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Grades Don't Matter: Using Assessment to Measure True Learning

Tony Donen, Jennifer Anton, Lisa Beard, Todd Stinson, Glenda Sullivan

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Using Assessment to Measure True Learning
Teaching with grades that basically measure completion and compliance does a disservice to students, teachers, and the community. Fairview High School teachers have developed a program that measures a student s mastery of concepts a grading process that actually values learning. Told through the teachers own experiences, with practical examples and sample rubrics, this book provides a vision of how to create a true learning culture in a traditional high school setting.
It s all about the learning Fairview High School could do well on minimum- proficiency testing, yet one day principal Tony Donen realized that the grades he examined didn t make much sense. There must be a better way, he thought, to measure what students really know about subject matter.

His quest for better assessments led him to assemble a team of teachers to think outside the box. Donen challenged the team to build a gradebook from the ground up a method of evaluating what pupils have learned in terms of mastering the material. As simple as it sounds, the results are nothing less than extraordinary: better understanding, improved communication, and more mastery of material.

Why traditional grading doesn t work
I began looking very closely at student grades down to every individual assignment, and this is what I found. Grades were a culmination of random percentage weights on different types of assignments with little forethought into what the grades were telling us about the learning that we were supposed to be holding in the highest esteem. Many grades were based on the luck of which teacher a student had for class. In all classes there were many grades based on work habits such as doing work on time and complying with teacher requests as opposed to verifying that learning did take place for a specific target. To me it came down to two basic items: completion versus mastery. And it was clear that every grade we had could speak to completion and very few could tell me something about student mastery. Author Tony Donen

The necessity for assessment
Changing student achievement can be done in many different ways. Take some time to study the research. What you will find is that ultimately the Number One, top-of-the-list, most crucial piece in making achievement gains for any teacher is through assessment practices. And so, with the very little knowledge I had on how to exactly do that and the limited amount of information I could find on this actually happening in a high school setting, I sat down with one of my math teachers and decided to begin with the most obvious and blatant area of assessment the grade book.

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