

GRADES VS. GROWTH: WHAT SHOULD EDUCATION MEASURE?

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For generations, grades have been the go-to measure of academic achievement. From elementary school to university, students are evaluated by the letters and numbers on their report cards. But as our understanding of learning deepens and the world evolves, an important question emerges: Should education focus more on grades or on growth?

Grades offer a clear and standardized way to assess performance. An “A” signals excellence, a “C” suggests average performance, and anything lower points to areas needing improvement. They provide a straightforward system for teachers, students, and parents to track progress. However, grades tell only part of the story.

A single letter or number can’t capture the full complexity of a student’s learning journey, especially when success is about more than test scores. Too much emphasis on grades can shift the focus from understanding concepts to simply chasing rewards. Many students begin to tie their self-worth to their report cards, rather than to the skills and knowledge they’ve gained. This pressure can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Moreover, a grade-driven mindset may discourage risk-taking and creativity. Students might avoid challenging subjects or innovative ideas to protect their GPA, rather than embracing opportunities that foster deeper learning and personal development.

On the other hand, a growth-based approach emphasizes a student’s individual progress over time. Instead of asking, “Did I get an A?” students are encouraged to reflect: “Have I improved?” “Did I overcome a challenge?” “What did I learn from my mistakes?”

This perspective fosters resilience, curiosity, and a genuine love of learning – qualities that matter well beyond the classroom. Growth-based learning acknowledges that everyone starts from a different place and moves at their own pace, creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

In the real world, grades rarely determine success. Employers and communities value skills like problem-solving, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and perseverance far more than test scores. A student trained to value growth is better prepared to navigate change and real-world challenges.

Still, grades do have a role. They provide structure, help set goals, and identify where support may be needed. But when grades become the sole focus, we risk losing sight of education's true purpose: to foster growth, learning, and development.

A well-rounded education system should measure both:

Grades reflect a student's current level of understanding.

Growth reflects a student's journey and progress.

Education should go beyond producing good grades. It should nurture capable, curious, and confident learners. While grades offer short-term feedback, a focus on growth builds the mindset and skills needed for long-term success. By valuing both achievement and improvement, schools can create environments where students not only strive for the right answers but also develop the ability to adapt, persist, and thrive in a changing world.

References:

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