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The Gentleman's 'A'

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The Gentleman's 'A'

David N. Figlio and Maurice E. Lucas

This study found that students taught by tough-grading teachers learn more in school. Unfortunately, it also found that parents have a more favorable view of teachers who are easy-graders.

Author David N. Figlio is a professor of economics at the University of Florida and author Maurice E. Lucas is Director of Research and Assessment for the Alachua County, Florida (Gainesville) public schools. Their study examined the grades assigned by Alachua County's third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers.

To date, few empirical studies link the grading patterns of individual teachers to student achievement. Alachua County was an ideal site for such an investigation because its students take both the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS).

The ITBS is a nationally normed achievement test and the FCAT is designed to determine how well students have achieved Florida's "Sunshine State Standards." Figlio and Lucas used FCAT scores to determine the accuracy of the student grades assigned by teachers. They used ITBS scores to compare local student achievement to national norms.

There was a substantial discrepancy between the absolute level of the grades and the FCAT scores. Only 9% of the students who were awarded A's actually performed at the A level (a score of 5) on the FCAT. Only 50% of the A students performed at the 4 or 5 level on the FCAT and 17% failed to achieve minimum competency (a score of 3 or above).

Importantly, there were substantial differences among teachers in the accuracy of their reported grades. Some assigned grades that closely corresponded to students' FCAT scores. They were classified as "tough" graders. The others were classified as "moderate" or "easy."

Sixty-five percent of students receiving an A from a tough grader earned an FCAT score of 4 or 5, i.e., the equivalent of A or B. Only 5% of the tough graders' A students attained an FCAT score of 1 or 2. By contrast, only 28% of students earning an A from an easy grader earned an FCAT score of 4 or 5 and 32% of them earned only a 1 or 2.

Benefit of Tougher Grading

When students advancing from one grade to the next happened to draw a tough grader, most made greater achievement gains. The average additional improvement was about 1/5 of a grade in achievement as measured by the ITBS. Only the students who were far below their class average failed to gain this benefit. Tough grading neither helped nor hurt them.

The students who benefited most from tough grading tended to be above-average individuals in classes where overall average achievement levels were low. Also, below-average students benefited from tough grading when they were assigned to classes in which overall achievement was high.

Who Were the Tough Graders

Tough-grading teachers were distributed throughout the school system. There was as much variation in grading among teachers within schools as there was among teachers throughout the district.

Tough-grading teachers were generally more experienced, holders of master's degrees, and slightly less likely to have attended a selective undergraduate institution. And they tended to retain their grading standards over time. Few teachers became easier or tougher from year to year, even when they taught classes of higher or lower ability students.

Why Tough Grading Works

The authors asked whether tougher grading may cause students to work harder or parents to give more help with assignments. They found that parents did report giving more help with homework even though the actual homework load assigned by tough graders was only 10% higher.

Why it is Tough to be a Tough-Grading Teacher

When parents were asked to rate their child's teacher, they mostly assigned A's. Tough-grading teachers, however, were 50% more likely to receive a B than easy or moderate graders.

Apparently, parents looked at their child's lower grades and greater need for help, and reasoned that the teacher could be doing a better job. By contrast, the higher grades assigned by easy graders may have created the opposite impression. Parents would have assumed that their children were learning well and effortlessly, and that their teacher was doing an excellent job.

Parents trust teachers; and, in any case, few parents would have the knowledge, expertise, or inclination to question a favorable report card. For decades, public polling has indicated that many parents are skeptical about the quality of public education but most are convinced that their child has a good teacher and a good school. Inflated grades may be the reason.

Many factors encourage teachers to assign inflated grades. In addition to maintaining a positive image, inflated grades sidestep parent and student disappointment as well as the need to revise instruction. Teachers know that low grades are far more likely to elicit criticism than high ones.

In truth, inflated grades avoid short-term discomfort at the risk of long-term failure. Like an inaccurate medical report, they can mask a problem until it is untreatable. With so much at stake, it would seem that all states and school districts need to examine this issue.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com