DEREK GOTTLIEB

Hello and welcome to episode nine of Thinking in the Midst, a podcast about philosophy and action in education. With Cara Furman, I'm Derek Gottlieb. In this episode, we are talking very broadly about school accountability, what it means and has meant, how it has come to be this way, and whether it is possible and desirable to modify the ways in which measurement and reporting technologies have been off the mark, to coin a phrase.

Our guests this week are the co-authors of a forthcoming book by that exact title, that is, Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but don't have to), due out from Harvard University Press on August 8th of this year. Please welcome Ethan Hutt and Jack Schneider. I would love for you guys to introduce yourselves. Ethan, would you care to go first?

ETHAN HUTT

Yeah, hi, I'm Ethan Hutt. I'm an associate professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

JACK SCHNEIDER

Thanks. I'm Jack Schneider. I'm an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

CARA FURMAN

Nice to meet both of you. So we're going to start today by asking, what is the issue related to school accountability, and why does it matter? And I'm going to urge you to think for a moment if you've got an anecdote that can help us understand it, that will really help our listeners, as you start to introduce us to why you study this particular issue, and why it should matter for others. And Ethan, you want to start first?

ETHAN HUTT

I was going to let Jack start. I mean, so I think accountability, I think, is a difficult word these days, because when people hear accountability now, they usually, the average person will start immediately thinking about, like, no child left behind, or the need to test. And there's a lot of baggage now onto that word. And I think what interests us in accountability, or at least interests me, I'll let Jack speak for himself, is this idea that there's a bigger principle here that we're interested in, which is that when you have a public institution, the institution has a lot of the public trust. They're doing a very important, in the case of schools, a very important responsibility in terms of teaching our kids about citizenship, about skills, about their future lives. And part of that responsibility means that you, as an institution, need to give an account to the public of what you're doing, how you're doing it, whether it's successful. And so, you know, thinking about all the different ways that that can be done, what information it requires, how

often, who is it being directed to, you know, those are all issues that are wrapped up into accountability. And so I think Jack and I spend a lot of time thinking in the context of our new book about, you know, where do grades and tests fit into that story, but also just trying to think about, like, at the most basic level, what does it mean for a public institution to communicate effectively with its various publics? And so that's what we think about when we think about this history of accountability. And I'm sure as we get into it, we'll talk about sort of where certain features of our school system fit into that, providing an account of what schools do on a daily basis.

JACK SCHNEIDER

I'll just add one thing to that, and that is that, you know, accountability has been something we've been living with now for a full generation, right? Test-based accountability as it plays out in the form of annual standardized testing in grades three through eight, as well as it's usually grade 10 in most states, letter grades being issued to schools in a majority of states, the idea that test scores tell us, you know, the sum total of school quality, that we can measure student learning this way, right? That we've been living with this for long enough that it is actually not as questioned as it probably should be. You know, there is a vocal sort of counter movement that has emerged over the past couple of decades, and that counter movement does a lot to remind us that the water in which we swim is in fact water.

But, you know, I think one of the things that Ethan and I have tried to do in our work over the past, you know, we've been writing about accountability together for probably, you know, 10 to 15 years. I think that a lot of what we try to do in our work is remind people that these systems and structures exist because they were created, they were choices, right? This is not inevitable, nor is this ideal. And so, you know, a lot of what we are trying to do is reconstruct the history of the creation of these systems and structures as well as to try to raise important questions about the impacts of policies.

Now, a lot of our work has been about accountability systems, and in the current book, what we're doing is we're actually looking at the impact on student learning itself, not from accountability systems, but from another approach to measurement or assessment. And that is how do we measure student learning in these non-state driven ways, right? Through, you know, teacher grades, through, you know, standardized tests, like those given by organizations like the College Board. What are the things that we do to learning in the same way that we have done things to the operation of schools via our measurement technologies?

ETHAN HUTT

I can, to help maybe listeners think about, like, what Jack said, like, there are other ways to do this that we may be have forgotten. Like in the 19th century, the most common way to do accountability was the state would actually send out a school inspector who would show up and they would inspect the school. They would chat with students. They would look at the library, what kinds of books were available. They would look at the physical plant. Was it in good

shape? I mean, so it was, there were other ways of giving account or, you know, before test scores, it was often that communities would come out and do like exhibitions for the public where the students would recite poetry or recite various kinds of things, you know, that they had learned. And that was a demonstration of how the school had done that year. And so there are many ways that to do accountability, as Jack is suggesting, that don't involve what we've basically done the last 20 years, which is test students annually and publish the results.

CARA FURMAN

I'm going to push a little bit back on what you're saying, not on what you're saying, but ask for a little bit more, which is, so I'm a former teacher. I know why it matters. I'm a parent. I also have a strong feeling about why this conversation matters. And you've given a great account of what it is that you do. Can you say a little bit about why this matters? Why should listeners care about how we're talking about accountability?

JACK SCHNEIDER

I think it depends on who you imagine your listeners to be, right? If your listeners are scholars, right, then I think it matters because there are a lot of interesting questions here. There are important philosophical questions to ask, right? About what does it mean for a school to be succeeding? What does it mean for a young person to be learning? How important is it that we measure those things? And what does measurement technology enable there? Are those valued processes? I tend to think more about a public audience, which I'm guessing is not the core listenership here, right? But in terms of what those folks should be thinking about, why they should care, right?

I'll give you a very concrete example. My daughter loved school in grades K through two and couldn't wait to get there each morning. And then in third grade, lo and behold, the first year that standardized testing hits here in Massachusetts and in all states, she started coming home and asking questions like, why do we do less art in school? Or why are we taking so many practice tests? Now, this is not the case in every community, but we live in a community that like many others does not have very high standardized test scores. And as a result of that, you know, there is a lot of pressure that is felt by educational leaders to raise student test scores. And they engage in practices that they know will raise student test scores. Some of those are pedagogies around, you know, instruction for reading or, you know, for math, but others are, you know, like basic tricks, teach the kids how to take the test, right? Expose them more to the kinds of questions that appear year after year.

And so what has that meant for me as a citizen rather than me as a scholar? What has it meant for me as a parent? It has meant that I have had to watch my kid become more and more disengaged from school, despite the fact that she started off loving it and has had every encouragement from her two educator parents to love it. And I care because I have a lot of friends and colleagues who work in K-12 schools, who have their hands tied or who have been, you know, made marginal to the curriculum because they teach music or they teach social

studies or, you know, they teach physical education. You know, parents should care because kids in cities like Chicago lost recess for roughly a decade. They should care because kids like my daughter have 15 minutes to eat their lunches and bring half of it home each day because they didn't have time to eat. So I think there are a lot of reasons to care both as scholars and as citizens here.

And again, to draw this back to the kind of work that Ethan and I do, right, that it can be easy to simply accept this and say, well, this is just another difficulty in life that we have to muddle through. So we quote Congressman Michael Capuano in our book saying, nobody likes tests, but tests are a fact of life, right? And that is very much the American attitude toward assessment and toward measurement technologies, right? That we have been living with them for so long, right? Test-based accountability may only be roughly 20 years old, but these measurement technologies like the standardized test are over a century old, and we've been living with them for so long that we have accepted that, of course, a standardized test is the way that you would measure student learning. Of course, letter grades are a reasonable way of assessing what students have learned in a semester. Naturally, we would rate and rank schools at the end of the year. And so it's important to raise questions about those systems and structures so that we can then take the concerns we have as parents, as citizens, as scholars, and then become more active and engaged in thinking about alternatives and solutions rather than saying, well, it's a fact of life. Nobody likes it. Let's deal with it.

CARA FURMAN

Thank you so much for that fantastic answer.

DEREK GOTTLIEB

I'm going to combine two questions that we tend to ask separately in this next question. One of the things that I appreciate most about your book – Ethan has dropped off the call and will be back shortly – one of the things that I appreciate most about your book, and full disclosure for listeners, I indexed the book and continue to call it the wrong title for some reason – that's neither here nor there – is that unlike most of the work on this issue that I have done and that most of the work that people who care about accountability in the way that you described, by which I mean people who see its harmful effects in schools, tend to take a sort of easy opposition that like, we should just get rid of tests and return to some sort of pre-test era in which things were quite obviously better.

And one of the things that you do in this book is take seriously as historians of education who are thinking critically and using tools that I associate with the discipline of philosophy as well, to think about the systemic function played by various kinds of assessment technologies. And a core feature of your argument is that if we are going to make changes to the existence of current grading practices, to the role played by the transcripts, to the role played by standardized tests, then whatever we replace these things with has to be able to do the job systemically that is being done by these things. And your book is basically a treatment of a

variety of alternatives that – or alternative candidates that might do that role. Can you describe some of those alternatives and also how you came to this particular perspective on standardized tests that is bringing your readership back to the idea that, okay, speaking realistically, we can't just wish testing or similar technologies away. They are doing an important job, and so let's think seriously about how to do that job in other ways that might be less harmful?

JACK SCHNEIDER

Yeah. One of the things that we try to do in the book is identify the various roles played by assessment technologies. So I'll just offer a few of those here. One is what we call short-haul communication. So this is communicating a very short distance between educators and students. Hey, you did a good job, but there's room for improvement in the future between educators and parents and family members. Hey, here's how your student is doing. Here are the things that your student should be working on and that you can help with.

And then a second one is long-haul communication. So communicating at a greater distance either in time or in space. So communicating to future audiences. Hello, future audiences. Here's what communication can do. That's something that the transcript tries to do. Or hey, employers who are at some great remove here from the school. Here is an assessment of this student's knowledge and skills.

So communication is a big part of what assessment technologies try to do, but there are other roles as well. So one of them is to try to create a system out of a non-system. So how do you stitch together elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, oftentimes with students moving from one town to another or from one state to another? And then even more challenging, how do you stitch together the K-12 system with the higher ed system, particularly when students are moving across state or not attending public institutions?

There are real challenges there with regard to the fact that the American educational system is not a system and emerged in a hodgepodge fashion. And assessment technologies try to bridge some of those gaps by saying, all right, here's what the student who just graduated from this high school is prepared to do now that they are arriving on a college campus. So that's another function there.

I'll name another function, motivation. Assessment technologies are used as a way of trying to motivate students to do their work, right? That they represent carrots and sticks that in some cases make teachers' lives easier, but in most cases are directing students away from the intrinsic value of learning towards the extrinsic value of learning. So there are lots of uses here and they all get bound up together. And we don't recognize those uses, right? That they're implicit rather than explicit. And we have a small number of tools which we're trying to use to pursue lots of different aims simultaneously.

The metaphor that we use in the book is that it's a little bit like saying, well, we kind of need a Ferrari to go fast on this highway, but then we need this tractor trailer to carry a lot of cargo for us. We'll just create a kind of hybrid there that'll do both. It'll be a Ferrari with a really long trunk, right? And it does nothing well. And that's the story of our assessment technologies.

And so one of the things that we talk through in the book is, is there a way of trying to create better technologies that would serve these different purposes rather than saying, you know, well, we're kind of stuck with grades and tests and transcripts. Let's make it work for these various purposes. We're trying to say, let's talk about the purposes very clearly and let's identify the negative consequences, mostly unintended, associated with current assessment technologies, and then try to propose better kinds of solutions that would still enable us to get at those aims. Because if all we do is say like, hey, no more testing, no more grades, no more transcripts, we're going to be left with the very same problems that these assessment technologies were created to solve in the first place a hundred years ago or 200 years ago, or however far back you want to go.

DEREK GOTTLIEB

Thanks for that. It's funny that I don't remember that metaphor from the book. It sounds like you're describing an El Camino. Let me throw it over to Ethan real quick to see if he has anything to add before Cara asks the next question.

ETHAN HUTT

No, I mean, I think just to give like a concrete example of a, you know, the SAT is one of the most important assessments that we use in our country. And if you think about the history of the SAT, this was something that was created, as Jack was suggesting, like as a way of synchronizing schools that otherwise were basically independent. And so the idea of having, you know, a common metric whereby whatever else you have on your transcript, it gives some, you know, institution and, you know, maybe it's a private institution, maybe it's a public institution to orient itself around students who are coming from all over the country. And as Jack says, we have no common national curriculum. We don't have a common sequence of courses. We have all of these classes, all of these different transcripts, all of these different pathways through our school system. And so historically we've looked for the system has sort of sought out these things that will allow, as Jack is suggesting, the creation of a sort of a system on top of what otherwise is a very decentralized, independently run unit. And so it's kind of like those things let the system be that way because there is some way to synchronize at these key points.

And so that's one of the arguments we make in the book is that, well, one more thing about the SAT, because this was not created intentionally, you know, the SAT is run by the college board, which is not, you know, there's no democratically elected college board, school board. There's no, you know, the influence that the public has over that institution is basically, you know, the capacity to shame or the capacity to try to, you know, threaten their bottom line. But there's no direct like democratic control. And that's what happens when we don't, when we're not

intentional about kind of these things that we're trying to do or the things that are important to make our systems work. External organizations often crop up to solve that kind of problem. And that's been true historically and not just at the assessment, but if the AP program is another good example of at the curricular level, an attempt to synchronize otherwise unsynchronized units of schooling.

DEREK GOTTLIEB

Thanks. That's great.

CARA FURMAN

Thank you so much. So this is a philosophy of ed podcast. And I'm hearing as a philosopher of education, a lot of areas in which you're using philosophical orientations and tools at the ways that you're asking questions. So some things that I'm hearing are, you talk about sort of what is the water that we're swimming in, identifying what it is, things that people might not be seeing, and then how do we question that, unpack that, and then how do we make sure that we're not unpack that, think about it differently. I'm hearing you work through metaphors and water metaphors that are going to help us think and also metaphors that we might sort of, that are limiting our thinking potentially. I'm hearing you constructing some genealogies, where did these ideas come from? Historians don't always use that word of genealogy. I'm wondering how you think of the humanities, which history is often listed as a humanity discipline, and philosophy specifically helps you to get at your research as people who I believe identify primarily as historians of education. And Ethan, do you want to start with this one, and then we'll go to Jack?

ETHAN HUTT

Sure. I mean, as you said, I think one of the things I think is really trying to drill down on these concepts, right? So these concepts, especially in history, people will maybe use the same phrasing about accountability, but the idea of what is the content of that accountability, like what are we accountable for and who are we accountable to? I mean, that's another piece that we haven't totally gotten to yet, but this idea that the group that a school was accountable for historically was the sort of immediate community, and now over time we've layered on other communities that say that they have a stake in that thing. So I mean, I think thinking about these concepts of like what is it that we're trying to do and how have people, you know, good faith people disagreed about like what is the content of that, who is the audience for that?

I mean, I think those, having that kind of skill set, I think really makes you sensitive to some of these changes, both in terms of tracking them over time, but also, I mean, I think in the book we try to say, I think one of the things that we're trying to do first and foremost is just to sort of identify all the different uses of these technologies and really try to provide a precise account of all the different things they're doing. And then we give them a little bit of a sense of what they're doing, and then we give our own view of what we think is like maybe an optimal setup, but we're hoping to invite a conversation recognizing that this isn't the answer of like what should schools

be accountable for and to whom, it's really a conversation that like is a public one. You know, it's not to be answered by us, but it's one to be engaged in. And so I think that like coming to the work with those kinds of tools and that kind of orientation is really, I think, an important part of the work and I think helps us do it successfully.

JACK SCHNEIDER

Yeah, I actually don't chiefly identify as a historian of education. Most of my work has been in policy for the last 10 years, and I am not really a good fit in any of the scholarly buckets that exist largely for reasons that are related to this question, which is that, you know, I do quantitative work and I do work where, you know, we're like doing qualitative analysis and coding things and then counting our codes. But a lot of the time, what we need to do is just ask, what the hell do we actually mean by this word or this phrase? And there tends not to be a lot of room for that in policy analysis, right? That if you write an article about the fact that accountability systems really have like completely excised human judgment from them, you're not going to publish it in a policy journal, right? That that's not a part of the method there.

And so I think the thing that the humanities allow us to do is to use this thing called the brain and to think through the obvious questions that we can't ask if we are narrowly tied to a methodology that involves, you know, more or less a script, right? So I think one of the things that Ethan and I like to do in our work is say, yeah, but what does that mean? Or, okay, but where did that come from?

And I'll give you an example. Matt Yglesias, a talking head, yesterday tweeted in response to an educator who was enthusiastically tweeting about Congressman Jamaal Bowman's new bill to limit standardized testing. He responded to her in this very condescending way. He quote tweeted her and then said, the utility of a standardized test is that it lets you compare across different schools in a system. It's like, yeah, he really showed her, didn't he? He told her what a standardized test is and why it's important. And I think one of the things that Ethan and I like to do is then say like, okay, well, it does let you compare. Why are we trying to compare? And where did that instinct come from? And what kinds of comparisons are we trying to make? And for what purpose? And what has comparison gotten us previously? And let's look at the historical record and see where did this tool come from and what were its origins? What was it designed to do? And is it capable of achieving the kinds of aims that we have for it, whether those are implicit or explicit?

It's like, there are a lot of questions to ask there. And if all we do is say like, well, this is the tool, we accept it. Now let's measure its validity and reliability. Then there's a lot that we just simply need to accept about the world. And so I think the thing that I value about the humanities is that it allows or they, it as a collection of fields or they as the fields themselves, allow us to exercise our human capacity for judgment and discretion. And just the kind of thought that doesn't go neatly in a method section. I joked for years that my method was I read things, I talk to smart people, and then I have thoughts. But you know, you can't write that. So hopefully not too many people are listening.

DEREK GOTTLIEB

I love everything about that answer, obviously. I am shocked that Matt Yglesias would condescend to somebody. The idea that it is difficult sometimes to publish thoughtful work in like high-level research journals is something that I think that our audience will definitely resonate with. Given what Ethan was saying about the role of your book and reframing conversations around what we should do with accountability, how do you imagine in more or less concrete terms, those conversations occurring within school buildings and districts, like at a small scale and then at a higher level in policy circles?

JACK SCHNEIDER

That's a hard question. I think that one of the things that we have spent a lot of time thinking and writing about over the years and writing about measurement accountability, whether thinking about systems and the kinds of state accountability that we see now, or thinking about other kinds of assessment that are not about accountability, measuring what a student knows and can do.

I think one of the things we keep coming back to is the fact that there needs to be time and space for people to interact with each other and to engage in some collective process of deliberation. In the book, one of the things that we talk about is the fact that there actually is some of that space in terms of making the time and carving out the room for conversation and deliberation and dialogue around the idea of student learning, but it's in the very early grades.

It is considered the way of communicating with parents at the kindergarten level that you will have conversations with them. It is not considered appropriate to send home graded work or to say, just check the online learning management system for your kindergartner's grades. The standard is that we need to communicate with each other about this. It is more or less standard to think it's a two-way communication. I actually need to learn from you all, you family members, just as much as you need to learn from me what I'm seeing here in the classroom.

And I think that that also applies to things like systemic accountability. The idea that there's a lot that simply can't be packed into a spreadsheet there. So, Ethan earlier offered the example of inspectorates from a bygone era. Of course, school inspection happens today in other countries of the world and there have been little experiments with it like in Denver. So, the idea that maybe we can build in even if it takes a little more time, even if we're going to need to try to push some of our other policy efforts aside for a little while to carve out the space. It is possible to envision a system where people have the opportunity to come together and have conversations or to use their direct senses or to disagree with each other in person and then have a conversation. So, Derek, you and I have written a little bit about the idea of deliberative accountability, drawing from models like James Fishkin's work, thinking about deliberation or deliberation day. And could something like that apply to school level accountability where local stakeholders would have access to data, but then would also be able to hear from young people

in the school and draw on their own personal experiences and talk with educators and hear from educators? Is there a way that we can build back some of the human element here? And again, Derek, this is something that you and I have referenced in some of our work together. We rely on juries to make pretty important decisions about people's futures, right? So, it's not completely without precedent that we would say, gosh, you know, human beings are capable of taking in information and having conversations with each other, weighing different kinds of evidence, and then making determinations. And so, if this is really important to us, then we just need to carve out the time and space for it. If it's not important, let it be an algorithm, right?

But I think that this is actually more important than something like, you know, well, what should the price of tea here in Boston be, right? Should a ride go up to $2.75? You know, as far as I'm concerned, run the numbers, run the numbers on it, and you tell me what the number is that works. But I don't favor a run the numbers approach when it comes to schools or when it comes to student learning because we're dealing with something that is far more complicated than that. We're dealing with something that simply can't be condensed into a number or a symbol. And when we do that, we're doing so at a tremendous loss of information. So, one of the things Ethan and I have talked about is thin information versus thick information. And right now, our measurement technologies are really suited for thin information. And that's fine in some settings, right? But that actually what we're really after in a lot of cases is much thicker information that requires a different kind of format.

DEREK GOTTLIEB

Excellent. Excellent answer. Ethan?

ETHAN HUTT

I mean, that was, Jack was pretty thorough there. I mean, I think the, the, I think one of the things, and I said this before, that we're trying to really offer with the book is to really distinguish among all of these different purposes that we have in trying to measure schools. So, Jack was giving that answer primarily from the perspective of someone really close to a school, someone who's thinking about maybe their child at the school. But there are other, historically and in the present, reasons that we want schools to provide accounts of how they're doing and how their students are doing. Like when we think about the big change that No Child Left Behind brought into schooling, it was that schools had to disaggregate their test scores by race, by important subgroups. And the reason for that was because historically we were concerned that there were states and there were districts that were systematically ignoring parts of our schools.

So, I think the key is not to say like, you know, get away with this or get rid of this process, keep this one, get rid of that. It's like there are lots of different things that we want, including to be assured that we're making good on our commitments to educate all children. And so there are ways that we can do that that don't necessarily require all the things that we do now, like testing every year. And so there are ways to sort of do this. And I think what we're trying to have is

invite a conversation that by clearly identifying all these different purposes, we can talk about whether some of the ways that we're doing things are the most effective or the most meaningful.

I mean, a good example of where it has gone haywire is like there was this movement of parents who were opting their children out of testing. And this is a good example of sort of being at cross purposes where parents were saying, I don't want my child to have to endure days of testing. I don't see the point. I'm, as Jack is saying, like I have other ways of assessing and I think my child is doing just fine. I don't need this test score to tell me anything about how my child is doing. But when you get people who are opting out of testing, that also really impedes our ability to say on the aggregate, how are our schools doing and how are they doing for all the kids in the system? So it's one of those where by framing, and we have for a long time, that accountability is in part telling parents how their kids are doing. When parents say, well, I don't need that, it also short circuits some other important things that we're trying to do with the accountability system.

So we can disentangle those things that we do with things like NAEP and there are other ways that we could do testing that doesn't involve telling parents like, well, you need this to tell you how your kid is doing. Because a lot of parents say like, no thanks. But then we can preserve both ways in part by being clear about what we're trying to do in disentangling. So it's those kinds of conversations that we think are helped by some of the analytic stuff that we do and we'll see if anyone picks it up.

CARA FURMAN

Thank you. Thank you so much. That last bit really resonated with me as a teacher at a school where we were doing opt out. And a big part of that also just to add in with the ethics of opting out when some families were able to opt out and some were not. And we talked, as you're describing, we talked as a school and we said, okay, we're opting out because we know that other schools in the city can't opt out. And so we're sort of shouldering that in particular ways, because we have some resources here that are allowing us to do that. So I'm using that point as a segue to our last question. We do have some teachers who listen to this podcast. And we do have some parents who are not in the field of education who also are listening. And I want to close by one or two practical ideas that a parent or teacher might bring back into their setting. And we try to frame it not as what you wish might happen so much as what are things that you're already seeing or already doing that could be done by somebody else, so that we're not in the realm of fantasy, but really on the ground, what could make a difference based on your research. So I'm going to give a really quick example and give you both time to think about it, and then I'll turn it over. So I use grading contracts in my classes with pre-service teachers. We use the grading to have that exact conversation you're talking about, Ethan, about, well, what is the purpose of the grade? Is it to communicate how you're doing? Well, the grading contract is a better way to do that as is a conversation. Is it to rank you against your peers? Well, your grade at the end does rank you against your peers and it communicates something to jobs. And so the grading contract ultimately is a way for you to have some control in this process, but then I do submit this grade that's more standardized, that's communicating something else. And we are

able to navigate the tensions of what it means to be assessing in these ways. That's one example. What is something that a teacher might do or a parent might do to shift the conversation a little bit in the ways that you're guiding us with the theory?

JACK SCHNEIDER

One idea that Ethan and I raise in the book is the idea of the over-writable grade. So, you know, grades do a lot of things in a class, right? They give students immediate feedback. Here's how you're doing right now, right? But at the same time, they're also a part of the permanent record. So instead of hearing, here's how you're doing right now, students will often hear, I'm going to ruin your future, right? That's what a C means. We educators would love to be able to give students a C that says, this is really not your best work, right? It's like completely below where I want you to be. We would love to be able to give that grade, but we know we can't give that grade.

Grade inflation is not an epidemic. It's a logical response to the fact that we don't want to hurt students, right? That they're going to get that and go, wow, I quit. This class is going to ruin my GPA, my transcript, my future. And so, one of the things that we talk about in the book is, is it possible to decouple the grades that are going to last forever on the transcript, and that is forever, right? From the more ephemeral kinds of grades that you could give students as feedback. So you could say, hey, there are only five assignments that really matter in this course, and you can overwrite the grades for each of those. Everything else, right? You can't overwrite, but it doesn't matter, right? Because they're ephemeral. They're going to go away. So yeah, you got a C on this. Does it matter? Is it going to be lodged in your permanent record? No, it's not. So you don't need to freak out about it. You can just see it as what it is, is a gauge of your present progress towards the goal that I have for you and that you hopefully have for yourself.

Now, there are going to be these larger assignments that are tied to the kinds of competencies that we've agreed this class is designed to cultivate. And then I'm going to give you a real grade on that one too, right? You got a B- on this assignment, but it's not over. That's not the end of the story, right? Because just like it didn't matter that once upon a time I didn't know how to ride a bike because now I'm pretty good at riding bikes, it shouldn't matter that you didn't know how to do something before the end of the semester if by the end of the semester you can do that thing, right? That's one of the things that we don't really talk about, that we don't question, that we simply accept about grades. This idea that it matters that you didn't know how to do something once upon a time, even if you know how to do it right now. And that is a real problem, particularly if we're concerned with equity, right?

We know we live in an unequal society. We know there are huge opportunity gaps. And so, what? We're going to give grades to students that really matter, that are going to be unexpungable on their records, when we know that the more time that they have, the more access to resources that they have, the closer that they're going to get to the goals that they have for themselves or that we have for them. And so in that sense, I think ideally we would

push towards a system in which grades would be overridable all the way through the end of high school.

And there are some organizations that are working on this kind of stuff, like the Mastery Transcript Consortium is doing some interesting work. At the state level, there's interesting work around performance assessments. I happen to be a member of that. And so I think that's a really interesting thing to do. Assessments. I happen to be associated with a couple groups. So I co-founded the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment. One of the things that we support is the use of performance assessments rather than standardized tests as a measure of what students know and can do. And Massachusetts happens to be one of eight remaining states that has an exit exam. It's a de facto exit exam. You've got to pass 10th grade MCAS in order to get a diploma. But why couldn't you have a portfolio there that you can constantly update that actually serves as an indicator of what you know and can do? So there's an example of the kind of thinking that we're doing, at least, in terms of what can practically happen on the ground in schools.

Of course, it's not going to be easy to do any of this stuff because there are things that schools can't do on their own, that districts can't do on their own, and that even states can't really do on their own. So it involves a lot of coordination. It involves a lot of half measures. But I think the way that we're thinking about it is that this book is the start of a conversation. Let's move forward with half measures. Let's start outlining what the challenges are that we face with regard to bigger swings, more ambitious efforts. And then let's begin working towards that aim. Maybe 10 years from now, 20 years from now, we'll be in a position where we can say, okay, here are the three things that we really want to push for in all 50 states. But right now, I think we're more concerned with what are the kinds of things that educators can start doing right now in their classes? And then what are the kinds of things we should really just start thinking about so that we're all aware of the bigger issues that we need to take on eventually?

DEREK GOTTLIEB

Thanks. I just want to say that I really love the example that you use of the discrepancy between the way that we think about learning to ride a bike from an adult perspective and the way that the transcript system that we have set up treats learning a skill. I haven't heard you use that example before. If you used it in the book, it wasn't indexable, and so I wasn't really paying attention. That's a perfect instance of illustrating a potentially harmful divergence that is also unnecessary, that is unlike the way that we treat other kinds of skill development in other regions of our lives. What an excellent example.

Thank you so much for being here to both you and Ethan. It has been a wonderful conversation.

JACK SCHNEIDER
Thank you.

ETHAN HUTT

Thanks so much for having us, guys. It was a great conversation.

CARA FURMAN

Thanks!

DEREK GOTTLIEB

And that is our show. Many thanks to our guests, Jack and Ethan. Keep an eye out for the book, which, again, is entitled Off the Mark, when it comes out later this summer. And in more local news, that is, regarding this show, we've created a guest and topic suggestion form. You can find it linked in the show description and linked also in each episode description as well. If you know of someone doing interesting work that you'd like to hear from, or if you have a topic that you'd be interested in hearing us cover, please fill it out and let us know. Self-nominations are always, always welcome as well.

And of course, subscribe to the show wherever you get your podcasts. Rating and reviewing us helps others to find the show. The email address for the two of us collectively is thinkinginthemidstatgmail.com. We have several forthcoming episodes and various stages of production as we speak. So what comes out next Friday is a mystery to me too, at the moment, though it is guaranteed to be good. Until that big reveal, and for Cara Furman, I'm Derek Gottlieb, we will see you next time.