

Any meaningful school reform needs to recognize the reality of our educational system



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In a perfect classroom, every student would willingly and joyfully do what is asked because learning is its own reward. In such a classroom, students would not compete with each other. The quality of their work wouldn't reflect anything other than their own growth and individual needs. In a perfect classroom, every student would be a willing and engaged participant; the only classroom management necessary would be containing their exuberance. In a perfect classroom, students would not get paid for doing schoolwork.

But wait—who pays students to do schoolwork? Students don't get paid to go to school. They go to school because they have to, and they do the work because we tell them to. Right?

Try as we might, we cannot divorce school from the features and behaviors that make up an economy: competition, trade, limited commodities, and

the use of a currency.

For all the talk of how important education is to employment and the market, we give surprisingly little attention to the economy of school itself. In fact, much of school's structure, curriculum, and content is deliberately designed to help us avoid acknowledging aspects of a market economy altogether. The market's sacred formula of supply and demand is forcefully rejected, except in the sense that teachers demand and students supply. In theory, the quality-ensuring authority of competition in a market does not apply to school because no student can be abandoned to failure or loss, and such a system inevitably creates far more losers than it does winners. In the ideal classroom, every student moves forward in learning and growth. No child is ever left behind. And the actual product of school—all those tests and essays and performances and projects—can't be traded for anything else.

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Imagine an adult's job looking something like this: Five days a week you are forced to go to a place and perform a series of unrelated tasks. You have many bosses and move from job to job and room to room throughout the day. A great deal of your time is spent sitting and listening.

You are forced to go to this job and do the work, but there are few clear incentives. All your basic needs are met, so this job isn't in service of any physical necessity, like food, clothing, or shelter. It's not directly connected to wants either. It doesn't get you better food or fancier shoes. Reward is simply praise, especially if you do the job well. Mediocre performance is mostly rewarded with the promise of no longer doing the work or the possibility of improving.

As for punishment for not doing the work at all or doing it poorly or simply misbehaving on the job, there are a host of indirect penalties and annoyances. You may have to repeat the entire experience or stay later instead of going home. A great deal of punishment simply involves getting yelled at.

You have limited choice over the work. Opting out isn't an option, but doing the job poorly is relatively easy. You produce a fair amount: answers, essays, projects, conversations, presentations, worksheets, posters, experiments, lab work, etc. But none of it has much immediate tangible value. You aren't allowed to barter your own work with others or be paid for it. You cannot do someone else's work, nor are they allowed to do yours. You really aren't encouraged to do much with it at all, except give it to one of your bosses.

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There is one specific reward—and here is where things get more complicated. Periodically, you receive a mark for the quality of your work. Some bosses are generous, others less so. This mark has little immediate value at all; you can't trade it for anything. It can't be used to purchase tangible goods. The amount you can earn is capped, and the value is in how close you reach that cap.

You build your earnings slowly, and the formula for growth has an almost infinite variety for each job. A few times a year you get a report outlining your savings and their value, though it is assumed the tasks themselves are a kind of reward. This is so painfully not true of many of the tasks that it hints at conspiracy.

You are told the value of your effort is built into the tasks, that the tasks themselves, the experience gained, is the actual reward. You are told the built-in reward of the tasks will allow you, in the future, to continue doing similar things for a currency that will allow you to purchase goods and services. You are reminded, repeatedly, that the longer you remain in this

system, completing tasks and demonstrating skill and internalizing data, the greater your ability will be to accumulate a more powerful currency later. You are working, in other words, for a reward that has extremely limited present-day value. If you like the work, that is the reward; if you don't like the work, the reward is the promise of escape.

You are fairly confused about the purpose, nature, and value, but you muddle along as best you can. The work itself is often vague of purpose, and much of the time seems strangely self-referential, of value only to itself. Final products seem backward, reflections of what was experienced rather than directed toward the future. The only reliable, consistent outcome is that you'll receive a number or letter upon completion of every task, no matter how widely they differ.

That's the job of school, and grades are the currency.

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Grades are the most powerful currency a school has to offer, and as such, everyone treats them as currency, whether they realize it or not. Teachers use grades to get students to do the work. Students work for the payment of grades. Parents and society determine the value of a

student's effort by their grades. Even if we decouple the motivational power of currency from schoolwork, grades, like money, still determine the value of both the work and the person doing it.

We'd like to deny that grades are currency and that the world of school does not function like the economic one we enter after leaving it. We'd like to assume that the structure of school, with its intrinsic motivation and teachers impassioned by the joy of their subject material, should not—cannot—function like a market. We'd like to emphasize that grades are not a currency, not tradeable, and that their value is connected to the skills of students and nothing else. All true—yet not quite true at all.

The truth is we don't go to incredible lengths to prevent schools from functioning like a market or grades acting as currency.

The most recent and by far most widespread attempt to shift this is the standards movement and standards-based grading. If grades are primarily an evaluative tool, the argument goes, then they should be unambiguously and clearly so. Grades should not be used to motivate or direct behavior. They should not determine value—only reflect an unbiased calculated level of competency. Thus, we now have many schools where grades aren't

supposed to reflect behavior. Late work, classroom disruption, missing texts, tardiness, etc., no longer can impact a student's grade.

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The grade, instead, is applied specifically and directly toward demonstration of a narrowly defined skill. In some schools, there is an attempt at no grade at all—either replacing the mark or percentage with statements of competence (such as exceeds expectations, proficient, needs improvement, etc.) or with extensive specific comments only concerning the skill being measured.

These efforts are heartfelt, noble, and fully directed toward students' best interests. But having worked for 15 years in five schools in various stages of the standards-based movement, I've seen that the results seem to be mixed. The high-performing students still obsess over their grades; colleges, parents, and just about everyone else in society values them over all else; and grades continue to hold motivational power.

School exists within an economy, of course, and for many it exists primarily to enhance the nation's economic power. Everyone but the student is paid for their labor, and everything going into a school must be bought, from supplies to utilities to transportation. Perhaps most crucially, students themselves still work, producing things that are then valued and judged. We attempt to remove their ability to trade their product as a commodity, but that merely shoves the whole enterprise onto this tiny little marker of the grade.

School is an island in the middle of a horizonless sea of commerce and trade. Nearly everything that reaches its shores is borne there on the water of money—from the food to the electricity to the textbooks. Its teachers row in on creaky boats, while admin motor in on better ships and berth at closer docks. Some students arrive in yachts, while others swim in with nothing but a bathing suit.

But once on the island, we like to pretend that the ocean of commerce in every direction barely exists at all. But we can't.

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relationships are inevitably built on exchange. Students do things for the teacher, and in return, they receive the teacher's favor. Teachers demand things from the students; teachers do things for the students. Information is given; action is required. A relationship is established and a kind of commerce takes place. It is sweetened for the willing and forced upon the unwilling. The currency that inevitably arises from these relationships is the grade.

We like to tell ourselves—as teachers, as parents, as administrators, and as a society—that school is not a market. There's no free exchange of goods among the participants in a school. In fact, the students are denied the sense that they have anything to offer because, after all, they are still learning. Neither teachers nor students are to think or behave as if they are working in an economy.

But an economy develops whenever people exchange items of value, whenever one person has control over something someone else needs or wants. Whether we acknowledge its existence or not, it occurs.

Schools are in a particular bind regarding inequality, motivation, and coercion. Some of the worst effects of our social devotion to money and wealth already intrude in ways both unjust and resistant to change. Poor

schools in poor neighborhoods seem to consistently produce poor adults; the reverse is true for the wealthy. If the market creates pockets of poverty, and all that accompanies that, the solution for a democratic, fair, functioning school won't be found emulating that market.

A school infused with unregulated market principles might well inflict the worst aspects of a market economy on helpless children. Teachers are not supposed to have to extract value from their charges.

Like most teachers, I have a complicated and often confusing relationship with grades. Some students care for the grade more than anything else, while others could care less and simply want just enough to be allowed to leave. To my knowledge, little research has been done toward an unbiased and nuanced understanding of the market aspects of school. Almost all policy decisions are made based on the market effects *on* schools rather than *in* them. Most of the attempts at changing the nature and authority of grades fail to accept or accommodate their inescapable currency.

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I'm neither an economist nor much of a businessperson. I'm a high school English teacher. To overcome this problematic functionality of

schools, there are no easy solutions.

We might try simply acknowledging the monetary aspect of grades and, rather than eliminate those attributes, strengthen those that work. If given, grades should have more transactional power, not less, and it should be both immediate and tangible, but directed in ways we desire. Students should be able to buy things with their grades, especially the things with value in schools: books, time, investment, healthy food, service, kindness. We should regulate the economy, not try to eliminate it.

Students should be able to buy freedom from their classes. An “A” grade should get a student out of a class or an assignment, not just count as a “job well done.” They should be able to buy access to college, too, and pay for it with the grades they earned in school.

Grades are meant to act as benignly neutral statements of quality or effectiveness or simple fact, but they end up as tradable markers of value and worth.

One of the essential features of any currency is that it is judgment-free. We don't judge the money spent on an expensive car, only the car itself. The value of a dollar is the same across all spheres. Grades, on the other hand, are intimately attached to whatever they are affixed to in confusing ways. It might be useful to consider severing that relationship. This gives grades a currency power disconnected from the work—in much the way a dollar makes no value judgment on what is bought with it.

But this process would raise challenging questions. What is the “value” of a grade? What does earning a 95 percent on an exam mean? What about an essay that gets a B+? In the current system, the value of each grade can vary from assignment to assignment, student to student, teacher to teacher, subject to subject, and school to school. As a result, nobody has much of an idea what any grade stands for at all—much less what it should stand for. What we end up valuing are specific classes we think represent true merit, wisdom, skill, etc. The core classes, like math, English, science. The value of a student's performance in other areas is minimized almost out of existence.

But a grade that was an actual currency, given out in equal measure by every teacher, might start to level the educational field.

It may sound counterintuitive to give grades more power than they already have. We tend to be idealists when it comes to our children, unwilling to accept compromise if it means allowing injustice. But there's a deep divide between what grades are supposed to do and what they actually do. They're meant to act as benignly neutral statements of quality or effectiveness or simple fact, but they end up as tradable markers of value and worth. And they're just one aspect of the internal economic landscape of schools.

I can't help but sense that the reason we struggle so much with grades is not because they have currency power but because we try so hard to deny that power. Rather than regulate the internal economy of schools, we attempt to prevent one entirely. To many in the education system, school is meant to be a kind of worker's paradise, free of currency and capital accumulation, motivated by the greater common good, overseen by benevolent dictators, and so on.

But is it really? Can it be? I'm not so sure.

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