



For many kids growing up in America's schools it's easy to get the message that good grades are everything. Straight A's along with freely high SAT scores are seen as the key to gaining entry into elite colleges and prestigious careers. But does a 4.0 ensure success later in life? The U.S. grading system was created more than a century ago as a measure of academic achievement. But in recent years, grades have become an overwhelming source of anxiety.

A 2002 University of Michigan study revealed 80% of students based their self-worth on their grades. The lower their grades the lower their self-esteem. And self-esteem isn't the only thing that suffers. Research shows that chasing after perfect grades discourages creativity and reduces academic risk-taking. Over time, some kids even lose their desire to learn. Their only motivation to study just enough to ace the next test. The constant quest for perfect grades can lead to high stress and mental health problems. A recent study by New York University's College of Nursing tracked

students attending to highly selective private high schools. 80% of students reported feeling a great deal of stress or somewhat stressed on a daily basis. Some students feel the need to resort to cheating to boost their GPAs. In a national survey of 24,000 students from 70 high schools 64% admitted to cheating on a test. With college entrance exams like the SAT and a CT, the pressure can be just as intense. While one might think students with the highest scores do better in college, that's not always true.

A 2014 study followed more than a hundred and twenty-three thousand students who attended universities with test optional admissions policies. The goal was to compare kids who submitted test scores to those who didn't. The researchers found that when it came to grades and graduation rates, the SAT and a CT test scores didn't correlate with how well student performed in college. Students with top grades in high school but only mediocre test scores actually did better in college than students with higher test scores but lower grades. That's because high school grades demonstrate a pattern of commitment to hard work but a test taken once during an afternoon only reflects performance on a single given day. What about top academic achievers? Do valedictorians go on to have disproportionately more success than their peers? A Boston College researcher tracked more than eighty valedictorians over 14 years to find out how they fared in the real world. Overall the best and brightest ended up well-adjusted successful adults with professional careers. But none that were categorized as visionaries or trailblazers. Many of the valedictorians admitted they weren't the smartest students. Instead, they described themselves the hardest workers who gave the teachers what they wanted rather than exploring the material on a deeper level and taking risks.

If grades don't correlate with long-term success and they take a toll on well being, is there a better approach? In a worldwide study of student assessment, Finland constantly ranks at or near the top

Why Perfect Grades Don't Matter

and academic achievement far ahead of the US. In Finland, tests and grades play a much smaller role and Finland is still credited as one of the best systems in the world. 93% of students graduate from academic or vocational secondary schools. For the first six years of school in Finland, there's no measure of student's academic abilities. The only standardized test given is a final exam at the end of senior year in high school yet Finland students rank top 10 in the world for academic performance year over year. A growing number of educators in the US are calling for new ways to teach kids. Instead of simply memorizing information experts say kids need to learn to think for themselves and develop the motivation to succeed. Tests and grades are unavoidable for most American students but they aren't everything. For many, the key to success will be finding a lifelong passion for learning that extends beyond good grades test scores and graduation day.