

High Grades, Empty Minds

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In many classrooms across the Philippines, students are celebrated for high grades, glowing report cards, and honor roll placements. Yet beneath this praise lies an uncomfortable truth, many of these students struggle with comprehension, critical thinking, and real-world application. The education system has long been obsessed with grades, but the question remains: are students truly learning, or just passing?

The problem begins with how academic success is measured. A student who memorizes a lesson and performs well on a multiple-choice test may receive high marks. However, when asked to explain or apply the concept, many fail. This disconnect reveals a systemic issue, schooling has become a race for grades rather than a journey of meaningful learning. As De Los Reyes and Orongan (2023) emphasized, traditional forms of assessment do not always reflect a student's depth of understanding or skill acquisition. Some students graduate with little understanding of the lessons they've been tested on, highlighting how the system rewards performance over true learning.

Part of the issue stems from the culture of academic pressure. Students are taught to chase numbers instead of mastering skills. Parents, driven by hope for a better future, often unknowingly encourage this mindset. Teachers, in turn, feel pressured to produce high-performing students for their school's reputation. This cycle promotes surface learning and leaves little room for creativity, inquiry, or self-discovery. Education becomes transactional: students memorize, get grades, then move on often without grasping the 'why' behind what they learn. According to Pinawin (2023), learners under performance-focused academic models tend to display minimal retention when instruction is not tied to context, engagement, or active application.

The government, particularly the Department of Education, must re-evaluate assessment standards. Grades should not only reflect test scores but also measure creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. Reston and Arawiran (2018) argued that authentic assessments, when integrated into the curriculum, allow students to better

demonstrate critical thinking and real-world application. Classroom-based performance tasks, oral recitations, and project-based learning should be valued equally. DepEd must provide teachers with the freedom and tools to assess holistically and meaningfully, not just based on paper tests.

Teachers must also be empowered to shift their teaching strategies. Instead of focusing on lectures and memorization, educators should be trained to use interactive, inquiry-based methods. Hornejas and Guntalidad (2024) presented a pedagogical model showing that project-based learning fosters both content mastery and deeper cognitive skills, proving that students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged. Regular workshops and peer learning communities can help teachers experiment with more engaging activities. School heads should create safe environments where teachers are encouraged to innovate without fear of judgment or poor evaluation results. As Rosal (2024) highlighted, authentic assessments provide teachers with flexible tools to evaluate students in ways that are more aligned with the realities of 21st-century learning.

Parents and local stakeholders have a vital role to play. Parent-teacher associations can organize community-based learning projects where students apply lessons to real-life situations such as starting a garden, creating a local map, or conducting a barangay survey. This helps reinforce the value of learning beyond the classroom. Rosario and Chua (2023) demonstrated that both case-based and project-based approaches significantly enhance science process skills, particularly when students are exposed to hands-on, practical experiences that link knowledge to everyday challenges.

Organizations like the Philippine Business for Education (PBE) and Foundations can support teacher development and promote reforms in student evaluation. They can assist schools in creating systems that reward genuine understanding over inflated scores. Additionally, media campaigns can help shift public perception reminding everyone that learning is not about perfection but about growth. A high grade should mean a high level of understanding. Otherwise, it's just a number on paper. The Philippines must move away from rewarding performance without substance. The goal should be to produce learners who can think, question,

and solve not just pass. Only then can the country claim to have truly educated its youth.

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