

# If we want better students, end the 19th-century ‘grading game’

*The Globe and Mail – January 2015*



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Since elementary school, I knew that grades mattered – a lot. I was a keen student who spent most of my schooling chasing after the highest marks and beating myself up for anything less than an “A”. Looking back, I was more concerned with playing the “grading game” than actually learning. While some would argue that higher grades are a reflection of ambition and hard work, they are more so a distraction from a deeper learning process. If we want to create a truly equitable education system with excellent learners, we need to stop this futile metric. It’s time to “end the grading game.”

The grading system has been around since the 19th century, and has remained unchanged ever since. The unfortunate reality is that grades are currently the only metric we have to benchmark students and remunerate their efforts. They have become a *currency* in the education world. Students who can perform within the confines of tests and assessments earn them and anyone who is outside the mold is left wanting. This system has trickled down from the universities and colleges that require this currency as a price for a student’s educational experience, making it hard to dissolve. The rigidity of this practice has stifled creativity and reinforced a negative climate for learning which underlies academic dishonesty, competition, and anxiety.

I recognize that it is unfair to say that grades are at the root of all evils in the education system. As someone who has benefited from “good grades”, it is hard to imagine how I would have advanced in my career in education without them. However, this also brings to light the students who have suffered on the other end of the grading scale – the students with “poor grades”. These are the students who may have had a bad academic year or just needed more time and were not able to recuperate from it. That is unfair.

To retire this futile game, educators need to bring assessment up to speed to create lifelong learners adept for the 21st century. As education evolves, we need to prevent this “currency” from being misused as the only worth of a student’s learning.

Instead of suddenly abolishing grades overnight, the value placed on them needs to change first. Teachers can begin to change the conversation around grades by putting the focus on alternative forms of assessment, such as written feedback and one-on-one interactions, as well as peer collaboration. If we are going to be committed to preparing students for the future, then they need to understand how they are developing, how to keep on improving, and how to work with others. These small changes can inspire the transition from the “grading game” into a lifelong investment in learning.

In contexts where there are high student-teacher ratios, these alternatives may not be as feasible. However, that is not an excuse for students to keep on suffering in this archaic system. **Alfie**

**Kohn** addresses this by placing hope in alternative-school structures, such as team-teaching and interdisciplinary classes. The key here is supporting teachers and giving them the time and space where they don't have to rely on grades as the primary representation of a student's learning. This is a shift in the whole system's mindset.

Since we know that grades are not going to magically disappear, we need someone to start this movement. Colleges and universities have the power to stop this flow of grade currency (that they created). They can start by not requiring grades as a transaction into post-secondary schooling and establish a more meaningful system for student assessment. This transition would be a game changer, making grades increasingly less necessary for all levels of education.

At the end of the day, we want our children to be well-educated, good citizens who are prepared for the challenges of a constantly evolving world. Transforming the culture around grades will give students a more holistic understanding of their learning and role as learners. It's time to break the rules of this tired game and start the movement for a lifelong learning process.