



# In Fight against Grade Inflation, Those Rare Tough Teachers Are Champions

**SIXTEEN YEARS AGO**, *Education Next* published a research article providing the first hard evidence that students learn more from teachers who are more demanding when handing out student grades (see “The Gentleman’s A,” *research*, Spring 2004). Using data on elementary school students in Alachua County, Florida, which includes the city of Gainesville, Maurice Lucas and David Figlio identified the toughest teachers by comparing students’ course grades to their performance on end-of-year state tests. Their analysis revealed that all students—and especially high-achievers—benefit academically from high grading standards.

I wrote then in this space that the findings reminded me of my high school calculus teacher, Dr. Richard Brockhaus:

In my high school, rumor had it that Richard Brockhaus was the toughest grader in the state. Others disagreed. They insisted it was the whole country.

When as a senior I finally braved his Advanced Placement calculus course, Dr. B did nothing to dispel these rumors. For all my efforts, it seemed that I could not live up to his expectations. My grade for the fall semester remains the only C on my academic record.

Dr. B was not wholly devoid of sympathy. A relentless encourager, he constantly reminded us that the material we were trying to learn was “not rocket science.” Thus motivated, I managed to improve my grade modestly in the spring.

When we arrived in May to take the course’s final exam, to our surprise we found a TV perched awkwardly on Dr. B’s desk. In lieu of taking an exam, we would be watching *Stand and Deliver*, the film documenting Jaime Escalante’s success in teaching AP calculus to disadvantaged students in East Los Angeles. Apparently our work had met his expectations after all.

Still, those of us who had struggled through the course had little idea of what to expect as we headed into the official AP exam later that month. As it turned out, the College Board’s questions were among the easiest we had encountered all year. Dr. B had taught “to the test” and well beyond it; every member of our class passed with flying colors.

In this issue, *Education Next* presents another article examining the effects of grading standards on student performance—this time among older students. Using data from Algebra I classes in North Carolina, Seth Gershenson finds,

as he puts it, “not only do students learn more from tougher teachers, but they also do better in math classes up to two years later” (see, “End the Easy A,” *features*). The benefits of higher grading standards accrue to all students, regardless of their academic preparation, offsetting concerns that tough graders may discourage or demotivate low achievers. More often than not, it seems, students rise to the challenge.

Reading Gershenson’s article, my thoughts turned again to Dr. Brockhaus—but now with the added perspective that comes from having awarded a fair share of grades myself. Back in 2004, still in graduate school, I had plenty of experience responding to grading standards but little experience setting them. More than a decade of teaching undergraduate and graduate students has made me keenly aware of the challenges of maintaining high standards for student work when all the incentives push in the opposite direction.

As Success Academy Charter Schools founder Eva Moskowitz puts it, “When teachers give high grades for mediocre work, no one asks any questions and they can carry on as before. When they give more realistic grades, they have an obligation to follow up with detailed feedback, more support, and better instruction.” In high schools, the forces placing downward pressure on standards include complaints from students and parents looking for an edge in the ever more competitive admissions process at elite colleges.

It is no surprise, then, that grade inflation pervades American high schools. Data from the College Board reveal that student grade point averages have climbed steadily over the past 20 years, particularly in wealthier districts and schools, even as SAT scores and other indicators of high school students’ academic accomplishment have remained flat or declined.

Seeing this pattern only increases my respect for individual educators like Dr. Brockhaus who, over a long career, bucked the trend toward lower standards—even as it reveals the difficulty of acting on the evidence from Gershenson’s study, and the study by Lucas and Figlio that preceded it. The challenge is convincing school leaders, teachers, and parents that doling out easy As does students no favors. Perhaps the next 16 years will see more progress on that front than the past 16.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.