

Opinion Grade inflation won't catch kids up on lost learning. Good data will.



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As the first report cards of the school year arrive, parents should ask questions and schools need to respond. What does an A or B mean? What are grades even for?

Agreeing what grades represent is critical to getting kids the help they need as they try to catch up following the pandemic.

Grades K-12 have been [puffing up for years](#). In some schools, pressure to [juice college applications](#) is to blame. Others might inflate grades so as [not to discourage](#) struggling students. Yet for all their flaws, grades are still the most regular indicator that parents and kids get of academic performance.

Now two new studies suggest that covid-19 cranked up the helium — that grades might be giving a false sense of how students are doing. Deceiving families about whether children need help during the window when interventions would do the most good is not kindness. This is no “victimless crime,” says Tim Daly, chief executive of EdNavigator, one of the nonprofits involved in the research.

[The first study](#) looked at 10 years' worth of grades and test scores from middle and high schools in Washington. The researchers — Dan Goldhaber, who runs the Center for Education Data and Research at the University of Washington, and Maia Goodman Young, a PhD candidate at the university — report a concerning trend.

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Before the pandemic, grades and scores rose roughly in step. Afterward, not so much. During covid-19 disruptions, state officials encouraged more generous grading, and average marks rose, for example, from B's to A's in all subjects. As restrictions eased, grades returned to pre-pandemic levels. Test scores, though, were [below pre-pandemic norms](#). Did a B pre- and post-pandemic mean that students had mastered the same material? Goldhaber and Goodman Young have their doubts.

In [a second study](#) two school districts — anonymized to protect students' privacy — turned over their grades, test scores and data on chronic absenteeism from 2017 through 2022. This research noted something odd too.

By 2022, the schools had many more students than in 2019 who were both absent for 18 days or more each year and who were scoring below par for their age on state tests. Yet more of these struggling students were earning B averages or better in their core classes. This investigation was done by Learning Heroes, EdNavigator and another nonprofit, the New Teacher Project.

Covid-19 policies varied between states and school systems. And standardized tests have [well known limitations](#). Still, the divergence between grades and test scores that these two studies flag are a warning: Parents and school systems need *some* accurate measurement of student learning.

“If any of us went to the doctor and had an MRI and it gave a false reading, we would be up in arms,” New Teacher Project chief executive Tequilla Brownie told me. “Yet we’re kind of ambivalent about the fact as a nation that we’re giving false data to parents.”

Part of the problem is a mismatch between how different kinds of education data are collected and delivered. Parents see children’s grades regularly; states can be slow to analyze trends or might not release them. By contrast, standardized test results are published and searchable, but these snapshots are less frequent.

Making grades meaningful is especially important now. Many post-pandemic academic recovery programs require families to opt in, which too few are doing. A [Brookings Institution survey found](#) that just about a quarter of parents are sending a child to summer school or tutoring or were interested in these. Less than 40 percent of students getting C’s or worse were participating.

Missing out on catch-up assistance has real costs down the line. [The City University of New York](#) reported that nearly half of its freshmen who had been educated in the city’s public schools needed remedial classes to tackle undergraduate work in the first semester of the 2022-2023 school year. At [a cost of \\$210 per credit](#), these students were paying for help they might have gotten free earlier.

On a policy level, gaps in evidence about kids’ lagging performance might lead to misguided support for one program over another. For instance, prioritizing student mental health by adopting a four-day school week might make sense if kids are truly achieving at high levels. If they’re not, [less teaching](#) could compound an unfolding educational disaster.

One place to course-correct would be for principals and superintendents to explain what grades mean at the start of the school year. If students can’t be scored below 50 percent on an assignment or in a course, [parents should know that](#). Schools could also give parents a benchmark for what their kids bring home, such as how last year’s ninth-graders performed in algebra or European history. If schools don’t offer that sort of data, parents need to ask for it.

And schools shouldn’t feel like they have to massage the numbers. According to [Bibb Hubbard](#), president of Learning Heroes, surveys show parents overwhelmingly want “complete, honest, truthful information” about their child’s academics, “even if it is bad news.”

It can also help if report cards to put grades in context. Schools could publish the whole distribution in each course, or color-code grades to show whether they place a student in the top, middle or bottom third of their class. A B-minus in chemistry might be a warning sign rather than cause for relief if it means a child is in the bottom 10 percent of their peers.

Students deserve the truth. It’s not caring to conceal what a child doesn’t know until [they’re floundering in college](#) or unable to meet the demands of their first job. The kindest thing adults can do is to have tough conversations with kids about what they are learning — and what they’re not.