Age-based gradings don’t always add up

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At the age of five, I failed maths, arriving home with a D on my report card. My brothers teased me. They called me Mrs Dumb-at-Sums. The name stuck. Even now, decades on, I’m tempted to tell you about the misapplication of the Cuisenaire rod system in Queensland, how maths failed me. Oh, I knew that black plus white made tan, but the symbolic leap to 7 plus 1 escaped me.

It wasn’t my fault, I want to cry, the king-hit of that first failure still ringing in my ears.

The grades that followed my first D piled failure upon failure. So for me, it's been particularly resonant to read the CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Geoff Masters, saying recently that he's not sure age-based grading of children is helping them learn. Go Geoff! I want to shout. You know me deeply! ACER’s role is to improve actual learning, and although it does a lot of grading in its spare time, running a range of national scholarship and aptitude tests for schools and universities, Masters is on to something.

At the start of any school year, according to Masters, in reading and mathematics the most advanced students can be six years ahead of the least advanced students. Grades are stable over time, and the best predictor of success in later years of school is success in early years. The converse is probably true, that the best predictor of failure is early failure. Those at the low end start the year on track to receive another low grade. I was on track.

Masters says that while once we assumed there are smart and dumb students, we now know that most, if not all, students can learn successfully "given sufficient time, motivation and appropriate opportunities". This is such an important point. It means that although some students might be tracking behind others, "they are still capable of making good personal progress". Age-based grades are too dumb to recognise that progress. They can only judge against the expectations a school year operates on.

Of course it's important for educators to know how students track against expectations, which hopefully build to the overall outcomes of high school education. But if everyone can learn, isn’t it important to also track whether students are moving forward in their own learning towards the final outcome? And doesn't that matter more to the students? Grading against age-based expectations means students have no idea whether they're progressing in their learning. Worse, we are telling D-graded students that they are not learning even when they are. High-performing students are failed by the system too. Both groups are at risk of disengaging, the low performer dropping out and the high performer coasting. I know the argument against A to E grades is often made from a self-esteem point of view, but Masters isn’t some sort of 21st century Captain Kindness. His driver is the fact that unskilled work is gone, and those who fail at high school are likely to be lost in the 21st century in which everyone must be skilled.
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Would changes like these be hard to achieve?

Probably. You’d need to track student learning year on year and give them feedback on where they’ve come from, where they are and where they’re headed.

You’d have to trust they’ll get there, and underpin the system with learning support to make sure. The student six years behind may even take longer to get to the outcome. The student six years ahead may finish early. And schools don’t like change.

But it’s worth doing for all the Mrs Dumb-at-Sumses. Our school system tells us early who we are and what we’re capable of. Of course they don’t know who we are. For one thing, our brains will recombobulate halfway through, and everything will change. But age-based grading does it anyway, very effectively, telling us what we can and can't do.

If nothing else, I like what Masters is saying because it proves something I learned way too late - when I taught myself maths as an adult - that I could have managed school maths, of course I could, if only I'd had a bit of time and confidence.