

When grades lie

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It really matters if school report-card grades don't tell truth about how your child is doing

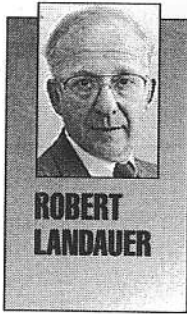
The Oregon high school junior has a 3.93 average — nearly perfect on a 4.0 scale. The student must be near the top of her class, you say. Wrong, the student is 84th in a class of 400, not even in the top fifth.

State Department of Education officials use this verified story as an example of grade inflation. Listeners must wonder whether all the children in that super community, like those in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, are above average.

Grade inflation masks differences. It gives students excuses to avoid giving maximum effort. It distorts insights that class rank might offer and tells colleges and employers less and less. And if a school's grades are routinely bloated, how far can one trust the recommendations of teachers and counselors?

The story illustrates another point. When Oregon's public school students bring home year-end report cards this week and next, parents no longer can comfortably rely on the grades they see. The real questions are:

What do the grades mean? How is my child doing compared to others in his class? Where does she rank among all students in her state? Regardless of comparisons with others, are our kids progressing? Are they learning survival skills that will help them clear the rapids that life scatters along our way?



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Oregon is striding toward answers to those questions. The results, though, will shock and even anger some parents, when children with comfort-zone grades run into much higher expectations. Tests results to be announced in late summer will tell how much ground students need to cover to prepare for statewide standards-based tests in two years. This year's eighth-graders will then be the first students to show whether their deeds merit a Certificate of Initial Mastery in math and English.

School districts will decide for themselves whether students need to earn this certificate to graduate. But an Oregon high school diploma without the certification — and, later, a Certificate of Advanced Mastery — soon will be treated like devalued currency in the marketplace. It will buy less.

"The certificates of mastery will be so important to employers and college-admissions people that they eventually will replace the diplomas," predicts Norma Paulus, Oregon's superintendent of public instruction.

The test for the certificates of mastery is when the bubble bursts, when the air is let out of the compression of grades. This is when students who dodge rigorous courses to protect the GPA are deflated. This is when their A in basic math, for example, is measured against the effort that goes into a B or C in trigonometry and calculus. It is when justice rewards the risk-takers.

It is also when alibis end for school districts. "School boards and teachers will have to see that challenging material and sound instructional methods are there for all students," says Paulus. "A low-calorie diet will show up as scrawny results on the tests for certificates of mastery."

Summit strongly supports school standards, testing

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The Oregon Leadership Summit on Monday delivered a strong defense of the state's school reform effort, including the oft-maligned state standards and tests that culminate in a Certificate of Initial Mastery.

A white paper prepared for the summit said it would be "short-sighted and disastrous" to get rid of the reforms that have boosted student achievement despite funding problems in many school districts.

The paper, prepared by the Oregon Business Council, also argued that if the state dropped these reforms, it would have to come up with new assessment measures because of federal law.

Gov.-elect Ted Kulongoski has also defended the reforms. His Republican opponent, Kevin Mannix, said during the campaign that they should be jettisoned.

In a separate paper, college leaders generally endorsed proposals to revamp higher education in Oregon, in part because the plan had some of the same features they also had already

decided upon.

Richard Jarvis, chancellor of the state university system, praised the emphasis on increasing access to college for Oregonians. Because tuition is relatively high at state institutions while the pool of scholarship money is low, some would-be students are now shut out of college, he said.

At a seminar on investing in higher education, Jarvis strongly endorsed the plan's call for more student financial aid.

Dave Frohnmayer, University of Oregon president, echoed the plan's call for more financial freedom at the local campuses. UO gets only 18 percent of its budget from the state, he said, but must rely on the state but reaucracy for many purchases, answer to lawmakers on tuition and go through a lengthy approval process for a new building even if all the funding is private.

— Jeff Mapes, Betsy Hammond and Steve Carter

Two facts help pound home to Oregon's parents and students how hugely performance expectations have changed:

● Roughly one-third of Oregon's 10th-graders in 1996 could meet the new high math standards that the State Board of Education has set.

● This year's eighth-graders getting set to romp through a summer of relaxation must meet those standards to get a Certificate of Initial Mastery.

Three former Oregon teachers of the year say that most students rise to high expectations.

As long as you are clear from day 1 about what you expect and inform students how they are doing, most make the effort to perform, says Stuart Perlmeter of Thurston High School in Springfield. He prints out grade reports weekly, gives few A's, and 15 percent of his students will bring home F's this term.

We are not demanding too much of students, says Bonnie Elliott, who teaches Spanish in the Bend district. "But there will be a transition period in which low scores send parents, students, principals and teachers into a panic, not because kids can't rise to higher standards, but because they are not used to doing that."

Clackamas High School science teacher and track coach Ford Morishita looks forward to raising the bar to give "a reality check on true ability and effort." He, like the other master teachers and Paulus, worries about backlash — about a possible push to drop our sights and lower our expectations. Morishita captures the essence of Oregon's entire school-reform effort:

We must have rigorous standards, and we must defend them.

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