

100

today's job market, and grades can be a part of this. However, our schools have been established to instruct the covenant seed to be followers of Christ in all areas of life.

Although grades are important, it is more important that our children do their best with the abilities which God has given to them. That is something which report cards cannot measure.

Toufexis writes, "In Atlanta a mother beats her three children — ages twelve, ten, and eight — with a rolling pin until they are black and blue. In Richmond a man forces his nephew to stand at attention and circles the boy while spitting on him. During a parent-teacher conference in Detroit, a woman grabs her twelve-year-old son, hits him in the face until he bleeds, then punches him in the ribs and walks out of the room. What did these children

do to earn such treatment? They brought home report cards with poor grades."

Toufexis also relates what social workers have noticed. "More and more social workers, educators and police are recognizing that report-card time can trigger a torrent of emotional and physical child abuse. While no national statistics are available, experts in communities nationwide say there is a spurt in the number of children suffering brutal beatings when report cards are sent home."

Two causes for this abuse are cited by Toufexis in her article. Parent expectations and anxiety for the future are parts of the problem. "For one thing, bad grades can unleash parents' anxieties about their social status and their children's prospects. To the poor, success in school offers a way for children to escape impoverished lives. Middle-class parents push their offspring to surpass their own accomplishments. And wealthy, well-educated people routinely expect stellar performances from youngsters."

Another, and very surprising, cause for such parental behavior is also mentioned. "In many families, good marks are equated with good parenting skills. Says Anne Cohn, executive director of the Chicago-based National Committee for Prevention of Child

Abuse: 'Many parents take bad grades as a personal affront.' "

Given *Time's* report as to how seriously report cards are taken by some, it might be amazing to find that report cards are a continuing controversy in educational circles.

A large part of the controversy pertains to how accurate a measurement report cards really are. Sometimes it seems that report cards are a much better measurement of how much television a child will be allowed to watch during the two weeks after report cards have been issued, than a child's actual academic performance. Lawrence Kutner wrote about report cards in his column, "Parent and Child," in the May 25, 1989, edition of *The New York Times*. He reports, " 'One summary score every few months doesn't tell a child where she's strong or weak, and what she needs to do differently.' " Dr. Conoley (a professor of psychology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln) continued. "The report card serves as a punishment or reward that's too distant from the behavior.' "

Not only is there some question about how well report cards measure students' present performance, there has also been some interesting research done on how well report cards predict "success" in the future. Kutner quotes Dr. Sidney B. Simon, a professor in the school of educa-

tion at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, as saying, "There is no research evidence to support grades as measures of achievement. There's no research that shows grades have any connection with success in future life." It is intriguing to note that the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has not issued letter grades for about twenty years.

The controversy over the accuracy of report cards as a measure of performance centers on what is called "validity" and "reliability." "Validity" means that a grade accurately reflects what the teacher says it reflects, and "reliability" refers to whether different teachers would give the same grade to identical work. Research on validity and reliability of grading systems has gone on for quite some time.

Kutner writes: "There's a great deal of inconsistency in what teachers use to arrive at grades," said Dr. Jack C. Merwin, chairman of the department of educational psychology and former dean of the college of education at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "It's so idiosyncratic, even within the same school building."

"Measures of reliability in grading have been equally disappointing. Although individual teachers are fairly consistent when asked to grade identical examinations or essays at six month

intervals, the consistency of grades assigned by different teachers to the same essay (known as inter-rater reliability) is much worse.

" 'Inter-rater reliability of grades are quite bad,' Dr. Conoley said. 'Grades for the same essay have ranged from B+ to D- in research on teacher grading.' "

Even with its problems, the report card system is here to stay. This is partly because it has already been around for so long. Kutner quotes Dr. Thomas Fagan, a professor at Memphis State University, as saying, "I recently looked at my father's report card from 1924 - 25. It had the same information as my children's report cards today."

Since report cards have been around so long in a relatively unchanged form and are unlikely to change any time soon, we might as well take a peek at some tips passed on by Kutner on how to evaluate report cards.

"When you talk with your children about the report card, focus on their experiences in their classes rather than on their grades.

" 'Parents need to ask their children, 'What did you learn?' not 'What did you get?'" said Dr. Simon."

There are times when the learning does not stop after the test is taken. Some children learn some facts better after going over

their test mistakes at home. Such improvement might be noticed, but is not likely to be reflected on a report card.

Rewarding students for their work has been discussed in an earlier issue of *Perspectives*, but Dr. Thomas Fagan says, "Lavish rewards are not necessary. Simple praise is often just as effective."

Finally, Kutner writes, "Variations in grades from course to course are to be expected from any child. Treat a significant drop in grades in several courses, however, as a warning sign that something may be wrong."

Here are just a couple of additions to Kutner's list. Report card grades (and test grades) are not created equal. There are chapters in some textbooks which are more difficult than others. A slight drop in test, and therefore report card, grades might be expected. Also, there are times when a teacher might change the format of tests. Maybe the teacher felt that a different style of test would cover the material which was studied a bit better, or perhaps there was not time to produce a test so the publisher's test had to be used. Changes, for

the better or the worse, could be expected under such conditions.

As a final addition, report card grades might also reflect certain personal interests of students. A student who loathes studying about flowers and trees, or some other topic, might also see his grades decline.

Certainly, report cards should not be the only means of communication between parents and teachers. Attention should be given to the daily papers which are brought home. Obviously, this is far more applicable in the elementary grades than in the higher grade levels, but, still, inspecting such daily papers should prevent "report card shock" brought on by an unexpected turn for the worse.

Professors, teachers, students, and parents will continue to discuss the merits and shortcomings of report cards for some time to come. As we listen to the discussion, however, do you recognize that small manila envelope protruding from Tom Sawyer's back pocket at the end of this school day? What does it say about Tom, and what will Aunt Polly's reaction be? ■■■

## School Memories

*The above is a new rubric. What we have in mind for it is short anecdotes (or even longer summaries) of school life, submitted by our readers. The stories may be humorous, or more*