of information; (2) anyone can achieve any grade he desires if he is willing to put forth the effort; (3) people succeed in life about the same as they do in school; (4) grading practices will provide the student to an introduction to the competitive nature of adult life; (5) grading is necessary for motivation; (6) the grade can be used as a means without being recognized as an end in itself.1 To be of value any grading system must carry out its purposes in practice. Does the A B C D F system meet this criterion? On the first point, the ABCDF grades cannot tell anyone what is the level of achievement of the individual or what progress he has achieved. Secondly, it is not true that anyone can achieve anything he desires. This is based upon the premise that the level of achievement necessary to succeed is low enough to insure attainment by all. Both are without foundation as individuals vary in ability. The degree of skill necessary for success 4 becomes so complex in certain areas that only a few will have the native ability to master, these fields. On the third point, which is that people succeed in life about the same as they do in school is based upon some questionable assumptions. This assumes that the individual will be compared with all individuals rather than one in his occupational group. The promotion of competition between those of unequal ability is a violation of principles of individual differences. Realistic grading must indicate the actual achievement of the individual if it is to have any meaning. (My comments). Grades are necessary for motivation. It is true that in many cases grades can be a source of motivation, but not without its limitations. Too often marks become an end instead of a means. The grades and not the learning become paramount. How comparable A B C D F marks are in one system to another is illustrated in the following table which was prepared by Walter Crosby Bell. (See

Table I.) From the table one can see that an F in one school might be an A in another. Therefore to interpret A B C D F grades it necessary to know the achievement and ability level of the school giving the grades as well as what local school standards of achievement means. Most of the criticisms of the A B C D F grades apply to the use of percentages or percentile grading. No further discussion of these methods will be done as it is felt that they have about the same faults as the A B C D F marks.

Dissatisfaction with symbolic marking has led to the parent teacher conferences. Getting parents and teachers together has much merit aside from the purpose of reporting. Knowing each other's problems will enable both the parent and teacher to do a better job. The conference plan is effective for reporting - especially in the elementary school. It does not result in a record which the school must have. It is further limited to those teachers that have the students all day or most of it. Another limiting factor is that many parents will not take the time for the conferences. This is especially true in the higher grades. Despite these limitations the conference, if supplemented by additional information, is one of the most valid and effective methods of reporting the pupil's progress. However, it has its limitations and seems to be practical only in the elementary grades. Another method, the informal letter to parents, has not met with much success. The lack of success has led to much dissatisfaction with this type of reporting in many schools.<sup>11</sup> The primary criticism of the procedure are: (1) letters are a one-way communication; (2) most teachers lack the ability to write a clear, concise and meaningful letter; (3) it is restricted to those teachers which have the pupils most of the day; (4) it becomes too cumbersome and time-consuming when a large number of pupils are involved; (5) and it involves separate reporting for purposes of administrative records and transfers. To overcome the weaknesses of the informal letter, the check form has evolved. In the check form a check is substituted for a sentence. Instead of the teacher writing, "He is dependable", it is printed on the form, and if it applies the statement is checked. "The check form type of report is mechanically the most practical and generally the most usable of the various departures from the conventional report card," says William Wrinkle.<sup>1</sup> It is not necessarily the best, but it is the simplest way to report the greatest amount of information with the least time and effort and yet keep a record of what is reported. These 5 factors will expedite its development and use. However, the tendency is for the check form to become too detailed and lengthy to be of maximum value. In their ten year study of grading and reporting the staff of the Secondary School of the Campus Research-Laboratory Schools of Colorado State College of Education at Greeley made some important discoveries. 1. The statement of any outcome or objective to be evaluated should be analyzed into its specific meanings so that its meaning is clearly stated. 2. The number of different forms should be kept at a minimum. If two or more short forms are to be used at the same time, they should be incorporated into a single form. 3. During a period of experimentation unless there is plenty of money to spend the forms should be printed. (Originally it was instead of mimeographed) 4. The basis for an evaluation of the student's achievement should be decided on. 5. In the interpretation of a report the likelihood of misunderstandings by the parents increases in proportion to the number of details included in the report. 6. Students should have a real part in the development of new forms and practices. 7. The development by students of an understanding of and a favorable attitude towards new practices is a most effective approach to parent education. 8. The summarization of reports on a student in a departmentalized, program by a guidance counselor, a homeroom teacher, or a

core teacher, or the principal involves too big a task and in not a workable plan. 9. The scale type evaluation form is unsatisfactory unless each item involves only a single outcome, the achievement of which can be expressed in degrees by clearly distinguishable descriptions. 10. The check form is simpler than the scale for use in reporting evaluations and is more economical of space on a printed form. 11. The development of highly detailed, elaborate cumulative record forms is uneconomical; if too detailed and lengthy they will not be used by most teachers. 12. Although it has many real advantages, the conference, plan is not a practical solution to the reporting problem, especially at the secondary-school level. 13. In addition to other forms used in reporting, a separate report using a five point scale should be maintained for administrative and guidance purposes. The Secondary School of Colorado State College of Education developed a report which shows the relationship of achievement competitively determined and the individual's background and ability. Thus enabling one to make an evaluation of industry out- put of the individual. 14. Unless carefully controlled, check forms tend to become increasingly detailed and, therefore, increasingly impractical. It is necessary to determine the most significant desired objectives which the school's program is expected to achieve. This is accomplished through cooperation and work by the staff, parents, and students. General outcomes which are a concern of all teachers regardless of curriculum area must be ascertained. In the case of the study by the staff of the Secondary School of College of Education these areas were (1) self-direction, (2) social adjustment, (3) breadth of interest, (4) participation (5) personal attractiveness, (6) oral expression, (7) written expression, (8) basic reading skills (9) location of learning materials, and 10) care of materials and equipment. In addition to the general outcomes, the outcomes which are exclusive or peculiar to each curriculum area must be delineated. Further identification of each outcome is necessary to insure reliable and comparable evaluations. An example might be the objective and self-direction. Self-Direction. The student: 1. Is regular and prompt in attendance 2. Moves from one work situation to another without wasting time. 3. Begins work promptly-and continues until it is time to stop 4. Engages in effective activity with a minimum of supervision. 5. Meets his responsibilities promptly and carries out agreements 6. Reacts in a positive manner and profits by criticism 7. Utilizes previous experiences in meeting new problems 8. 8. Has justifiable confidence in him but are not overconfident 9. Has courage and perseverance which keeps him on the job even though the work is difficult. 15. The best way to state objectives is in terms of desired behavioral outcomes is to state what the learner should do. . 16. Many teachers have difficulty in writing effective comments. A deliberate program for the improvement of the writing of informal comments is essential. 17. the most intelligible way to write supplementary comments in explaining evaluations is to tell-what the student did.1 Conclusions: Most school systems grade on the basis of ability, comparison, or a combination of ability and comparison. The form of grading in general use is inconsistent with the stated educational philosophy. According to that philosophy the primary purpose of school is to help every child to develop his abilities as far as he is able. Grading in most cases is meaningless except to the one, doing the grading. Percentage grade and A B C D F grade systems are being discontinued in increasing numbers of schools. The major problem of grading is that the schools don't know what to do. There is little if any comparability of ABCDF grades between schools or even within the same school. Interpretations of these marks depend on knowing the achievement and ability level of the school giving the grades as well as what the local school standards of achievement means.

Parent-teacher conferences are time consuming, but offer a partial solution to the elementary schools. However, they must be supplemented with written records for administrative and guidance purposes. Parent-teacher conferences are of little value in high school or departmentalized situations as the teachers do not know the children well enough, and the sheer number of students and conferences makes the plan impractical. Informal letters have not been too successful due to their one-way communication and time consuming requirement and the lack of ability of teachers to express the information clearly. The check form type of report, offers a great potential because of its simplicity, clarity of expressing information, practical uses and great flexibility. Any effective and realistic grading program must be based upon desired objectives which the school program expects to achieve. These objectives should be developed by pupils, staff, and parents. Part of the objectives must be of a general nature, which will apply to all teachers regardless of curriculum area. Others must be related to outcomes which are peculiar or exclusive to each area of curriculum. Complete identification of each outcome and its delineation is necessary to insure reliable and comparable evaluation. The best way of stating objectives is in terms of desired behavior outcome. In addition to other forms used, a five point scale should be maintained for administrative and guidance purposes. Every school should analyze its grading problem and work toward a solution which will enable it to do a better job of educating its pupils. This can only be done through study, experimenting, research and work.

FIFTY ONE YEARS LATER After visiting several school systems, talking with many teachers and reviewing the literature I have found little change. All of the schools that I visited still use the ABC grades or some check form. It seems that fewer schools are using the parent-teacher conference; however, my sample is inadequate to say that this is true in most schools. I had expected or hoped that by now a more effective reporting system would have been developed and used. I will describe a few of the reporting systems that, as a principal, I experimented with and the results. Dissatisfied with the ABC system we implemented parent-teacher conferences and home visits. Teachers were given a day each semester for time to meet with parents. They structured their time so that they were available during the day and evening to make it convenient for parents that worked and those that didn't. If parents could not come to the school during conference day the teachers would make an appointment to visit with the parents at their home. I think the home visitation motivated most parents to come to the school as we usually had close to a hundred percent participation. It was important to make the parents feel that the meeting was worthwhile. As a staff we decided that meeting with the parents would provide them with the following information: 1. the functioning level in each subject as measured by standardized achievement tests, 2. the student's achievement, progress and the effort, 3. how the parents can help the teacher and student. 8 Before we initiated our grading system there had been a great deal of interaction with parents and the community. It was important that the parents and community knew what we were going to do. It wasn't easy to get parents to accept the change as they felt they understood the old ABC system. It was a learning process for many of them. Once they understood that the process gave them real insight to their child's actual functioning level and what was being done to help the student progress most of them accepted the new grading system. Briefly I want to explain how the teachers usually provided the parents with information about their child. The teacher would show how the student ranked in terms of grade level with other students in the country, as

measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. This test was given to all students at the beginning of the school year. The parents were told that another test would be given at the end of the school year and the parents would be given the result so they could see the student's progress. The teacher would also show current examples of the student's work and progress or lack of progress of the student. Today with our computers and data processing ability we can make evaluation and grading more accurate and relevant. In the past grouping students by multi criteria such as, I.O., socioeconomic level, parents education, was almost an impossible or impractical task. Today it isn't a major task. By grouping students this way and analyzing the data one is able to develop norms which will provide a more valid basis to measure student's effort and progress as it will be a comparing individuals with comparable ability and backgrounds. For maximum effectiveness the school needs to have a clearly delineate continuum of skills and knowledge that it expects student to learn. Having such a list enables teachers to determine the functioning level of students and then being able to measure their progress in relation to other students of similar ability and background. Teachers with this type of data can more accurately tell parents about the efforts and progress of their child. It will provide administrators with valuable information about the effectiveness of their program. This type of evaluation and reporting is difficult but we need to decide to be or not to be professional. If you have lung cancer any competent physician isn't going to tell you that you have a cold. He will give you the facts so appropriate treatment can begin. Should we as professionals not be honest with the parents.

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show how the student ranked in terms of grade level with other students in the country, as measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. This test was given to all students at the beginning of the school year. The parents were told that another test would be given at the end of the school year and the parents would be given the result so they could see the student's progress. The teacher would also show current examples of the student's work and progress or lack of progress of the student. Today with our computers and data processing ability we can make evaluation and grading more accurate and relevant. In the past grouping students by multi criteria such as, I.O., socioeconomic level, parents education, was almost an impossible or impractical task. Today it isn't a major task. By grouping students this way and analyzing the data one is able to develop norms which will provide a more valid basis to measure student's effort and progress as it will be a comparing individuals with comparable ability and backgrounds. For maximum effectiveness the school needs to have a clearly delineate continuum of skills and knowledge that it expects student to learn. Having such a list enables teachers to determine the functioning level of students and then being able to measure their progress in relation to other students of similar ability and background. Teachers with this type of data can more accurately tell parents about the efforts and progress of their child. It will provide administrators with valuable information about the effectiveness of their program. This type of evaluation and reporting is difficult but we need to decide to be or not to be professional. If you have lung cancer any competent physician isn't going to tell you that you have a cold. He will give you the facts so appropriate treatment can begin. Should we as professional educators do any less for our students?