

## No more 'As' or 'Fs' for children in early grades

**OUR OPINION:** Strange new report cards reflect each child's individual learning progression

"Mommy, mommy, look at my report card!"

"Did you do well in school, honey?"

"Yeah, I did — instead of that one little card, my teacher gave me two whole pages of neat words and letters and stuff!"

"Umm, that's great sweetie — isn't it?"

It is for thousands of American schoolchildren.

Parents of elementary and middle school kids nationwide are seeing a new aspect in the increasing trend within education reform — report-card reform.

Instead of handing out the traditional letter grades of A through F for any single subject, some public schools are adopting a system of rating students on more than 150 different academic and social skills.

Proponents say the change reflects the desire of many educators to educate the "whole" child.

Changing the traditional grading system is a big issue, but it is also an entity that has needed tinkering for a long time.

For years, educators and psychologists have studied the demographics and learning patterns of children. Experts have found that the physiological differences between girls and boys contributes greatly to the way the two sexes not only comprehend and interact with their world, but also how they learn about their world.

In kindergarten, and earlier social environments such as childcare, many girls show a higher level of maturity

and learning ability than their male counterparts. Some studies show that many little boys aren't even ready for the academic and social demands of preschool.

Differences like these demand a creative and new approach to grading each individual's educational progression. Without changes in the way educators gauge student progress, children can and will continue to struggle with low self-esteem and serious anti-learning attitudes.

Beginning with kindergarten and carrying over into the primary grades, schools are starting to encourage children to learn at their own pace. This emphasis is another reason educators see the need to replace the standard letter grade with the new rating system.

The change will not only benefit children, but also parents concerned with the quality of education their children are getting. In answer to a parent's concern and a child's need for individual development, schools utilizing the new grading concept want to communicate to parents more than just how well their child is doing in the basic subjects. The ability to read phrases; read an entire story without stopping; apply mathematical formulas to real-life questions; and respect diversity, are a few of the academic areas teachers want to teach children, and to keep parents informed about.

Although parents and educators find the new grading system confusing and about as easy to decipher as a big-city road map, the new report cards represent a move in the right direction.



## Measure 20-54 robs Peter to pay Paul

It is a very good thing that folks in Eugene want to do something to provide affordable housing. When the utility sales tax is defeated, let's join together with a common goal: getting the City Council to fund affordable housing now — out of the existing General Fund.

Measure 20-54 should be defeated. A utility sales tax for any purpose, no matter how worthy, is a bad idea. Here are just three of the reasons that Eugene residents should vote "no" on their mail-in ballots:

1) The measure taxes necessities to pay for necessities.

When the Oregon Legislature proposed a sales tax in 1993, it exempted utilities. It recognized that utilities are necessities, not luxuries. The Eugene City Council should have shown a similar sensitivity.

Utilities and housing are necessities. In this day and age, it is difficult to imagine a household operating without water or electricity.

This tax is "robbing Peter to pay Paul." It takes money away from one purpose to pay for another and pays off one debt only by incurring a new one. The goal of an appropriate tax is to provide more housing, not to tip people on the economic edge over into poverty.

2) Measure 20-54 is unfair to low- and fixed-income ratepayers.

"That promise and a nickel will get you a cup of coffee."

Unfortunately, a nickel won't even buy a cup of coffee anymore. Inflation and taxes are always on the rise, and those on low and fixed incomes are unable to keep pace. A utility sales tax is regressive because it taxes people without any regard to their ability to pay.

As a Eugene Water and Electric Board commissioner, I know that the average utility bills of low- and fixed-income ratepayers are comparable to those of high-income ratepayers. By necessity, low- and fixed-income ratepayers are already conserving energy and water to keep their bills low. An increase that seems small to one ratepayer adds another burden to people already having trouble paying their expenses.

The proponents make much of the 10 percent of this tax that is promised to "energy assistance programs." This leaves the incorrect impression that low-income folks might not pay the tax.

In the early debates, the city designated a program to receive these funds — one that pays the full bill of those least able to pay (those below 125 percent of the poverty line). It did not address the tax paid by the majority of low- and fixed-income ratepayers.

When this was pointed out, the proponents deleted that language from their arguments and adopted a "trust us" position as to how the 10 percent would be distributed. Because the city is not the Internal Revenue Service, it has no record of individual incomes, so the tax cannot

### COMMENTARY

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be based on ability to pay.

Therefore, most low- and fixed-income ratepayers should expect to pay this tax without relief. If the City Council has a concrete plan for how to avoid this, it has yet to share it with the voters.

3) The tax targets non-profit organizations such as schools, churches and other community groups while exempting some other users.

Everyone has to pay for utilities. The proponents argue that because no one can avoid paying utilities, the utility sales tax is an effective way to raise lots of money for the city.

The tax allows the City Council to tap an "untapped market," namely nonprofits, which are usually tax-exempt. Nonprofits are tax-exempt for a reason: Society has determined that nonprofits provide a social good. We should continue to exempt nonprofits from taxation.

In fact, EWEB steam customers, "interruptible" customers of Northwest Natural Gas and those who use oil or wood for heat have already been exempted or have been promised that they will be exempted from paying this tax. In addition, Measure 20-54 would allow customer classes to petition the City Council for an exemption after the fact. You can expect the politically influential to line up at City Hall for this exemption should the measure pass.

I've opposed the utility sales tax since its proposal in May 1995. I remember how it feels to be unemployed and have to worry about how to make my next payment. A lot of expenses can be cut drastically, but utilities are not among them.

There were months when I had to kite my utility payment to pay off student loans or other bills. I was fortunate. I had a history of paying my utility bills regularly, so EWEB was sympathetic to my difficulties. Even though I am now employed, my decisions are shaped by that humbling experience.

I and many EWEB customers give to EnergyShare to help those less fortunate to make their energy payments. Charity comes from the heart, not just the pocketbook. We need to continue to encourage charitable contributions.

The City Council made a mistake when it referred the utility sales tax to the voters without a public hearing. Let's negate that error by voting down Measure 20-54. Let's tell the City Council to fund affordable-housing needs through its existing funds, rather than by a "creative tax."

Vote "no" on Measure 20-54.

EWEB Commissioner Jeff Osanka is a University alumnus and a spokesman for Defeat Utility Sales Tax.

## Oregon Daily Emerald

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