



Reimagining the High School Transcript

John Gulla, E.E. Ford's executive director, and Rand Harrington, Kent Denver School's head of school, debate the pros and cons of the Mastery Transcript Consortium | *By Ari Pinkus, Artwork by Josue Evilla*

How do we improve teaching and learning? What's the best way to assess student progress? As educators tackle these questions, a group of schools has joined to develop a new approach to assessment sans grades. Formed at the 2017 NAIS Annual Conference, the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC) aims to "change the relationship between preparation for college and college admissions for the betterment of students."

MTC's work to reimagine the high school transcript has struck a chord. The group received \$2 million from the Edward E. Ford Foundation, garnered copious press, and stirred the independent school community.

John Gulla, E.E. Ford's executive director, and Rand Harrington, Kent Denver School's (CO) head of school, shared their contrasting views of MTC in an extended email chat last fall. The two know each other from The Blake School (MN) where Gulla hired Harrington as a science teacher. In this edited exchange, they challenge each other's thinking—and reveal their vision for education.

RAND HARRINGTON: John, I saw you posted another MTC article. Although I am open to being convinced otherwise, my current thoughts on MTC are quite dim. I see this as a ruse to avoid the most important questions about great teaching. Last summer, the dean of admission at the ^a prominent, highly selective university described MTC as a non-starter—unreliable and unnecessary. I can't say I disagree.

JOHN GULLA: I don't have any need to convince you there are great benefits in an approach to



assessing student progress without grades as reflected in the goals of MTC. Some quick points:

1. Grades are, in my opinion, an inherently limited and greatly flawed practice. Why reduce to a one-dimensional measure something (student progress) that is inherently multidimensional?
2. Are you really quoting a university admission dean as an opinion in support of your position? How can he know MTC's approach to be unreliable when it hasn't even been developed yet? Unnecessary? I could not disagree more profoundly. There are more than 150 schools now signed up with MTC. I'll bet you the university learns how to read and interpret the MTC transcript to assess the students who apply from schools using it.
3. Too many teachers think grades are "objective" measures. They are not. Can they represent something meaningful about a student's progress? Sure. But they weren't handed down inscribed on stone tablets to Moses from on high. Do you know where and when and why their use began? (Mount Holyoke College, 1887, standardization). I could go on and on.

"DO GRADES SERVE YOUR STUDENTS WELL? DO THEY ENCOURAGE THE SORT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING THAT YOU HOPE TO SEE AT KDS?"

-JOHN GULLA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, E.E. FORD FOUNDATION

4. I'd urge you to consider these questions: Do grades serve your students well? Do they encourage the sort of teaching and learning that you hope to see at KDS? If so, then stay dim on this approach for your school.

HARRINGTON: In my opinion, the key questions are: How will MTC improve classroom teaching? Is the talk of MTC moving along the conversation about what great teaching is, or is it a distraction? Here are my additional two cents:

First, college admission is a process of selection requiring some type of judgment. What remains is the question of what to judge and by what metrics. The way MTC was shared with me indicated categories that were nonuniform, determined by each school, very poorly defined, and ~~even~~ more unreliable than what we have now.

Not one of the problems with grades—inaccuracy, no meaning, inflation, measures the wrong thing—can be fixed by changing how we represent grades or even changing the category, from disciplinary to non-cognitive. Every critique I have heard can be traced back to the skill of the teacher. Poorly trained teachers with no expertise who make a mess out of grades will make an even bigger mess out of an alternative transcript where "content" has no value.

Should we be measuring or encouraging a wider variety of skills and attitudes? Certainly. Is the way we represent student achievement to colleges the issue? No, the issue is how we teach and what we value in our classrooms. In the end, students will be judged by both their ability to learn concepts in physics (or history or math or art) and their work ethic and resilience. And, if done right, their grades should reflect both.

As you can sense, I have strong

"HOW WILL MTC IMPROVE CLASSROOM TEACHING? IS THE TALK OF MTC MOVING ALONG THE CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT GREAT TEACHING IS, OR IS IT A DISTRACTION?"

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feelings about this. The teacher shortage is coming, and schools are ill-prepared. And MTC will not [in my opinion] solve this problem.

GULLA: While I personally believe in the direction MTC is trying to lead those schools that choose to follow, I have never thought that there is *only one* right way to go about this pursuit of organized education.

For schools that want to continue to offer grades—those limited measures that so often become ends in themselves and obscure the real goal, which, in my mind, is to create a *desire to know*, something that I feel we are born with but that so much of formal education effectively snuffs out over childhood and adolescence—the same way forward is yours to take. Schools that want to continue to create sorting systems that have resulted in epidemic levels of childhood anxiety, depression, unhealthy habits of sleep deprivation, and soulless pursuits of externally determined societally endorsed goals, the path forward is clear. Keep on keeping on.

HARRINGTON: My point is that tossing the foundations is a terrible mistake. The mental health issues you describe are serious, but are not [in my opinion] caused by grades.

GULLA: And my point is that we agree that the foundations are necessary, but we disagree about grading, which is not necessary. I worked for seven years at a school that gave no grades. It is possible to have a very “rigorous” experience without grades.

HARRINGTON: No grades, but certainly the school had assessments. Were these all formative? Likely not, some must have been summative. Were they narratives? The details are important, because what you call “grading” is pretty narrow (A, B, C scales). I am arguing that summative assessments are necessary, and that how those assessments are labeled is less important. You seem hung up on the labels themselves. Replacing A, B, C with something else does not solve the problems you describe.

Even the pure narrative ends up being scored by whoever is judging the student’s application to their next experience (higher education or a job). That scoring is a judgment that should be the responsibility of the great teacher who knows the student. Shying away from judgment (or grading) is a cop-out. Improve the skill of the teacher so the judgments are accurate and value the right things.

GULLA: You seem hung up on the “necessity” of some form of one-dimensional ranking. ~~I find when such an impasse has been reached, a story sometimes helps.~~ Back when *U.S. News & World Report* was still a print magazine and they were trying to expand their pernicious practices of ranking to independent schools, the then-president of NAIS, Peter Relic, urged membership not to cooperate. The *U.S. News* group got wind of this and sent the project lead to talk with Peter. During the chitchat, Peter asked the guy if he had any children. The man said he had three. Peter asked

him to rank them.

HARRINGTON: I agree, that is silly in the same way that we discarded class rankings some years ago. I see class rankings as equivalent to your examples. In other words, one number to judge something that is multivariable. Our grades are associated with the standard disciplines: English, math, science, etc. If a student can only muster a C or a D in English classes, then one would deem that useful information about their ability to read or write (a deficit that would likely impact their potential success in college). We can ~~certainly~~ argue whether we need more categories.

My point is that whatever dimensions you decide are meaningful, there is someone or some institution that will want to know if this student is OK, good, or exceptional in this area. [By the way], the MTC prototype does the exact same thing, but with hard-to-measure categories and colored pie graphs.

GULLA: Yes, outside institutions will want information so that they can sort students. They may even want us to grade the students, but we don’t have to do their work for them.

This is the whole reason Scott Looney didn’t want to go this alone with Hawken School (OH). No college or university is going to decide to simply ignore and fail to consider

how to read and understand a mastery transcript when there may be thousands of very talented (not to mention many who are full-pay) students whose applications have this transcript, not the antiquated, Industrial Age, Carnegie unit, seat-time based transcript they’ll be getting from schools that stay the course!

HARRINGTON: Sure, performance-based assessments look amazing on first pass. Unfortunately, we (teachers) end up spending a lot more time on the mechanics of assessment with our noses pressed to the screen tracking students with digital rubrics than we do teaching and planning our learning experiences. I once developed a rich rubric that looked at experimental skills, problem-solving skills, and conceptual understanding. In the end, I had to give them a single grade. But unlike some folks, I didn’t find this too distasteful, given my grades had always been an indication of some weighting of all these things ... as it should be.

So, this is perhaps the guts of what we disagree about. You have a very optimistic view that MTC will be the thing that will take us to this elevated place where we know students so well in all their dimensions that colleges will be able to pick and choose based on some other criteria.

But if you think getting a B in U.S. history is ambiguous and without meaning, then try evaluating a

DO YOU HAVE A CONVERSATION TO SHARE?

Have you had a great conversation with a colleague recently that broke down silos or got you thinking about your work in a new way? Have you chatted with someone on (or off) campus that led to an unexpected collaboration? Tell us about it. Do you know of—or are you a part of—an exemplary mentor-mentee pair? A great student-teacher duo? We want to hear about it. Send a brief description to ismag@nais.org and we’ll follow up.

In such an impasse, a story can help.

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student's "grit" on whatever scale you want (linear or otherwise). I've seen no evidence that those promoting MTC have spent much time on how to define good teaching or how to make these more meaningful assessments. If you believe these conversations are happening, then I will be the first to support the effort.

This conversation really deserves a few beers in person. Perhaps sometime this year...

GULLA: Yes! ☺

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