

# Tough Love

## *The value of high grading standards*

In my high school, rumor had it that Richard Brockhaus was the toughest grader in the state. Others disagreed. They insisted it was the whole country.

When as a senior I finally braved his Advanced Placement calculus course, Dr. B did nothing to dispel these rumors. For all my efforts, it seemed that I could not live up to his expectations. My grade for the fall semester remains the only C on my academic record.

Dr. B was not wholly devoid of sympathy. A relentless encourager, he constantly reminded us that the material we were trying to learn was “not rocket science.” Thus motivated, I managed to improve my grade modestly in the spring.

When we arrived in May to take the course’s final exam, to our surprise we found a TV perched awkwardly on Dr. B’s desk. In lieu of taking an exam, we would be watching *Stand and Deliver*, the film documenting Jaime Escalante’s success in teaching AP calculus to disadvantaged students in East Los Angeles. Apparently our work had met his expectations after all.

Still, those of us who had struggled through the course had little idea of what to expect as we headed into the official AP exam later that month. As it turned out, the College Board’s questions were among the easiest we had encountered all year. Dr. B had taught “to the test” and well beyond it; every member of our class passed with flying colors.

Contrast my experiences with those of 300 11th and 12th graders in Boston, Springfield, and Worcester surveyed in 2003 by the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute. In the 10th grade, these students had failed in their first attempt at the statewide Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam.

Yet more than 45 percent of them reported having a B average or better in the 2002–03 academic year; fewer than one in ten reported an average of D or F. This despite the state’s insistence that students who do not pass the MCAS demonstrate no more than “a minimal understanding of the subject matter and do not solve simple problems.” Their

teachers, it would seem, had signaled success when in fact the students were floundering.

Today in Massachusetts, as in many states, students who fail to pass the statewide graduation test are prevented from receiving a diploma. Teachers who hand out misleading grades thereby allow some students, already let down by a school system that has failed to prepare them adequately, to be blindsided. Only because the state provides multiple opportunities to pass the MCAS do such students have some chance at redemption.

In this issue, David Figlio and Maurice Lucas take a systematic look at the effects of grading practices on elementary students in Florida (“The Gentleman’s A,” p. 60). Their findings confirm what Dr. Brockhaus understood: Students learn far more from rigorous teachers than from those with lenient grading standards.

Regrettably, teachers with high standards appear to be as scarce in Florida as they are in Massachusetts. Only 50 percent of students awarded As and 11 percent of those with Bs performed at an A or B level on the corresponding section of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Teachers clearly need some discretion in deciding how to distribute grades; situations will arise where they feel the need to award a higher grade than warranted in order to sustain a student’s morale or to reward exceptional effort. But grades that are consistently too high send the wrong message. They tend to discourage students from making a serious effort and increase the odds that serious problems will go unidentified until it is too late.

Is the era of unchecked grade inflation already behind us? Perhaps. As external assessments become a regular part of the American education system, parents may demand that report cards offer accurate information about their children’s progress. And principals responsible for ensuring that their schools make “adequate yearly progress” will need to ask teachers to keep standards high.

—MARTIN WEST

Teachers who hand out misleading grades allow some students to be blindsided by state tests.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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