

WHAT IS A GRADE? Part 1

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This is Part 1 of a 4-part series on the subject of grading in public schools

The majority of people in this country, from ages 5-95, have participated in some form of formal schooling. The majority of that group has also participated in public schooling.

Our own schooling experiences inform what we think and believe about what should happen in schools. It makes sense – it's one of the oldest "institutions" in this country and for a good majority of us, we spent approximately 13 years of our formative years going to school. So we know something about it from our own experience.

Take, for instance, the concept of grading. For the majority of us, when we went to school, we started out in late August, early September, completed work that the teacher asked us to complete, learned certain knowledge and skills from that teacher, and at different times throughout the marking period, we were "tested" on what we had learned. Those "tests" made up part of a "marking period" grade. Those grades were reported to students in a variety of subject areas that were deemed important to learn - Reading, writing, math, science, social studies (or geography), art, music, physical education, and in some cases, maybe even penmanship (print and cursive). At the high school and middle school grades were reported on a numeric (0-100) or alpha-numeric (A, B, C, D, F) scale; but that scale was always based on a range of 0-100. That's what most of us knew, and so that knowledge forms our assumptions when we talk about the concept of grading in school.

So consider the question before us – if we are to raise expectations in Windsor Locks, what does our grading system (whether here in Windsor Locks or anywhere else, because the issues are the same everywhere) have to do with it?

Consider this simplified example for an individual student.

Assignment Graded	Grade Recorded in Gradebook
Homework 1	0
Classwork 1	60
Quiz 1	60
Test 1	60
Classwork 2	60
Homework 2	80
Quiz 2	90
Test 2	90
Quiz 3	90
Test 3	90

Grades "earned" on different assignments – Science, quarter 1, assignments were given in the order they appear. All assignments are out of a total of 100 points.

In order to arrive at a single grade to report on the student's report card, the teachers first have to look at the grades the student earned, include all of them in a sum total, then divide the total by the number of assignments. You arrive at an average of 70.

Think about it – the assignments are listed in chronological order from the beginning to the end of the marking period. Clearly, in this list of assignments, there is a point in the marking period where something changed for the student – perhaps more effort, or maybe even some intervention from the teacher, or staying after class, that may have helped the student to grasp the concept. Then, for the rest of the quarter, the student performs on each of the assessments at the 80-90 level. Yet, when you average all of the quarter grades together, the student is left with a 70. Wait, a 70? All that work and learning, with a consistency of performance at the "90" level – and the student ends up with a single, final mark of 70?

If measurement of learning is what a grade is supposed to communicate, wouldn't we want that grade to reflect the student's level of learning as a result of teaching over the course of the quarter, instead of rehashing what the student didn't know at the beginning of that quarter? Isn't the point of education to know, understand and do something that you didn't know, didn't understand, or weren't able to do before? So why should a student's grades include assignments that demonstrate what the student didn't know, didn't understand, and wasn't able to do?