

Gradeless Assessment Pilot
Response to parents' questions

Q: From the information presented, it is mentioned "Research shows." Can you share the research that supports that when grades are removed that there is a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation in students.

A: There have been numerous research studies on student motivation, beginning in the 1960's and continuing into the present. While there is no single definitive study, Alfie Kohn has compiled the research for numerous articles on the subject. Perhaps most comprehensive was his article, "From Degrading to De-grading," published in 1999 (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/article/degrading-de-grading/>). At the end of the article is an appendix that includes many of the definitive research studies on the subject of the effects of grading on both motivation and academic achievement.

Q: "...grades create a preference for the easiest possible task." How will the shift in motivation occur from the grade as the motivator to the task?

A: This is a tricky question, especially for a year when gradeless assessment is being piloted in only a couple subjects. Realistically, this means students will have both graded and non-graded classes. It will be interesting to see and learn from students how shifting from one system of assessment to another will affect them. There is some risk that students will work harder in graded classes simply because they have both -- that they might choose to work harder in graded than ungraded classes. However, this was not the result when we implemented Reading Workshop. When students were given the freedom to read what they wanted, most of them read more and more difficult books than when book titles were assigned. It is our hope that going gradeless will have a similar effect, and that when limitations are removed, student achievement will soar.

Q: Will every assignment receive narrative feedback? Are all assignments then weighted equally and the students can expect narrative feedback on all assignments?

A: No, not every assignment will receive narrative feedback. Report cards will be narrative, and some assignments will receive narrative feedback. Other assignments will simply be "credit" or "no credit" -- particularly for practice work toward mastering a skill. In some cases, conferencing with students will replace rubric scores. Finally, in rare cases, assignments might still be given a percentage score (some gradeless schools do this, particularly in math), but only to give formative information to students and teachers (e.g. what still needs work in this skill area?). Assignments won't be "weighted" because there are no grades or scores to average. More important assignments (or ones the students value more) will be kept in the portfolio, where students will have the opportunity to reflect on what they learned from them.

Q: How often will my child be made aware of her progress?

A: Progress reports and report cards will be issued at the same time as always. If there is a problem (e.g. a student not completing work or not making adequate progress) parents and

students will be notified immediately and a conference will be scheduled. A parent may schedule a conference at any time if s/he is concerned about a student's progress.

Q: Is it the expectation that the student will read and interpret the teacher's narrative feedback? Will there be opportunities for students to frequently confer with teachers regarding their progress?

A: Yes, there will be time for students to confer with teachers about their progress and performance on specific assignments. In addition, because the focus is shifting in the non-graded classroom from product to process, teachers will be constantly monitoring students' progress toward mastering skills and content while they are working in class. For example, if a student turns in a piece of writing that is unacceptable (e.g. poorly organized or poorly edited), instead of receiving a poor grade, the student will be asked to fix or re-do the work before moving on to a new piece of writing.

Q: Will the teacher's narratives align with the expectation that the student is to obtain mastery of the given standard(s)?

A: Yes, narratives on report cards will report on the standards being taught each trimester.

Q: How will the teachers maintain the narratives to summarize student performance when completing progress reports and report cards? Is this kept in the student's portfolio?

A: Teachers will be experimenting with various methods of record-keeping for narrative reporting, but these records will not be kept in student portfolios. Initially, they will be electronic files on each student, with notes be entered at the end of classes, after assignments are turned in, and during or after conferences with students. Down the line, we would like to use the portfolio (possibly an electronic version of the portfolio) to demonstrate mastery of the standards, and for students to self-reflect on their progress in a systematic way that becomes part of the narrative report card.

Q: Have other schools eliminated grades from some or all of their classes?

A: Yes, at the end of the article, "From Degrading to De-grading," published in 1999 (<http://www.alfiekohn.org/article/degrading-de-grading/>), Alfie Kohn has a list of schools that are gradeless. Last April, Ms. Friedman visited the Waring School in Beverly, Massachusetts, and last May, Ms. DeNoia visited Carolina Friends School in Durham, North Carolina. Both schools have been completely gradeless since the 1970's. We learned a great deal from visiting them and hope to make more school visits as the pilot study progresses.

Q: Do the schools which were researched and visited to base the decision to go gradeless have demographics similar to those at LECS (high achieving students, strong parental involvement, enrollment size, school of choice)? Can you describe the researched and visited schools please?

A: According to those criteria, yes, the schools had a similar demographic. They were small schools with high achieving students and involved parents. However, both schools visited last

spring were private, and therefore exempt from many state mandates. However, it is worth noting that our implementation of Reading and Writing Workshop was modeled after a small private school in Maine (led by Nancy Atwell, who recently won the first-ever \$1,000,000 “Genius Award” for teachers), and the model has succeeded with our population. Still, we would like to see a public non-graded school, so next on our list to visit is a school in Ithaca, New York that is a public school of choice more similar to ours.

Q: What is the long term expectation of gradeless classes when we know once students leave LECS they will return to the world of GPA, percentage scores and letter grades?

A: Our expectation and hope is that students will develop a strong foundation in all content areas with intrinsic motivation to learn, and that this spirit of learning and discovery will follow them to high school and help counter-balance the negative effects of grading. We want our students learning for the love and the inherent need to learn rather than out of fear of a punishment or hope of a reward. If we can build these truly engaged learners, ironically, they will be the students most prepared to succeed in a graded system because their focus will be on the learning not on the grades.