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A Flawed Grading System

The American education system has used a point-based grading system to determine a student’s understanding of the material for many years. Students earn points from homework, quizzes, tests, etc. The points earned divided by the maximum possible points determine their grade. Each of these points contributes to a class grade for the term, and an average is taken for all of the classes to determine the grade point average (GPA). Even in college, most universities and professors use the same means of grading. Because this academic grading system reinforces incorrect learning habits and creates a stressful learning environment, teachers should try introducing new systems of assessment to help students focus on learning.

This point system of grading does not encourage students to learn, but rather focus on the amount of points homework and tests are worth and how to get the most points. Chip Porter, a student who attended Mountain Brook Junior and was a member of the MBJH Ted-Ed Club TED Talk, points out that most students only want to know what they will be assessed on during tests. He explains that one messed up assignment, project, or test can ruin any chance of getting a good grade (Porter). Porter proceeds, stating that this can cause students to give up because they cannot get the grade they want anymore; other students resort to cheating because a better grade is more important than learning the material. As a result, this has led to many schools creating an “Earning not Learning” environment for their students (Porter).
However, other students such as Kate Harding, author of “How I Bluffed My Way Through College,” simply do not care about their grades and just want to pass the class. She writes, “...I read just enough to get through a couple of papers and a final exam...” and continues to describe how she could have easily been an A English student if she read half the books that were assigned. Many students have the capabilities to excel in school, but lack the motivation to do so. This lack of motivation is due to the system presenting itself in a way where you only need so many points to pass so why do more work than you need.

Furthermore, the current academic grading system can also cause students to experience large amounts of stress. Students can often become overwhelmed with school work that has to be completed and tests they have to study for. On top of that, many students are involved in after-school activities such as extracurriculars or work. A survey by the American Psychological Association reports that “nearly half of all teens — 45 percent — said they were stressed by school pressures” (Neighmond). Schools should present a safe and healthy learning environment for children to learn and expand their knowledge. While stress can be good in small doses, constant stress is detrimental for the body, especially for developing teenagers. Teachers must remember that their job is to teach, not to assign as much work as possible to know how much their students understand. An NPR poll conducted with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health also found that “Almost 40 percent of parents say their high-schooler is experiencing a lot of stress from school” (Neighmond). It is an awful thing to hear that some students even resort to unthinkable, permanent solutions. In this case, Porter reports in his TED Talk that 40 students kill themselves every year because of school-related
stress. School becomes so stressful and painful for them to endure that they would rather die than deal with it anymore.

As a result of these issues, schools should consider introducing new ways of teaching that create a healthier learning environment for students. One example is standards-based grading. Michael Scarlett, an associate professor and chair at Augustana College, explains that “Standards-based grading is a practice that bases students’ grades on their performance on a set of clearly defined learning objectives rather than the completion of assignments and tests or the accumulation of points.” Scarlett introduces this system of assessment into his classroom and discovers something. He notes that the conversations he had with his students focuses more on learning rather than policies, effort, and the number of points assignments are worth (Scarlett). Scarlett also believes that the grade he gave to each student at the end of the term better represented their level of understanding than when the grades were based only on points.

Another teacher, Catlin Tucker, who is also a best selling author and education trainer, provides a different solution in which she only uses the most recent assessments, not the whole term, to represent how much a student has improved during the grading period. Throughout the year, Tucker also allows her students to make corrections with a rubric which allows them to understand why something is wrong and how to fix it while also producing less stress. Lastly, Tucker gives her students a chance to argue their grade by having a one-on-one conversation with each of them. This style of teaching presents a great example of a healthy learning environment because rather than focusing on points and becoming stressed, students are encouraged to reflect on their learning and the progress they have made over the term.
On the contrary, other people, such as Susan du Plessis, a member of the Association for Mathematics Education of South Africa, claims that good grades are important for becoming a successful person in life as they can help students get into good colleges and receive scholarships for higher education. While this may be true for some, everybody has a different definition of success. For many, college is not the path they wish to take, and people such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg have all dropped out of school and became very “successful” people (Hess). Grades are not necessarily a bad thing, but how they are assigned could use some adjusting.

In conclusion, school officials should try teaching in new ways by branching out from the popularized system of grading. A sense of humor and less assigned busy work could make a huge difference in relieving unwanted stress. Children are more than just numbers in a system, they are people who want to learn and grow, but the current grading system can make it difficult for some. It is important that students get their work done, strive to do their best, and push themselves to achieve greatness, but they cannot do it alone.
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