

# Grading Schools: A Hazardous Exercise of Questionable Value

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Dec 20, 2016

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. [John F. Kennedy]

Because our traditional public schools are supposed to be the one best school for everyone (mission impossible), a lot of us – perhaps the vast majority - have gotten used to thinking about quality and talent in one dimension. They imagine that there are great teachers, good teachers, mediocre teachers, and bad teachers. There are great schools and bad schools, and a lot in between. There are smart kids, and not-so-smart kids. That's how a lot of us think about school system policy issues, which is a serious problem. The much more realistic and productive perspective is to see educators, campuses, and students in multiple dimensions. People and teams of people (like schools) have strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, we have [evidence](#) that even our traditional public schools, tasked with favoring no one and doing a great job for every child in their attendance zone, accidentally develop strengths and weaknesses; that is, except for schools that have become utterly dysfunctional total failures.

The critical factor is that children differ in how they learn, and in terms of the subject themes that can either excite/rivet them (recall the [Sports School blog](#)), or bore/disengage them. So, along with doing the obvious (but difficult in the current system) of disbanding the staff of totally dysfunctional schools, and firing holders of teaching positions with no useful teaching competencies, we need to recognize the imperative of matching educator strengths with student needs and passions. I think that will require specialized schools that you cannot assign children to, and then well-informed (including, especially by dynamic price signals) school choice on a level playing field (subsidy policy that does not favor public school users). But maybe it can happen through huge, multi-faceted, 'comprehensively uniform' schools, better student and educator data,

and then teacher-student matching with a super-computer; an e-harmony for student growth and educator career satisfaction. We need one or the other, fast.

Assigning letter grades or scores to comprehensively uniform, traditional public school campuses is reasonable and somewhat informative because all of the schools have the same aim; educate every child in their attendance zone. Well-conceived grading systems for traditional public schools usefully indicate the relative probability that your child will better learn the tested material there than at another ranked school. But given educator, even comprehensively uniform schools', strengths and weaknesses, highly ranked schools and highly regarded educators, will serve some children poorly. A universal school choice program in which private school users receive the same subsidy as public school users will cause *every* traditional public school to suffer some enrollment losses; though not necessarily net losses after the sorting process stabilizes. Even executed brilliantly, one size does not fit all. Some will prefer a specialized alternative; again recall my discussion of the [Sports Theme School](#).

We have to expand our thinking about 'good' students to good at what, and by what pedagogy. We have to expand our thinking about 'good' educators and campuses to *good for whom*. That multi-dimensional mindset is an essential precursor of productive school system transformation.