



PROOF POINTS

Parents trust report cards more than test scores — with consequences for kids

A study of 2,000 parents finds that they're more inclined to step in with extra help when grades, but not test scores, are slipping

by JILL BARSHAY February 23, 2026

does the report say this?

Credit: Michael Wyke/AP Photo



Parents trust report cards more than test scores — with cc

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Most parents want to help their children succeed. We check report cards, ask about homework and try to help our kids study. When that fails, we sometimes hire tutors. But in an era of rising grades, it's easy to be misled.

assumes parents ignore eyes & how if grades are good

A new study finds parents often assume everything is fine when their child's report card shows mostly A's even when standardized test scores slide. That assumption may underestimate the help and guidance their child needs.

what % of kids get mostly A's?

Mind/Shift

This story also appeared in Mind/Shift

In an online experiment, researchers at Oregon State University and the University of Chicago created hypothetical fifth graders, whom they called Stacey and Robert, and asked more than 2,000 parents how they would advise the children's parents to respond to different scenarios of grades and test scores. Test scores were expressed as percentile ranks on standardized tests, such as the annual state tests that public school children take each spring, so that parents could compare Stacey and Robert with those of other children nationwide. And study participants were given an imaginary \$100 per week to "spend" however they wished. Options included enrolling the child in an after-school program, hiring a tutor or saving the money for a vacation or bills. They could also invest their own time, such as helping with homework or reading together.

Journal assumes reqs for other parents reflect behavior for own kids do researchers?

are state test scores falling or just NAEP? can't compare nationwide state tests

Parents advised increasing time and money spent when both grades and test scores were low. Parents were less likely to provide extra help or resources when grades were high and only test scores were low. The researchers found that parents were more likely to step in when grades were low but test scores were higher.

More than 70 percent of the parents said they trust grades more than tests for making decisions about their own child, and fewer than 9 percent said they had more confidence in tests.

of course they do test reports are almost useless: vague language no way to ask questions

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no connection to classroom work

The findings appear in a draft paper that has not yet been published in a peer-reviewed journal and may still be revised. It was publicly circulated by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago this month.

is this NAEP? did report use NAEP

As test scores have fallen nationwide while grades have risen, the researchers believe that parents may be underinvesting in their children. "Parents are the key to children's success," said Ariel Kalil at the University of Chicago. "What you need is for parents to be making investments in their kids' skill development, and you need that parental effort to be happening early and often. Anything that depresses parent investment is a problem."

doesn't research show grade inflation much more common among wealthy communities?

his links to a study on HS and college (not middle school) grades

Kalil is concerned that this underinvestment in children is more pronounced in low-income communities, where, she said, high grades are often issued for below-grade-level skills. After the pandemic, schools struggled to persuade families to enroll in free tutoring and summer programs to make up for months of disrupted instruction. Many report cards showed solid grades, reducing the urgency for parents to act.

is the free tutoring the depressed investment

Paired with other recent research on long-term academic and economic consequences, this study strengthens the case that grade inflation isn't harmless. Inflated grades may feel encouraging, but they can send false signals both to students, who may study less, and to parents, who may see less reason to step in. Ultimately, it not only hurts individuals, but American labor force skills and future economic growth, the researchers argue.

the focus on low income family behavior is odd given that the solution is tutoring, which generally requires \$\$\$

the article treats grade inflation as fact & clearly defined. it is neither. does the underlying research?

Kalil, a behavioral scientist, believes that parents have more confidence in grades because they are familiar and easier to understand. Meanwhile, score reports are complicated and even many well-educated parents are confused about scaled scores and percentile rankings.

belief? why not research and determine?

or because they are clear + understandable + transparent

A survey that accompanied the online experiment revealed that a sizable share of parents don't trust standardized tests. Forty percent of the parents in the study said that tests were biased. Almost 30 percent thought student scores were a reflection of family income. Fewer than 20 percent of parents thought tests captured their children's skills.

the premise conflates not trusting and not understanding

misleading, inaccurate, condescending

Related: Easy A's, lower pay: Grade inflation's hidden damage

are the claims about state tests or NAEP or standardized tests generally

Kalil says there's another psychological phenomenon at play even for parents who understand and value standardized tests: the tendency to ignore bad news when it is paired with good news. "If the report card is all A's, there's a cognitive bias towards sticking your head in the sand and rejecting the bad information," said Kalil.

Parents w/ bA's have likely benefitted from testing to get ahead thus are more pro-testing

There were hints in the data that Hispanic families were most trusting of grades and least trusting of test scores, while Asian families were more willing to heed test results. But few Hispanic and Asian parents participated in the survey, so these patterns were not statistically significant. (Almost 70 percent of the respondents were white and 20 percent Black.) Parents with at least a bachelor's degree also paid more attention to standardized exams.

why include statistically insignificant point?

Solving the problem won't be easy. The researchers say schools can do more to explain what test scores measure and how to interpret them, but better communication alone may not shift parents' instincts. Reversing grade inflation would be the most direct solution, but that would require a broader shift across schools — something that is unlikely to happen quickly.

In the meantime, the burden is on **parents to read report cards with a critical eye**. When grades and test scores don't align, it's **worth asking why**. A strong report card can be reassuring, but it may not always tell the full story of what a child knows — or what help they might need.

but accept test reports at face value?
article has been "ask why grades are wrong!"

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*This story about **parents and report cards** was produced by **The Hechinger Report**, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for **Proof Points** and other **Hechinger newsletters**.*

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