





Making the Grade?

Parents view report card grades as most important for understanding achievement. Teachers don't.

Eight out of 10 parents think it's important for their child to earn a college degree, according to Learning Heroes, an organization dedicated to helping equip and inform parents to better advocate for their children's educational success. But if students aren't meeting grade-level expectations, parents' aspirations and students' goals for themselves are unlikely to be realized.

However, most parents have an inflated view of how well their children are really doing in school. Learning Heroes' research report, *Parents 2018: Going Beyond Good Grades*, conducted by Edge Research, found that nearly 9 out of 10 parents—regardless of race, income, geography, and education level—believe their child is achieving at or above grade level in grades 3–8. Yet national data indicates only about one-third of students actually perform at that level.

Learning Heroes recently delved into the drivers of this disconnect to find out why parents hold such a rosy picture of their children's performance and what could be done to give them a more complete and accurate view. The organization found that while different parents maintain different levels of involvement in their children's education, they rely on report cards as their primary source of information, believing that good grades mean their child is performing at grade level. Yet, when Learning Heroes polled teachers of grades 3–8 nationwide, almost half reported that grades measure effort more than achievement, with 64 percent agreeing that parents focus too much on grades alone.

Grades Are the Disconnect

That's right: Report cards are at the center of the disconnect. Parents rate the grades on their child's report card as the most important way to assess how their child is achieving. It's not surprising that they base their sense of their child's performance on report cards; it's the one piece of information parents receive reliably—and report cards generally tell them that their child is doing fine.

More than 6 out of 10 parents report that their child receives mostly A's or A's and B's on their report cards, with 84 percent

assuming that this indicates their child is doing the work expected of them at their current grade. “For most parents, if your kids don’t get D’s and F’s, you assume they are doing well,” one parent told Learning Heroes. “Until you get that notice, you assume they are doing OK.”

Yet a recent study by TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) found that while nearly two-thirds of students across five school systems earned A’s and B’s, far fewer met grade-level expectations on state tests. On the whole, students who were earning B’s in math and English language arts had less than a 35 percent chance of having met the grade-level bar on state exams.

In focus groups, parents said they also rely on talking with their child, and on their child’s mood and body language, as indications of how well he or she is achieving academically. But children might give parents only part of the story about how things are going in school, based on Learning Heroes’ interviews with upper elementary and middle school children. “I don’t really open up to my mom as much as I feel I should,” said one Pittsburgh middle school student. “I pretty much only tell her good things that happen.”

How Teachers Tell

Teachers know that report card grades typically reflect effort, progress, and participation in

class in addition to academic mastery. In contrast to parents, they rate report cards third in importance for understanding how students are achieving, behind regular communication and graded work on assignments, tests, and quizzes.

In fact, nearly 6 in 10 teachers (58 percent) agree that “report cards and annual test scores together are the best way for a parent to understand how their child is doing academically.”

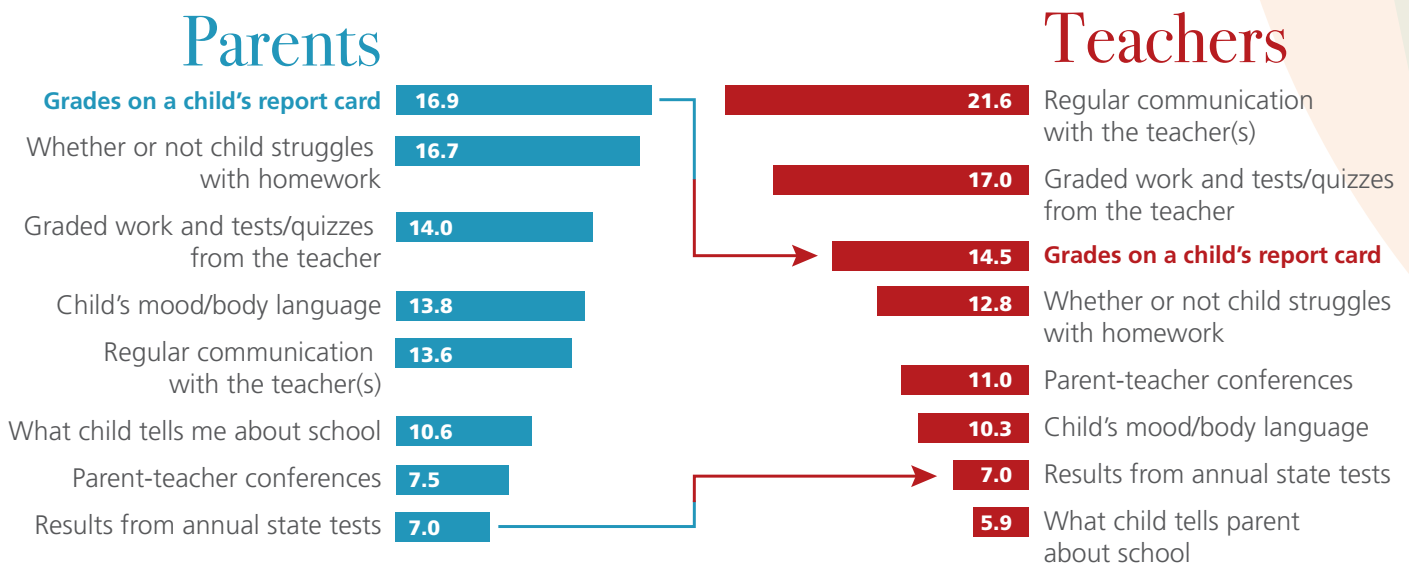
Though nearly 8 in 10 teachers said achievement or mastery of concepts factors into report card grades for their students, nearly 7 in 10 also factor in progress over the grading period, effort put forward over the grading period, and participation or engagement in class.

“Teachers are all different. Sometimes their report card grade doesn’t really match their Istation grade or scores,” said a Texas principal. “They want their kids to do [well], and they give them the grades. I’ve had talks with teachers about not doing that.”

Teachers Face Pressure

Many teachers report feeling pressure from administrators when it comes to report card grades: 56 percent said they are expected to let students redo work for additional credit, and 34 percent are expected to avoid giving too many low report card grades. Among the teachers who feel pressure to avoid giving too many low

Parents, Not Teachers, See Report Cards as Most Important for Understanding Achievement



Note: Any score above 12.5 is an above-average score.

Source: Learning Heroes, “Parents 2018: Going Beyond Good Grades”

grades, 47 percent said that the expectation comes from their principal, 41 percent from their school district, and 32 percent from other administrators or parents, while almost a quarter say from themselves.

“I think grades have been inflated for years—100 percent,” said a New Hampshire elementary school teacher. “I think most teachers would be lying if they didn’t say a B–, C+, C are the lowest kids.”

Displaying the Disconnect

Providing parents with a selection of already available information in a clear, decipherable format helps them reconsider their views about student performance, Learning Heroes found in its 2018 Parent Research.

For example, parents in the survey read the following text: “A 2017 national parent survey found that 9 in 10 parents of kindergarten through 8th graders believe their child performs at or above grade level in math and reading. Yet, a nationally representative assessment of American students shows only about one-third of students perform at grade level. And only 39 percent of teachers say their students start the school year prepared for grade-level work.”

After reading this passage, the percentage of parents who say they feel “extremely” or “very confident” that they have a clear understanding of how well their child is achieving dropped from 82 percent to 65 percent. Their confidence in report cards also shifted, with 34 percent now agreeing that “report card grades are not a good way to tell if students are performing at grade level” and 39 percent agreeing that “teachers—especially those in elementary school—do not want to give students bad grades on their report cards.”

In another scenario, parents were told to imagine their child received a B on his or her report card in math, and annual state test results indicated their child did not meet expectations. They also were told that their child’s school received an overall school performance rating of C. After reviewing this information, the 88 percent of parents who initially rated their child as at or above grade level in math dipped to 52 percent, demonstrating parents are open to multiple factors of achievement when assessing their children’s progress in school.

Painting an Accurate Picture


As part of Learning Heroes’ 2018 research, parents and teachers were presented with

“From Puzzle to Plan: A Family Worksheet,” a tool the organization designed to help enhance communication between school and home by putting a grade-level indicator based on test scores side by side with feedback from the parent, teacher, and child. The worksheet also provides parents with questions they can ask their child’s teacher in a parent-teacher conference and references to tailored, skills-based resources they can use to help their children at home as part of a co-created plan.

Nearly 7 in 10 parents rated the Family Worksheet “extremely” or “very useful” “for giving you a clear picture of how well your child is achieving academically.” Nearly 8 in 10 said they would be “extremely” or “very likely” to work with their child and their child’s teacher to fill out the information. Eighty-five percent of parents said “having all this information in one place” is “extremely” or “very useful,” and 79 percent said “discussion questions for a conversation with [their] child’s teacher(s)” are “extremely” or “very useful.”

“I would feel like there was a partnership between me and the teacher,” said a Cincinnati parent after viewing the worksheet. “We’re both working on it. Now we have a plan. I love it. I want a copy of this. I like having a plan, and I think my son would like it.”

Among teachers, 70 percent say they are “extremely” or “very interested” “in having a handout like this sent home to all of the parents of students in your school,” and 75 percent say it is “extremely” or “very useful” “for giving parents a clear picture of how well their child is achieving academically.” Seventy-five percent of teachers say they’d be “extremely” or “very likely” to work with parents to help fill out the information. And 84 percent of teachers agreed that “completing this handout would show me that a parent is involved in their child’s education.”

Closing the disconnect between what parents believe about their child’s performance and the realities of whether or not the child is actually meeting grade-level expectations is achievable. Providing parents and teachers with the same set of clear, easily decipherable information can lead to more meaningful teacher-parent discussions, which will help parents be more engaged and better prepared to support their child at home. It can provide a starting place for building deeper teacher-parent partnerships on behalf of all children. 



GOOD GRADES MASK UNDERPERFORMANCE

A 2018 study from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute says that grade inflation appears to be reinforcing the disconnect between report cards and performance through the high school years. Comparing end-of-course (EOC) exam performance to report cards, it found that EOC exams are a better predictor of grade-level proficiency and ACT test scores than report card grades. But “parents don’t appear to value both equally,” the report asserts, with parents choosing to favor the validity of report card grades.