

End of the Marking Period:
Grades, The Process of Learning, and *Calvin and Hobbes*

The end of the Middle School's first trimester is near. As such, it's not surprising to see some of our students, parents and faculty experiencing higher levels of stress. As a community of high achieving individuals with expectations of excellence — impending deadlines, trimester reports and student-led conferences could be viewed with some trepidation. Coming off the excitement of the World Series, I am reminded of the resiliency of human beings to perform in stress-filled situations at the highest levels. While walk-off homeruns and Game 7 pitching gems may not resonate with all of us, I thought the proclamations of Calvin from *Calvin and Hobbes* might. What follows are some reflections about grades and the process of learning woven in between Calvin's insights.

Calvin: What grade did you get, Susie?
Susie: I got an A.
Calvin: Really? Boy, I'd hate to be you. I got a C.
Susie: Why on earth would you rather get a C than an A?!

Calvin: I find my life is a lot easier the lower I keep everyone's expectations.

Oh, Calvin... I wonder what you would have been like as a middle school boy. No doubt, you would have benefited from a Holland Hall education! Grades. As educators, we observe unhealthy perspectives and judgments about student achievement because of them. Our philosophy aims to frame the grade as reflection of a student demonstrating successful academic behaviors. The grade is just an over-simplified representation of a child's performance. With just a grade, you cannot understand the nuances of a student's academic behaviors.

That is why we have spent a good deal of time in the Middle School developing each discipline's academic benchmarks, benchmarks of school skills that lead to greater academic achievement, and our ability to write comments that provide examples of student behaviors towards those benchmarks. The comments in tandem with the benchmark scores should clearly lead to the grade students earned in each of their classes.

Calvin: Why should I have to WORK for everything? It's like saying I don't deserve it.

Student cannot passively engage in the process of learning and perform to their potential. By developing our students' discipline for reflective academic work, they come to recognize they deserve what they earn. We encourage you in your conversations at home and in the upcoming Student-led Conferences to focus on this dynamic. How are your child's school skills affecting their performance in their classes? Is a conversation about material management or engaging in class activities going to be more productive in improving your child's performance? And yes, Calvin, it is WORK! It requires a

resiliency, a willingness to try, to fail and to learn from failure. This exemplifies a growth mindset.

Calvin: I'm learning real skills that I can apply throughout the rest of my life... Procrastination and rationalization.

Not here, Calvin. We would be developing your growth mindset, challenging you to engage and to reflect! To develop that growth mindset, we lead our students through a reflection on their first trimester performance. That reflection culminates in the writing of goals for the second trimester. While that goal setting is accomplished in part prior to the parent conference, you play an important role as a parent in framing the discussion about goals.

In partnership with you, we hope we can lead conversations that develop your child's independence as a learner. That independence is gained, in part, when the student recognizes what their strengths and areas of growth are and exercises control over their academic behaviors. Developmentally, that happens at different times for different children. So, if you recognize a little bit of Calvin in your child, no worries. Remember, we could all benefit from some of Calvin's self-deprecating humor and sense of optimism.

Calvin: You know how Einstein got bad grades as a kid? Well, mine are even worse!

We are excited to share our observations of your child. With the transition to trimesters, we believe we have a more developed picture of how your child is performing. Our goal is to mail trimester reports on November 11 with student-led conferences taking place the week of November 14. Your child's advisor will contact you to schedule them. As always, if there are any questions you have about your child's experience in the Middle School, please do not hesitate to ask us.

In service,

Joel R. Bicknell
Head of Middle School