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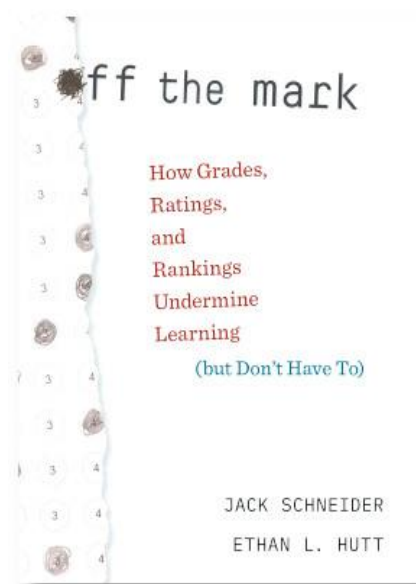
Schneider, J., & Hutt, E. L. (2023). *Off the mark: How grades, ratings, and rankings undermine learning (but don't have to)*. Harvard University Press.

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The foundation for *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning* was laid before the COVID-19 Pandemic outbreak of 2020. The authors, Jack Schneider and Ethan L. Hutt thought that this global setback would halt or derail their project altogether; however, it increased the need to inform and analyze the assessment process as a whole. The pandemic forced the world to reevaluate how the learning environment might look. Education as a whole required a reexamination of its current structure for grading, ratings, and rankings and to examine the notion that one system is appropriate for all learners.



The authors, Jack Schneider (University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Ethan L. Hutt (University of North Carolina), both professors of education, bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to the topic. Schneider, a published author, researcher, and professor, and Hutt, a co-editor and published author featured in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, are well-equipped to delve into the complexities of educational assessment.

The book is designed to be accessible to a wide range of readers: from educators, parents, students, or anyone who has experienced the stress of preparing for a test to those who want to understand the purpose and validity of assessment data. It is an accessible exposition that explores the use of assessment and its evolution into a societal view of grades, ratings, rankings, and their impact on the education system.

Schneider and Hutt present an insightful analysis of the rationale and motivation that, over time, have shaped the leading educational institution's standings. The

authors begin by discussing how society has evolved in such a way that we view formal assessment practices as necessary. Through formal evaluation, society has learned to rate educational institutions, communicate educators' effectiveness, gain government funding, and emphasize the individual's internal value. Although we view these assessment practices as necessary, they have shifted the focus away from learning for its own sake to an extrinsic motivation to achieve an objective. Grades, ratings, and rankings have shifted from the idealistic notion that student knowledge needs to be quantifiable to gauge the internal progression of the individual's academic growth. The authors discuss the inevitable damage this common practice does to the learner's growth: the joy of learning is diminished. However, there was a time before such demands were not placed on the learner. Their analysis poses the question to the reader whether assessments can be modified to meet society's quantifiable demands while supporting joy in the learning journey.

*Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning* is part of a larger conversation. The authors offer a variety of assessment approaches with the potential to meet the quantifiable demands of society while also providing the student with a deep understanding of the content. Many of the discussion points in the book align with the work of Feldman (2023) in *Grading for Equity*. Both books address how society's focus on grades has communicated to students that the score is valued, not the knowledge they gain. Both books pose the question worth investigating: Is there a better way to gauge students' achievement than through grading? The authors of *Off the Mark* have gathered assessment data from around the world and have found that many of the barriers faced by the US education system as a latent effect of colonialism are common across the globe. Teachers around the world share many of the same concerns and practices about student learning and assessments. The authors have evaluated the strengths, weaknesses, and cultural differences in varying assessment types and their impacts on the learning experience. For example, New Zealand has adopted an approach that mirrors competency-based standards in the United States. In Norwegian schools, student performance is communicated to parents through written communication, which documents students' progress and areas needing improvement. In Finland, standardized testing is only performed at the end of a student's secondary education, and Singapore has recently adopted an aggregated score of student performance based on a series of assessments.

Schneider and Hutt (2023) write:

Seeing how assessment technologies foster extrinsic motivation, create perverse incentives for teachers and students, and reduce learning to memorization, these educators imagine many of the same solutions that their American counterparts have advocated for: moving away from multiple-choice exams, fostering student mastery, reducing the stakes associated with assessments, and developing more nuanced and holistic formats to demonstrate learning. (p. 153)

The essential components of the text address grading, rating, and ranking undermine learning through failing grades, testing demands, and permanent records. The authors discuss how society has developed a reliance on grading, testing, and transcripts and how this assessment culture is impacting the development of the United States education system. Society has placed a demand on the education system to account

for student learning through the justification of bureaucratic means seeking numerical information on student performance and, therefore, justifying the taxable expenditures of education. The need for universal data and standardized assessments to determine students' performance has become a currency in education to distinguish between the elite and the undesirable. The emphasis on the quantitative measure of student performance undermines the holistic learning and development of the student; every child has a story, which cannot be accurately computed into finite measures. Schneider and Hutt state, "The gravitational pull of test scores on the attention of policymakers, school officials, and teachers is considerable and has resulted in pulling focus away from the holistic view of student learning and school quality" (p. 53).

Test scores may offer a glimpse into a student's ability, but they do not consider the confounding variables that make up the individual; they are mere snapshots of student performance and should be a tool of measurement, not an end goal. As a result, the authors discuss the concern that educators have begun viewing their students through the lens of their test scores and are basing their instructional time accordingly. The term "bubble kids" is often used in schools to define the students nearing proficiency measures; most instructional focus is structured around these students, often ignoring those well above or below the proficiency measure.

The authors then consider the implications of an educational shift away from the traditional assessment standards. The authors then propose a potential authentic assessment reform. Potential alternative authentic approaches to assessments are for students to demonstrate and use the knowledge and skills that they have gained. Potential authentic approaches proposed by Schneider and Hutt are portfolio assessments in which students show their work samples over a duration, narrative evaluations in which students express their thoughts and experiences that went into their work, creating a detailed document of student achievement and progress, pass/fail and contract grading systems relieving pressure on students and encouraging them to learn for the sake of knowledge rather than a grade. Lastly, micro-credentialing and competency-based education, where instead of receiving a student's grade based on an overall score, the course is broken down into constituent skills, and each skill is evaluated individually. The various alternative assessments proposed by the authors offer valuable insights into addressing the root of the problem through communication, motivation, and synchronization that promotes an assessment that sustains learning.

The book is available in print and through audio recording, offering a range of mediums for consumers to interact with the content. The book has no overall editorial issues. The contents, index, and notes are adequate for easy reference. *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning* offers insightful perspectives about how society's focus on grades has shifted the joy of learning towards a quantitatively driven machine.

## Reference

Feldman, J. (2023). *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Corwin Press.

### About the Reviewer

**Lacie VanDam** is a proud Southern Utah native and passionate kindergarten teacher, dedicated to sparking a lifelong love of learning in every child. Since beginning her career in education in 2021, she has developed a firm belief in nurturing the whole child—academically, socially, and emotionally—through meaningful relationships and intentional instruction, a commitment that earned state recognition in 2024 with a Science of Reading award. Lacie holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, and is currently pursuing a doctorate at Utah State University.



### About the Book Authors



**Jack Schneider** is the Dwight W. Allen Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for Education Policy at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is a historian and policy analyst who studies the influence of politics, rhetoric, culture, and information in shaping attitudes and behaviors. His work explores why particular ideas gain policy traction, how public perceptions of schools take shape, why education reform so often fails, and how organizations can use data to empower stakeholders. He is the author of six books, and his research has appeared in journals like *AERA Open*, the *American Journal of Education*, *Educational Policy*, the *Harvard Educational Review*, the *Journal of Education Policy*, the *Journal of Teacher Education*, and *Teachers College Record*.



**Ethan L. Hutt** is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he also holds the position of Gary Stuck Faculty Scholar in Education. His research focuses on the numbers used to describe, define, and evaluate America's schools. Ethan's research asks, where do the metrics come from? How did they become central to the work of schools? And what effects have their use had on how we think about what schools do and how well they do it? In answering these questions, his research often takes a historical approach that emphasizes the role of law and policy in shaping these developments.

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