

FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

The New Parental Obsession: Checking Kids' Grades Online

Watching a steady stream of test and homework scores is too great a temptation for some; 'There's this horrible compulsion to know'

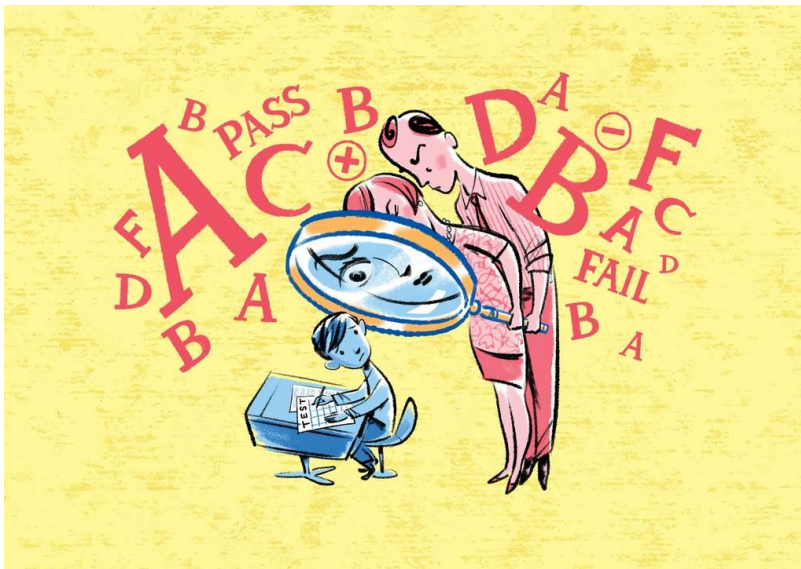


ILLUSTRATION: STEVEN SALERNO



By

Julie Jargon

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Parents of middle- and high-schoolers are facing a new anxiety: whether or not to check their kids' grades in real time.

In many school districts, middle school is the first time kids receive letter grades. In itself, this can be a difficult transition. Until then, parents mostly get only basic indications that their child is—or isn't—meeting state standards. In recent years, districts around the country have begun requiring teachers to submit grades for every assignment, quiz and test into online grade books, and have granted students and parents access to them through websites or apps. Many participating schools also send parents text or email alerts when new grades are posted, and when assignments are missing.

The argument for online grade books is that they allow parents to detect a problem before it mushrooms and to intervene, say, with tutoring. Knowing students' grades before report cards come home can also prevent unwanted surprises.

But this new feed of information shifts the responsibility for academic performance from the student to the parent—or at least it can feel that way. And in an age when so much data is at our fingertips, how much is too much? When parents start checking grades so often, what should they be doing with that knowledge?

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you have access to online grade books? If so, how often do you check your kids' grades, and how do you use the information? Join the conversation below.

Sarah Quinn, a teacher in Clifton Park, N.Y., currently has a son in ninth grade and a daughter in fifth grade in the same district where she teaches. This means that when she has her online grade book open to insert grades or track attendance, she also sees notifications about her own kids' grades.

"It's like a telephone ringing. You can't help but pick up," Ms. Quinn said. "There's this horrible compulsion to know."

During the second week of school this fall, Ms. Quinn noticed that an assignment in her son's computer class was marked as missing. When she asked him about it, he said he'd turned it in late and therefore it wasn't graded immediately. For the last four weeks she has been bugging him to ask his teacher when his grade will be updated, because it currently shows he's failing the class. Waiting for her son to resolve the situation instead of getting involved herself has been painful, she said.

"Teachers are asking for you to be involved and you have this venue to do it, but at the same time you're supposed to be raising a child to be independent and responsible," Ms. Quinn said. "When I was growing up, there was much more onus on a child to remediate himself. These electronic notifications take that away."

Magda Pecsenty, a management consultant in Detroit with two sons in high school, can relate.

"The challenge for me as a parent is to control myself so that I can allow my kids to develop into adults on their own. This real-time grade-tracking doesn't help with that at all," she said. "It's suddenly raised the stakes, like, 'My kid isn't going to get into college because he got a B on this one test.' "

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Ms. Pecsénye remembers seeing a low grade her older son had gotten on a test last year and immediately texting him about it. “What kind of horrible parent does that?” she said.

She apologized to her son for confronting him before he had a chance to tell her about




Magda Pecsénye has been weaning herself off checking the grades of her two sons, including Robert French. PHOTO: MAGDA PECSÉNYE

the grade himself. She since has been weaning herself from the app, checking her sons’ grades once a week, down from once a day.

“Certainly those parents who are uber vigilant will be uber vigilant whether they have online access or not, and parents who aren’t paying attention still won’t pay attention,” said Amy Pedigo Carmichael, a vice president at Jupiter Ed Inc., a developer of an online grade book used to track the grades of four million students world-wide.

For schools with Jupiter, 50% of families with access to the parent portal never log on, said Ms. Pedigo Carmichael. Meanwhile, 14% log on at least once a day. She said 8% of schools take their grades offline to keep both parents and kids from obsessing, but they can still view homework assignments.

A spokeswoman for PowerSchool, another big provider of online grade books, said that on average, parents check the app or website a few times a week. She also said having access to



Laura Austin

Jovian School 2019-20

Messages

To Do

Grades

Assignment

Materials

My Files

Calendar

Report Card

Attendance

Behavior Log

Settings

Video Tour

Logout

1st Semester

Geometry

Mr. Hundsness, Rm 107, per 1

87.2% B+

1st Semester

Due Tue

Puzzle Project

You will present your projects Wed & Thu.

Fri

Chapter 4 Quiz

Due Mon

#3.3 missing

Show More

World History

Ms. Diego, Rm 116, per 2

91.4% A-

1st Semester

Due Tue

Hieroglyphics pod

Due Thu

Time Traveller Essay

If you could take a trip to any time and place in world history, where would you go and when? What would you want to learn? Give at least 3 specific examples. Minimum 1000 words in essay format.

Concert Band

Ms. Wagner, Rm M02, per 3

94.2% A

1st Semester

Biology

Mr. Verma, Rm 224, per 4

78.8% C+

1st Semester

Due Tue

Zombie Ant Apocalypse

Due 9/6

Symbiosis pod missing

Show More

Of the families who use Jupiter Ed to track their kids’ grades, 14% log on at least once a day, according to the company. PHOTO: JUPITER ED INC.

grades “increases the likelihood that parents will engage in conversations with their child, or their child’s teacher, regarding their growth and progress in and beyond the classroom.”

Wade Etheredge, a private wealth adviser in Greenfield, Ind., said access to real-time grades was a great way for him to stay on top of his kids’ academic performance but that he didn’t obsess over it. “I’m not a daily checker,” he said.

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He still has a daughter in high school but now that his son is a freshman in college, not having constant visibility into his grades has been an adjustment. As adults, college students aren’t required to disclose their grades to their parents, but Mr.

Etheredge made it clear that he wasn’t paying tuition unless his son granted him access. “He’s a good student, but let’s just say I’m anxious to see his midterm grades,” Mr. Etheredge said.

Teachers report mixed feelings about online grade books. Sean Riley, a high-school teacher in Seattle, said students and parents can become so focused on the metrics that they lose sight of the bigger picture. “It starts to turn learning into a series of tasks to be completed instead of a process of exercises to learn more,” he said.

Obsessive grade-checking is also symptomatic of the desire, peculiar to a generation that has grown up with everything just a swipe away, to receive instant gratification. Mr. Riley said this

can lead to anxiety and disappointment in some students.

The upside is when students use the information to advocate for themselves.



Sean and Lisa McEvoy decided not to check their daughters' online grades at all. PHOTO: MCEVOY FAMILY

Sean and Lisa McEvoy made a conscious decision not to look at their daughters' online grade books and to encourage the girls to come to them if they had trouble in a class—

preferably before a teacher called or a bad grade showed up on a report card.

When the younger of their two daughters was a high-school freshman and struggled with math, she told her dad she was going to get extra help in the weekly after-hours sessions her teacher offered, and she improved her grade.

“I don’t think you can instill motivation in kids through fear or intimidation,” said Mr. McEvoy, an account manager at a computer company in Ridgefield, Conn. “It has to come from within.”

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