

MODERN METHODS OF REPORTING TO PARENTS
AND
ONE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S EXPERIENCE
WITH THE CONFERENCE SYSTEM

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by
Marie Blanding
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Traditional ABC marking systems have been subject to wide adverse criticism in recent years on the grounds that marks: (1) are actually ambiguous and meaningless, (2) often become superficial ends in themselves to the detriment of more worthwhile educational goals, (3) are frequently influenced by a teacher's personal bias, and (4) can be unfortunately and unnecessarily harmful to the development of a child's healthy self-image.

This thesis recognizes some of these objections that have been expressed by educators and psychologists and goes on to note some of the more common procedures that have been adopted in moves away from traditional report cards. A survey of relatively recent professional literature notes wide use of a dual marking system, the use of separate sections for reporting a child's personal and social development as distinct from academic progress, and, particularly, the growing popularity of the parent-teacher conference. This last usually leads to doing away completely with report card marks.

Such conferences are especially evident among elementary schools attempting to implement a nongraded type of organization. Obviously a school structured to allow each child to proceed at his own pace will have difficulty marking

that child on the basis of pre-established group norms. The thesis goes on to report the experience of a local elementary, partially nongraded school during its first year of substituting evaluation sheets and conferences for the customary quarterly report cards.

The impetus for change in this school came from two teachers working with the lowest group of entering first graders, most of them headed for "F" marks. With one exception, other members of the staff and the principal were enthusiastically in favor of conferences. Parent cooperation was rated as excellent by the staff, although many parents had to leave work to attend the conferences.

In speaking of their trial year, teachers generally noted two factors that had been troublesome. The first was the anticipated pressure of time--time both for the conferences themselves and, to an even greater degree, time for the preparation of the quarterly evaluation sheets which actually emerged as the basic reporting tool. (In practice and in a majority of cases, only one formal conference was held with parents during the year.) The second factor involved the structuring of the evaluation sheets: making decisions as to what information should be included and what omitted, devising methods to gather information on which to base evaluations, and choosing language which was clear and honest without being inoffensive or discouraging. While teachers felt they successfully overcame these difficulties

in the end, they agreed that more careful preparation and some sort of guidelines would have been helpful to them.

Beyond the problems of time and record keeping, both capable of solution, was the more intricate problem of teacher attitude. Those teachers who did not feel the need for a greater exchange of information provided by the conference system and who were unwilling to take the time that preparation of a worthwhile evaluation sheet would seem to demand could write evaluations surprisingly similar to the traditional report cards: "Johnny does well in reading. He is not doing good work in math." Apparently, no administrative decision alone can alter a teacher's customary practices.

A majority of teachers, however, found the advantages of the conference arrangement well worth the extra work and time it involved. Among these advantages, they mentioned the establishment of a better relationship between home and school, the opportunity to present the child's performance in positive rather than negative terms, the elimination of neighborhood and classroom comparison of marks, and healthier attitudes among the children themselves.

This school's experience must be recognized as falling short of the goals and achievements that advocates of the conference system describe in the literature. It did, however, demonstrate rather conclusively that an elementary school can operate adequately and probably beneficially without traditional marks.