

#93: Making the grade

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack, after our last episode on Teach Like a Champion, we actually got a lot of new listeners and some new Patreon subscribers. So I want to welcome them both, and also just take this opportunity to talk a little bit about what it is we do on this show. So, Jack, what is this show?

Schneider I don't know. I feel like what we do on this show is you usually pull out a surprise topic for me to, you know, try to weigh in on, despite having prepared for a different topic and then present me with a variety of gotcha questions. And, and then somehow we ended up laughing about it and and saying some things that in retrospect didn't seem so terrible.

Berkshire Well, our tagline is that we're a podcast about education policy and in politics. And because Jack has a super power, that would be a PhD in education history. Often what we do is take some current issue and kind of trace it back 50 years, a hundred years, 200 years.

Schneider Try not to look so bored while you say that Jennifer. Yeah, well, you know, every, everything in the present has an origin and those origins matter. And so if we look at an issue like the topic that we're going to be talking about today, grades and grading which could be, you know, like snooze who cares about letter grades at the K-12 level. But it turns out that there's actually this really fascinating history that they exist for a reason, in fact, for many reasons. And because they're trying to serve these multiple purposes, which were basically never paying attention to we are kind of asleep at the wheel and accepting them school and learning ended up being really transformed for young people often in negative ways.

Berkshire Well, the reason that we're talking about grades today obviously is that they've sort of exploded as a topic in the wake of the mass school shut downs this spring, right. That for various reasons, something as commonplace as just giving a grade became suddenly became fraught and difficult. And one of the reasons for that was that immediately we were confronted with this deep inequity, right? Like how do you announce, well, school's just going to continue online and you're going to be given a grade just as you always were, except oops, you're in an area that doesn't have internet, right? You're in a rural area. Like we covered in an episode a few back, or you're in an urban area where it turns out that because of the cable monopoly, that internet access is actually really expensive. And so your, your, your peers who have internet access are going to be continuing doing new material and getting grades, but somehow you're going to be left out of that. So this just sort of opened the door to a broader debate that that really became quite explosive.

Schneider Absolutely. And it wasn't just that people were talking about inequality and the fact that grades are not just grading what students know and can do based on what they've learned in the classroom, but often you know, grading people desperately based on their social and economic privilege but also opened up other problems with grades. For instance, there were a

number of schools, districts, or even states that said that they were going to move to pass fail. It just seemed fairer, particularly in light of the inequities in terms of access to the internet having parents at home, etc.

And suddenly people started getting up in arms about a variety of things like, well, why is my kid going to try at all? If there are no grades, well that raised this important question about why are we relying on grades to motivate students? Shouldn't learning be the motivation. Shouldn't there be some other deeper guiding purpose here. Other parents became very upset about, you know, how is my child going to be eligible for scholarships? Or what about college applications, other parents talking about military eligibility again, this raised new questions for people, right? Why are we relying so heavily on grades for so many different things when they contain so little information? I mean, what do we really know about what a student knows and can do from just looking at a letter grade? What does an A mean, what does a B mean? What is a GPA? How did we get here?

Berkshire So Jack, this episode also gives you the opportunity to hold forth on a topic that I know is very near and dear to your heart. Can you guess of what I might be thinking?

Schneider I can't, it feels like a trick and I'm going to opt out.

Berkshire Well, your favorite topic in the world as our regular listeners know is the apprenticeship of observation about which we are not speaking today.

Schneider Well, let's talk about it.

Berkshire Because we're going to be dwelling on your second favorite topic. And that is, what?

Schneider Well, first of all, I would challenge you and say, it's not a topic, it's a concept. But I think maybe you're pushing on the grammar of schooling, which is a concept developed by historians of education, David Tyack and Larry Cuban and my warm you're smiling. Like I got it. Like I win the prize,

Berkshire That would be exactly the concept upon which I am pushing.

Schneider Ah, yeah. Great. What do you want to talk a little bit about the grammar of schooling? I would be delighted.

Berkshire Yes. I want you to explain to people who aren't familiar with it, what it means and why it's relevant for the conversation that we're having in this episode about grades.

Schneider The grammar of schooling is a way of talking about the features of the public education system. So our schools, the way they're organized, the way they're run the culture of schools that would otherwise be invisible to us because they are so ever present. And these are features that give shape and form to the way schools operate. But again just go unnoticed because they are the water in which we metaphorically swim. When we are in schools, an example of the grammar of schooling would be the fact that the teacher generally stands at the front of the room. Another example would be that there is often a blackboard or perhaps if we're feeling wild, a whiteboard at the front of the room, homework is a feature of the grammar of

schooling. The fact that there are desks in the classroom, that there is kind of an anticipated number of students in the classroom.

If you take away one of these suddenly a school doesn't seem so much like a real school to us anymore. That's one way of understanding something as a part of the grammar of schooling. And just like with our language where the grammar of the English language really shapes how we're talking and the way that we communicate, but is invisible to us unless we actually take a class in it. The grammar of schooling really shapes the way that schools operate until maybe we step back and look at it critically for the first time, perhaps in a class, maybe a history of education class or in a crisis when suddenly we've been forced to change the system in some way. And all of a sudden we realize that we hadn't really thought about that piece before,

Berkshire As you've probably figured out, grades are a big part of the grammar of schooling. And fortunately, Jack has recruited an expert in the subject friend of the show. Ethan Hutt is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina school of education, where he studies education, history reform and law. He's also writing a book with our own Jack Schneider about grading, its history and what grades do and do not mean. And the two of them recently got together. And they talked about why at a time when the world is on fire grades are actually an important topic.

Ethan Hutt Yeah. I mean, I think it's an interesting time because so much has been put on hold with COVID and protests and everything that's going on in the world. And what's interesting about the conversations that are happening around grading and testing is that people are really pausing about...what does it mean to pause grades? They're run there, they're running into these questions about beginning to grapple with some of the features of grades, which is that it's well and good to say, 'hey, this class is kind of a wash. We're going online, where it's all disrupted. Let's just give everyone a pass.'

And so suddenly you get a response from people saying, well, wait a minute, this was my junior year. This was the year that I was supposed to really show colleges what I, what I could do. Or you have students making transitions and saying, well, I was going to be eligible for the honors program. So they, you suddenly realize that a grade is not just some Mark that you get for the work done in a class where we could say, well, the class was disrupted. This grade is kind of compromised in some way. Let's just give everyone, you know, like a literal pass, as opposed to just, you know, trying to record a grade and on, on difficult circumstances and people are immediately running into the scenario of like, Oh, this grade has a longer term impact. And then people begin to struggle with questions of equity and fairness and all those other thing, meritocracy, and then it becomes a, a debate that's been really interesting to follow.

Schneider Yeah. One of the things that you were just pushing on Ethan is the fact that grades are used systemically for so much in an American education, both at the K-12 level and higher ed. And I think another thing that I've been observing in the wake of the pandemic and the sort of rolling adjustments that schools and colleges and universities have made often adjusting by simply moving to a pass fail system. I've been observing not only are people concerned about the systemic uses of grades, but also the kind of more intimate and personal uses of grades like student motivation. There was a petition in Oregon that was circulating on change.org and one parent commented. How do I explain to my child that has great grades, that she should keep working hard when anything that is D minus and above will still pass. This is ridiculous. And so

there are a lot of people who are really upset about what are, I think, good faith efforts by schools and colleges and universities to not make life harder. And these people are saying, well, hang on a second, you are making life harder.

Hutt Yeah. I mean, you know, we're, we've conditioned for lack of a better word, students to expect that their work gets evaluated in a specific spectrum. And so to say, Hey, do your best pass or fail. You know, that's a very foreign concept to students. And so it's a fair question for parents to say, you know, I'm struggling with this. My student is not used to this kind of grading environment. And you begin to see how tightly linked as you say, you know, motivation justification for doing certain kind of work is entangled with the kind of grade that you get at the end of that. And it's certainly something that at all levels, I think you're, you're seeing students and families struggle with that.

Schneider So Ethan, you and I have written many times about grades and metrics and test scores, and I can never keep it straight in my head if there are three purposes of grading or four purposes to grading. So I think I just said porpoises.

Berkshire Purposes purposes. The point is that grades play a number of different roles could be three, could be four. You may want to pause here to grab something, to jot some notes down. Now, back to Ethan Hutt on purpose or porpoise number one,

Hutt The first, which we were talking about a second ago is, is motivation. And this is the original bread and butter motivation. I mean, Horace Mann is famous for saying... "If a superior rank at recitation be the object, then as soon as that superiority is obtained, the spring of desire and effort for that occasion relaxes." And so he was referring to this idea that if you didn't record a grade, if you didn't like write it down, then the sort of like a femoral, you know, teacher calls on you, you do a good job or you show up once a year for a kind of a presentation to the town that just didn't kind of maintain people's focus. And so the idea of grades as a motivation, as a record to help guide and focus attention has, is, you know, kind of the original purpose of grading.

Berkshire So we're going to pause Ethan there for just a second. Maybe the best thing about getting two education historians in a virtual space together is that one of them can always think of an historical detail that the other one missed.

Schneider One of the things that I think is really interesting about the student motivation piece is that it was less essential prior to the 19th century. So we did see efforts to motivate students but grades didn't actually arise in those earlier periods. We tended to see prizes and awards. And I think that's largely because the students who were in school were motivated to be in school. And this really changes in the mid to late 19th century as states begin to make schooling compulsory. Now you've got a whole new group of students in school who may not want to be there. In fact you've got a new invention: the truant officer who goes around pulling kids out of penny arcades and alley ways and dragging them to school. You've got to try to find some way to motivate those kids, and carrots and sticks in the form of grades—and they weren't always A-F grades. They would be 1-100 or other forms. Sometimes Latin honorifics were used to try to motivate kids."

Berkshire So Jack, I feel like we should give people just a minute to sort of sit and reflect on that image of you, perhaps in a penny arcade or in an alleyway when you were supposed to be at school. Did that happen?

Schneider I'm wearing my newsboy cap and I don't know what it they're hitting one of those wooden wheels with a stick. Yeah, that, that sounds fun to me.

Berkshire Well, one of the things that I learned when we were working on our book, *A Wolf in the Schoolhouse Door*...I feel like we need an ominous soundtrack to go with that title.

Schneider Done, done, done.

Berkshire So critics of public schools will point to many different moments in history when the sort of wheels went off the track, but there's been some pointing that actually goes really far back in fact, to the moment when school became compulsory. And so you'll actually hear people saying that, you know, well, we shouldn't have compulsory schooling because you take all the motivation away from kids since they have no choice, but to go. And so I, this was really, I was kind of shocked to realize this, but your description just now about grades as a kind response to the era of compulsory schooling made me think about that again.

Schneider People aren't entirely wrong when they say that compelling students to be in school makes the process of education more difficult. It absolutely would make teachers work easier if kids who didn't want to be there, weren't there, but of course they are children. And if we allowed them to make that decision for themselves, they would be closing off all sorts of future opportunities. The challenge then becomes how do we make school, a place that actually feels rewarding and occasionally pleasant to young people. That's a big challenge. And it's a lot easier to say, well, if you don't go, we're going to arrest you and we're going to drag you home by your ear. And inside of school if you don't behave and play right, then we've got a permanent record and we're going to write this stuff down and it's going to affect the rest of your life.

That's a much easier way to compel people to behave in a particular way to comport themselves in a particular way. You can't force them to learn, but you can force them to sit down to be quiet. And these are actually elements of a grading system that aren't always a part of it. But certainly are in some cases where we're taking into account, how students are behaving in the classroom, how much effort they're expending and grades are a lever for getting students to do what we want them to do inside the classroom.

Berkshire Okay. The original idea behind grades was motivation, but that is only part of the story. Now, back to Ethan Hutt.

Hutt We sort of assume that people always recorded grades permanently and that they shared those with other folks, you know, other teachers, other schools, other employers, but that actually is, is pretty late on after the start of, of grades. And so, you know, you, you certainly have this communication that starts out as what we call short haul communications. So it's sort of that the triad of, of, I think of it as the teacher, the parents and the student. And so there's a communication that's happening constantly among that, that group.

And then you have, in addition to that, you get what I was referring to a second ago, that what we call the long haul communication. And that's the communication that happens year to year teacher, to teacher school, to school. And then, you know, obviously when you eventually show up to employers or other folks who might be consumers of the information of grades, that's a conversation that happens at quite a distance from any given class, any given school, and often, you know, all that's left at that point is the name of the course and the grade.

And that is supposed to communicate everything you need to know about kind of what's going on, which is, as you can imagine, very different than the kind of intimate knowledge, the sort of close communication that you have, where in a given, you know, Oh, that teacher's hard, that grade, that's a good score for that teacher, that kind of thing, all that gets stripped away. And it just becomes, you know, just the letter, just the school name, just the school course.

Schneider One of the things that I think is important to remember here, as we're talking about the communication function is that there were many other ways to communicate with students and their parents. And in fact there were many other mechanisms used. The phrase "head of the class," in fact, comes from an alternate effort to show students how they were performing in the class. And that was to actually physically rearrange them. Now, this is not to say that's a better way of communicating with students, how they're doing can actually result in public shaming, which I think most of us would be against the point is that the use of letter grades is neither natural nor preordained. It was the result of a series of decisions that were made. And that if that's the case, we can also begin to imagine some alternatives that may be difficult to introduce today, but which are certainly possible to envision.

Berkshire So can I just say that part of what I am finding endlessly amusing about listening to you and Ethan is that somehow there turns out to be this entire specialized discourse for talking about the subject of grades that also seems to apply to the trucking industry.

Schneider We did that on purpose. Yeah. We've got a side business Schneider and Hutt Hauling. There is shh, shh. Keep it a secret.

Berkshire We've covered motivation and communication, both long haul and short haul. Now we are finally ready to learn about the third purpose of grading that would be articulation.

Hutt So much of the system relies on really clear, clear reciprocation of, you know, you give a grade and I acknowledge it. And I give someone the benefit of having earned that grade either as, because they're able to enter my my school as a freshman or something like that. And so when you think about grades as holding the system together, that we really rely on schools honoring the grades that people get in lower grades. That's another purpose. And one of the reasons that so many prior efforts to reform grades have failed is because they don't tend to that issue where if you do your own organically grown a grading system, if someone else doesn't understand what that is, you get real pushback and you get resistance to it. They often fall apart at that point. And so, you know, I think it's worth pulling out articulation as a, as a separate sort of system function system, operation feature of grading. That's a little bit distinct from the, from the kind of long haul communication. It's really what makes the system continue to move and have students be able to move from one, one school to the next.

Schneider We've got motivation, communication and articulation, and the communication is both short haul to the student and family and long haul to other schools and employers and anybody else who wants to eventually view that permanent record. What happens when you mix these together? You know, it might be that this one technology happens to be good at multiple things. It's like the iPhone, it can play. Music can be used as a phone. You can do your email. But I think there are probably some obvious ways we can help people understand the ways in which this single technology really fails to serve multiple purposes.

The one that jumps to mind for me is the conflict between short haul and long haul communications. So even though both are an effort to communicate the fact that grades are being used for both really yields some perhaps unintended, although at this point obvious consequences, consider that if you're trying to use a grade to communicate with a student, you may want to communicate to a student, you know, this really isn't up to par. This is nowhere near your best work, and it doesn't meet the expectations that I have for you or for the class. So you might want to give a grade if something like a C or a D even possibly an F, but the long haul communication function means that this is entering the permanent record. Maybe it's only a unit test then, so it's not going directly on the report card, but it is going to inform the grade that does live on the report card. And the report card is something that's going to live forever, right? It's your permanent record. And so when you're giving a D or an F to student, you're not simply issuing that a chastisement that you might to a student who, you know, can work harder and perhaps perform better. You're actually saying, I am going to ruin your future. I am going to singlehandedly ensure that you don't get into the college of your choice. And so we can see, wow, the short haul and long haul functions really undermine each other when you're trying to use the same technology for both purposes.

Hutt I mean, I think the other, another good example is the one that is, is so present in our minds right now, which is the tension between that Mo motivation feature and that, that, that sort of longer haul problem where, you know, we want to remove the, we basically want to, we want to short circuit, the short term communication. We want to keep students motivated. And because grades are so tied up into that motivation students and parents are suddenly feeling like what, what is motivation without without this sort of long-term long, long haul communication.

And so it becomes a really difficult thing where we we've put so much of our motivation energy around saying, this is how we communicate to you, how you're doing and how you should be treating these assignments. I mean, every teacher knows the, is this going to be on the test? And that's, you know, we, we think of that as a way of communicating to students, whether something is important or valued. And so I think suddenly we're finding ourselves a little flatfooted in saying, you know, we really haven't talked to students about being motivated for things other than grades. And so you can see immediately that by linking those so tightly, when you want to turn off one feature like the, the shorter, our long haul communication, then suddenly the motivation goes, goes with it.

Berkshire Well, Jack, this is actually a topic that I have just been thinking about. I was recently in the Heartland visiting my dad and the two of us were hanging out. He was recovering from a medical procedure. And so he decided it would be really fun if he sort of dredged up some old documents and then we looked through them together. And one of them was a high school report card of mine, and it was not stellar. In fact, there was an F on it.

Schneider Well, you know, Jennifer, these, these kids these days benefit from grade inflation. And so, you know, your, your wisdom and experience accompany, a tougher grading scheme that you had to move through.

Berkshire That's possible. I share this anecdote with people to give them a little encouragement just in case they, or a loved one of theirs happens to be a late bloomer cause I really was. But also because I think that what, what Ethan was just talking about, the sort of high stakes were a little, they were a little lower when I was coming up, right. That the, the communication signaling of that, the F I received one nine weeks period in physiology while I was clearly thinking about something else did not have the same kind of long-term consequence that it may now.

Schneider Yeah, that absolutely makes sense. If you listen to white middle class parents, these days, one of their top anxieties is getting their kids into a good college or a university that was much less of an anxiety you know, 20, 30 years ago, because far fewer people were applying to college at that time. You know, it's one of the stories of American education that every time people begin acquiring credentials that provide new kinds of social and economic opportunity for them, other people follow suit. So when Americans started getting high school diplomas with greater frequency in the early 20th century, suddenly everybody wanted a high school diploma because it would actually open doors for them. And that actually had one of the consequences of devaluing that credential. So people went off to go get more education. Of course, you know, not everybody had equal access. And so it tended to be more privileged people who were then pursuing college and university educations. And now, as we've seen for the past couple of decades of push for college, for all something we've talked about in previous episodes on this show, we've seen that that credential has become devalued. And so it's even more important for status conscious parents for their kids to get into the right college or university, and then perhaps even get a graduate degree after that.

Berkshire The occasion for this conversation of course, is that the pandemic has put grades on hold in many communities, a problem that now looks like it's going to be with us for a while, which means that a lot of places are trying to figure out what to do. So our grading experts have agreed to take off their scholar hats if only temporarily and offer some suggestions about how to fix our screwed up system of grading.

Hutt So, I mean, I think the first piece that you would want to target is to think about ways to decouple that short haul and long haul communication, because it's really the idea that something is going to be recorded as permanent, that really weaponizes grades and really prevents the kind of feedback or communication between teacher and student that you would really ideally like to have. So if you could imagine a system in which teachers had a channel for communicating, whether it was grades or feedback that they were assured would never enter the permanent record would never be part of that long haul communication. You could make a much more robust and much more candid set of feedback and communication lines between teacher and student.

And I think one of the ways that you might think about doing long haul communication, that is de-centering the grades and allowing for a different kind of communication is, is focusing on more like exemplar tasks. And this is just an example, lots of people could come up with different things, but if you thought about a scenario where you were doing much more sort of

longer term production of either portfolios or exemplar pieces of work, very much akin to how we think about certain AP courses certain IB courses where the idea is the product.

And that, that is the thing that becomes the long haul communication and frees up a different kind of evaluation for the teacher and that communication between the student that might be the start of an idea where you begin to de weaponize, or at least lower the temperature on what each evaluative tasks that a teacher gives a student. Because even if the teacher says, you know, well, you can bring up your grades. It's like, there's still the threat that this is entering a system in which it's going to be part of a final recorded grade. And so that's like the main, the main rub that I think you'd first want to want to pull apart.

Schneider Right. And I think that if we were to pursue a system, like what you're describing Ethan, where rather than classroom grades eventually aggregating into course grades, which live forever on a transcript, if we were instead to say, actually the ultimate indicator of what you know, and can do will be a portfolio of your actual work, then not only do you free up the communication channel with students and their families by sort of de weaponizing it, right. You're taking the punch of the grade out of that communication. And you're simply saying, you know, here's how you're doing in terms of producing the kind of longterm exemplars of work that you ultimately will want to be able to produce, but you're also then taking grades out of the equation in motivation. Now that of course is going to pose a problem, right? You take grades out and it absolutely will pose some problems for student motivation, but I don't think it's beyond the capacity of our present educators or our future educators to think through. Okay, well, what does it mean then to motivate students intrinsically rather than extrinsically, to convince them of the inherent value of what they're doing, rather than being able to say it doesn't matter why this is important because you're going to be graded and those grades are ultimately going to shape opportunities for you. And so even though there wouldn't be an automatic replacement for something like motivation the gap there would create opportunities.

Hutt I mean, the key would be to make sure that schools later on in the line are accepting. These exemplar tasks are reorienting themselves to accept the idea that a student is going to come with a certain portfolio, a certain set of items. It could be essays. It could be, as you said, you know, lab reports and that those become the basis for admission and advancement later on in the system at elite colleges, they already are expecting students who have taken certain AP courses and to have done well at them. And those kinds of tasks, whether it's writing a DBQ, whether it's creating a, a studio art portfolio recording themselves, you know, being competent in, in a foreign language. I mean, these are things that we already are already part of our, of our system and are ready. There are sectors where we expect that students are going to demonstrate that they have completed a more task-based idea, you know, you would really want to make sure.

And here's where I think uniformity if there are policymakers listing, I mean, I think the key here is really making sure that you try to move together on this because if your university system is still geared around an old articulation system, then it becomes a real problem in terms of like, as you were saying a second ago, you know, the, around motivation around what kind of communication we're really having here. And so I think thinking through the articulation piece and making sure that whatever is the new form of communication becomes the basis for entry or at least eligibility, that is a really key feature of a, of an alternate system.

Schneider Yeah. And I think one last piece to add there is thinking about equity, moving away from a system of grades and permanent records enables us to envision a system where students have second chances. Second and third and fourth and fifth chances even, right? The thing about the grade is that once it enters the permanent record, once it lands on the transcript, it exists forever. There's no washing it away, as opposed to, if we envision a competency based system built around a set of common identifiable tasks, that if students didn't meet the bar for competency or mastery in those tasks, that they would ultimately be able to continue working on them until they did. And so the piece that would need to be layered in, in order for equity to be achievable would be continuing and ongoing support for students who had not already reached a level of competency or mastery by the time they were ready to exit the K-12 system. And so this then gets into another element of the grammar of schooling, which you mentioned at the outset of the show, which is age grading that students eventually age out of the system, they hit the end of 12th grade. And that's it. Your, your ride is over as opposed to, it may be to

Envision a system in which grade 12 is not the end. That's perhaps the typical end for students, but there may be other opportunities. And currently we're just using the system of work arounds because many students simply go to community college to try to get the equivalent of a level of competency so that they can then enter four year schools.

Hutt I think to make it work, you actually have to keep some form. And I should stress some form of standardized testing, because I do think that if you eliminate, if you eliminate other forms of information for people at various levels, then you are ratcheting back up. You're sort of working against what we're trying to do, which is if you create a plurality of measures, people can make the best case they can offer different kinds of presentations around. Yes, we do things a little bit different with our portfolio, but you can verify the sort of rigor over here with other forms of testing.

I actually think if you, if you just move to all grading, no standardized testing, I actually think you might make it more difficult because you will be more we'll ride on any individual task or any individual competency. And so I actually think that there is a way in which, you know, strategic use and that, so I'm not saying you have to have the sat or the act or any particular standardized examination, but I do think that there is a, there is a way in which we sometimes build systems that are actually are at cross purposes where we're trying to ratchet down the importance of grades, but at the same time, we're eliminating all other forms of evaluation of student work. And that we really want to be careful about how we do that, because it can, it can actually end up with unintended consequences,

Berkshire A big thanks to Ethan Hutt for that expert tour through the ins and outs of grades and Jack and I will be right back to wrap things up and reveal the subject of this episode in the weeds segment for our Patreon subscribers. Here's a hint conspiracy theories involving the future, or rather the lack of a future for public education may be involved

[Music]

Berkshire Listening to you and Ethan talk about how hard it is to come up with alternatives. Made me think about a specific alternative that you and I were doing some research into Jack a year or so ago. And that would be Maine's bold experiment with competency based learning.

We're hearing a lot about this again today with the various disruptors who think that this would be an ideal time to take the education system and turn it upside down.

So one of the big problems that they had in Maine is that the school districts didn't even agree on what competency meant. And so when it wasn't then clear when students graduated, what that, that they had received say they had somebody got a three, right? Like what did that mean? And what did that then signal to colleges? And so the, the experiment unraveled for many different reasons, one of the big one was that they didn't the state, didn't really a lot extra funds to implement it, but so much of the unraveling had to do with exactly what you and Ethan have been telling us about, which is that this relative, what seems like a small piece of the grammar of schooling turns out to be connected to all of these other threads.

Schneider Absolutely. And I think it's worth pointing out. Jennifer, since you mentioned the grammar of schooling that, you know, one of the characteristics of the grammar of schooling is that it generally goes unquestioned. You can think of it as a treaty signed long ago. It, it shapes how we operate and we no longer really think about what went into the negotiation of that treaty. And when you then pull that piece of school out and replace it with something new, there are all of these arguments that need to be had. So if you pull grades out, you're not pulling out something that's perfect. You're pulling out something that is deeply flawed. We don't agree on what an AE is or on what a B is, right? An a grade in one teacher's classroom. And the very same school may be quite different from the teacher down the hall.

But because grades are a part of the grammar of schooling, we just kind of forget about all of that. We put all of that aside. Well, when you replace that with something new that we pay more attention to, right? That we become much more aware of. We ask all of these important questions that we don't ask of these elements of the grammar of schooling. So you pull grades out and you insert competency. Education will suddenly, we're hyper aware and we've got loads of questions. And so competency based education would need to be in place for decades in order for people to stop having those questions. It really means that replacing anything that has been around for a long time is really difficult because there are all these questions that we'll ask that we simply don't ask of the existing system.

Berkshire So Jack, I want to pivot a little bit and talk about something that I think is closely related to grades. You even touched on it a little bit in that would be testing. So a big new study came out recently from an outfit called REACH, and I'm going to ask you to step in and spell out the acronym for us.

Schneider Sure. REACH: research on education, access and choice. I think it's the ch is ch choice. I don't think there is an H in the acronym.

Berkshire I don't think you're going to get an a and an acronym spelling out, but our listeners should

Schneider Look it up. Cause I think I'm right on this one.

Berkshire Good enough. So they did, they released the study. It's really, it's the most comprehensive study to date about how traditional public charter schools and private schools responded to the school closures in the wake of the pandemic. And it was really interesting

because you could see that a lot of what we thought we knew turned out to really be talking points that while traditional public schools may have been a little slower out of the gate, they caught up to private schools very quickly and, and really outpaced them significantly as far as being able to meet the needs of lots of students. So I raised this because the key findings of the study were that the strongest determinants of how comprehensively schools responded to the closure were one education level of parents and education, the level of people in the neighborhood and to internet access. And it was yet another example of how the pandemic has really shone a light on out of school circumstances.

And I raised that because there are a lot of people whose livelihoods depend on shining a light on in school circumstances. And I'm thinking of course of people who think that testing is a very important thing. We need to do it a lot. And it tells us a lot. For example, there was a letter to the editor and the globe recently from a gentleman who works with an organization called Democrats for education reform, making a bold, a bold call for testing students, as soon as they get back in the door. Right. And so I've been thinking about that because if the studies that we're seeing really show how deeply unequal the society is when it comes to the sort of inputs and support students, get, you have another industry that's saying, you know, we need to focus our attention back on what the school can do about that.

Schneider I'm so glad you brought up testing Jennifer, because at this particular moment, I think, you know, on the one hand that I've got a lot of hope for people beginning to ask more and more difficult questions about grades and begin to become aware of grades in a way they really haven't for a number of generations. On the other hand though, the fact that the testing apparatus is still in place and the people who view tests as an important tool continue to exert influence over the public education system means that, you know, maybe grades aren't so terrible, because I think they're certainly preferable to standardized tests as a measure of what students know and can do.

They provide much more slack to allow teachers to actually to exert some professional judgment about what kids know, rather than narrowly confining it to whatever a machine can read on a Scantron. Grades also offer a little bit more room for equity in the sense that we generally do treat an a as an a no matter where it's been given now, that's not entirely true, but it does a great deal, I think, to level the playing field across really disparate socioeconomic contexts.

And so, because tests continue to be so deeply rooted in our system, it's also important to, you know, give grades they're kind of they're due in terms of not being a wholly negative influence on the education system. They in fact offer some affordances that standardized test scores don't so it's important to keep both of those in mind at the same time.

Berkshire Well, Jack, I never thought that I would learn so much about grades and I'm imagining that many of our listeners feel the same way.

Schneider I hope they don't sound as bored as you do right now, Jennifer.

Berkshire No, I think they're, they're hoping that they're going to be able to preorder your book. When is the book of the out?

Schneider Oh, not for a long time. Jennifer. Our book isn't even out yet. How can the next book be out yet? They are going to have to read our book and hold their horses. This is what they're going to have to do.

Berkshire So Jack I have it on the highest authority that the reason that you were actually a little late to this recording session today is that you were busy spinning conspiracy theories with a mate. Is that correct?

Schneider No, not a mate. A student of mine, a doctoral student, and they're not conspiracy theories, Jennifer. It's a, it is a theory. But I think it's rooted in evidence and it has to do with why the present secretary of education is pushing so hard for schools to open despite her long history on the record of saying that the federal government shouldn't ever tell schools what to do.

Berkshire Well, I can't wait to hear that. And I'm guessing that there will be some listeners out there who want to hear too, if you are a regular listener, you know, by now that we rely on, on our Patreon supporters to keep the show afloat and pay our excellent producer. And all you have to do is go to patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast, and you'll see a list of the various extras that you can get. If you send it through a few dollars, our way, we put together a custom reading list for each episode, and we do a special extended play episode that we call in the weeds. And that's where we do things like kick around conspiracy, not conspiracy theories, the kinds of questions that I've been getting lately, like is this whole thing, just a plot to blow the schools up.

Schneider That is not too far from what we were talking about. Jennifer, while your Patreon dollars go into our bank account for the show to keep the show afloat, our hearts are filled by other matter. And so if you want to engage in a non-capitalist expression of fandom, we encourage you to go on wherever you get your podcasts and give us a rating. It helps people find the show, share an episode with friends or coworkers. We're always interested in growing our audience or, you know, send us an email or tweet at our handle at, have you heard pod? We've gotten some great ideas for shows from our listeners. And we also just love hearing from you

Berkshire Jack, as always. That was very heartfelt.

Schneider I wish, I wish people could see the mean faces you make at me when you say that. Yes. Thank you, Jennifer

Berkshire Zoom has really made my job a lot harder, I have to say,

Schneider Yeah, I should record these. And then, you know, like post post them to to, I don't even know the names of the conservative sites I would post them to. I should look that up. Anyway. I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is Have You Heard. Stick around and join us In the Weeds if you're interested, otherwise we'll be back in two weeks.