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Grade Inflation and Teaching:

What Should Teachers do in a World of Entitlement?

Meira Levinson and Ilana Finefter

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Hamaskil High School is an independent Jewish day school in an East Coast suburb.[1] 60 teachers teach about 300 students in 9-12 grades. The student body is entirely Jewish, although from many different traditions (atheist through Modern Orthodox). The vast majority are middle or upper middle class; approximately 40% of students receive some financial aid to help meet the $37,000 annual tuition, although some of these students receive aid because one of their parents is a rabbi or other leader of a Jewish institution rather than because of demonstrated need. The school's website touts its rigorous English- and Hebrew-language curricula, low student-teacher ratios, multiple service-learning and experiential learning opportunities, and commitment to Jewish education. Virtually 100% of graduates attend highly selective four-year colleges, in some cases following a gap year experience in Israel or elsewhere. Hamaskil's stated mission is "to inspire, teach, and empower Jews who are passionate, intellectual, critical, original, and ethical in all parts of their lives, so as to bring about Tikkun Olam: a more just and caring world in which Jews and all human beings will flourish with dignity and joy."[2]

This is the context in which Hamaskil is struggling with a challenge that teachers have been quietly muttering about for years, but have only recently started to raise more vocally in faculty meetings: namely, grade inflation. Teachers agree that grade inflation is rampant, for a wide variety of reasons. Some have to do with parental pressure:

> There's a big issue of entitlement to grades here…. I feel that there's pressure on teachers to inflate grades, to do overs and all those kind of things…. Generally speaking, the parents feel that they deserve it. They're paying, and they deserve for their kids to get an A+. [Ms. Sheldon]
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> You know, you have to ask yourself, how much is [dealing with the parents] worth it to me? How much is this worth, the constant battle back and forth? [Mr. Morrison]

The school administration itself often also pressures teachers to give higher grades than their students have earned.

> I'll be very honest, I have given kids D's because it's easier than giving them an F because if I give them an F, I have to document, I have to go back and forth. I have to fight, and giving them a D- is probably simpler. So yeah, have I done that? Of course. Every teacher in this school [has done this]. [Mr. Morrison]

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[1] To keep their identities confidential, we have assigned pseudonyms and changed some identifying details for the school and the teachers.

[2] Note that this is a rewording of the school's mission statement so as to protect the school from being identified by a Google search, but it stays true to the principles and values articulated in the original.

> Despite all of my trying and his trying, he was still failing…but I was supposed to pass him anyway. So I would just pass him and I said, I don't know what this means, I will be so embarrassed later on, if somebody notices that it's my name attached to this pass. I don't know what this pass is; it does not in any way reflect my feeling that the student has mastered any of the material…. It was just thrust on me. [Ms. Stein]

At the same time, teachers recognize that grade inflation is not specific to Hamaskil High, and that it would be unfair simply to blame parents and administrators for the pressure to inflate grades. Rather, grade inflation is a widespread social phenomenon in the United States. A 2005 study conducted by the ACT, for example, concluded that high school grades had inflated by as much as 12.5% between 1991-2003.[3] College grades have inflated even faster: A's and A-'s are now the most frequently awarded grade at American colleges and universities, comprising 43% of all grades, up from 31% in 1988 and 15% in 1960. Hamaskil High School is also in good company with other private schools, which seem to inflate at higher rates than public schools and universities.[4] As Mr. Morrison acknowledges, "Frankly…when I was at [an Ivy League school], it was the same thing if I wanted to fail a kid. I had to actually write a letter to his dean and justify it, so I just gave them a D."

Furthermore, these inflated grades pay off. Research shows that students with higher GPAs than other applicants are more likely to be admitted to selective colleges or be hired for competitive jobs, even if they come from a school with overt, rampant grade inflation.[5] Schools that have fought against grade inflation are now therefore rethinking their approach. Princeton University, for example, "deflated" grades about a decade ago, mandating that no more than 35% of students enrolled in a course could earn an A or A-. But against mounting evidence that Princeton undergraduates may be losing out in graduate school admissions and hiring, that high school students who are admitted to Princeton may be disproportionately favoring other Ivies instead, and that the atmosphere on Princeton's campus is now competitive rather than collegial, Princeton faculty are rethinking their deflationary policies.

The benefits of un-curved high rankings may even extend beyond schools. Corporations like General Electric and Microsoft are rethinking their policies of promoting and firing on a curve, as studies of their "stack ranking" approach show it results in lowered productivity, negative effects on employee engagement, reduced collaboration, increased cheating, damage to morale, and mistrust in leadership.[6]

In this respect, grade inflation can be seen as a supportive stance, one that is focused on student success rather than failure. Despite his earlier condemnation of grade inflation, for instance, Mr. Morrison later treats it as an expression of Hamaskil's ethic of care:

> One of the things that's really good about this school is we encourage personal relations of the faculty with the students…. I can't help it; I feel bad if there's a kid who I know is gonna be

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[3] https://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/issues.pdf

[4] http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/14/the-history-of-college-grade-inflation/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

[5] http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0069258. Swift SA, Moore DA, Sharek ZS, Gino F (2013) Inflated Applicants: Attribution Errors in Performance Evaluation by Professionals. PLoS ONE 8(7): e69258. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0069258

[6] Murray, A. (2010). *Lasting Lessons from the Best Leadership Minds of Our Time. The Wall Street Journal Essential Guide to Management.* Harper Business.

> devastated by the grade…. I think this is a cultural thing…. We've created an environment in which we try to find success for kids, no matter what… and that I think sometimes does lead us to grade inflate or to be easier on the kid.

One possible solution is to abandon grades altogether and give feedback via narrative reports. Hampshire, Evergreen State, Fairhaven, and Goddard Colleges, for instance, are all selective colleges that provide faculty narrative assessments rather than grades. But this only works if faculty teach relatively few students overall so they can write informative, original reports for each student. The University of Santa Cruz, by contrast, has abandoned its historical commitment to narrative assessments in favor of grades because of increasing demands on faculty time, rising class sizes, and decreasing confidence in the use or originality of narrative assessments in an age of "cut-and-paste" word processing. The trends are even more discouraging at the high school level. One researcher was able to find only five US high schools in 2008 that used solely narrative assessments; by 2014, this number seems to be down to one or two.[7]

Hamaskil High school teachers' frustrations with grade inflation hence are part of a complicated picture. On one hand, teachers fear that their students see that no matter what, they will pass their courses with grades that satisfy college requirements. These teachers also believe that students therefore don't put a lot of effort into studying—either because they don't know how to or because they know it doesn't matter—and then graduate from high school without really knowing the material. In contrast to Hamaskil's mission statement, this directly harms students "intellectual" and "ethical" development, as they acquire a sense of (unearned) entitlement that follows them into college and career. Teachers also sacrifice their professional integrity by assigning grades that misrepresent students' learning.

On the other hand, these students feel nurtured and cared by their teachers who want to help them make their way to a good college and subsequent life. High school teachers focused on "empowering" their students shouldn't stand in the way of their success. Nor can private school teachers afford to alienate students and parents in a metropolitan area replete with alternative choices, including other Jewish day schools. When the data demonstrate so clearly that grade inflation increases students' college and career opportunities, and that grade deflation actively hurts students in an ever more competitive world, it may be hard to justify any opposition to grade inflation.

How should Hamaskil's faculty balance professional integrity, student learning, care, transparency, student success in college admissions, and school success in the private school marketplace? What principles should guide grading practices at Hamaskil High School?

[7] The 2008 study can be found at http://www.msmc.la.edu/PDFFiles/Education/High%20School%20Students%20Perspectives.pdf. We took the list of schools included in this article and checked their current assessment policies; only Lehman Alternative Community School—notably, a public school in Ithaca, NY—still assigns no grades. We were unable to check the pseudonym-ized "Progressive Secondary School" studied in the article, since we do not know its actual identity.