

## TIME FOR A REVOLUTION

James Pillans' blackboard and chalk changed how teachers shared information, and it's time for a similar renovation. When it comes to assessment, the ineffectiveness of numbers and letters is irrefutable. Like women gaining the right to vote, eliminating grades is an inevitable revolution and an idea whose time has come. Teachers worldwide are already implementing systems built on narrative feedback; they are creating grassroots movements that are spreading across schools, districts, cities, and states. The Internet is chock-full of articles and videos about progressive education and involving students in conversations about learning. More colleges are accepting students without traditional grades, accentuating the use of digital portfolios and teacher recommendations. Students in classrooms built on narrative feedback routinely outperform their traditionally graded peers on standardized tests, quashing any argument that students can't pass tests without a consistent record of grades on worksheets and other practice activities.

There was a time when it was inconceivable that students could produce schoolwork on anything other than a small piece of slate. Then the spiral notebook was invented, making the slate obsolete. If I had written a book 10 years ago, suggesting that notebooks, like the 19th-century slate, would soon disappear and be replaced by thin electronic tablet computers, I might have been branded a heretic. Yet, now schools across the world use tablets every day. Like the teachers who have replaced pencil and paper with tablet computers, we need to remain open to the possibility of other bold initiatives like the no-grades classroom if education is to continue to evolve.

## THE FUTURE IS NOW

Fast forward to the year 2050. You enter a school where grade levels no longer exist; instead, students advance based on their own skill levels. A 10-year-old boy learns calculus, and a

16-year-old girl spends most of her day studying music and art because she has had all of the core subjects that she desires. There are no bells, and students traverse hallways at random intervals because traditional class periods disappeared long ago. There is no attendance office because students arrive at different times throughout the day, based on when classes meet or when they need to see a teacher. There is no assistant principal in charge of discipline; school is an engaging environment, where students focus only on the joys of learning. You walk by several rooms and see teachers involved in deep conversation with individual students, while other students rest comfortably on cushioned chairs or sofas, reviewing written feedback, making changes to activities, while waiting for a turn to converse with the teacher. There is no measuring of learning. No numbers on papers and no letters on report cards. Of course, this doesn't surprise you. Seeing grades would be as archaic as those ancient spiral notebooks and pencils. How teachers ever measured learning with numbers and percentages is incomprehensible.

Now, rewind to the current year. That school of the future may not seem so futuristic. There are many schools without bells, using alternative schedules. Not so long ago, my own school adopted a system in which students moved about at different intervals, and teachers dismissed them by checking the time and announcing that class had ended. Some schools teach students based on their knowledge; it's not uncommon in those places to see sixth graders taking ninth-grade courses. And, as noted in numerous places throughout this book, many teachers assess learning with narrative feedback and conversation with students about what they've accomplished.

For these teachers, grades are like slate and chalk, like paper and pencil. These educators have looked to the future and seen schools without grades. They have witnessed the remarkable power of narrative feedback, conversation about learning, and student self-evaluation. They have known students to become amazing, critical, independent learners. They have seen the brilliance of a classroom without judgment, completely bereft of any subjectivity. They've experienced a future classroom, built on Assessment 3.0, and they have decided that the future is now.