

movement laid the foundation for twenty-first century integration” (p. 237). These goals, which include the decriminalization of students, culturally inclusive curriculum, and the hiring of educators representative of, and connected to, the communities they serve, constitute “an expanded vision of integration that does not limit itself to curated, statistical integration and does not depend on changes to the racial and ethnic composition of New York City students” (p. 237).

Bonastia’s reinterpretation of community control as an “expanded” form of integration with contemporary relevance will surely generate debate, as all discussions of 1968 in New York City do, but the past-present connections he makes are clear enough. The limiting analytic factor for *The Battle Nearer to Home* is not a sin of commission, but omission: the decision to bypass the years between 1975 and 2010. Bonastia is not wrong that integration was “essentially moribund” (p. 205) as a concern for citywide leaders, but within the decentralized system, many efforts for integration and educational equality took place. Some looked like earlier struggles, including the federal order to integrate Mark Twain Junior High School in Brooklyn in the 1970s and the fight over the changing composition of the Roseland Intermediate School in Queens in the 1980s. Other efforts laid the groundwork for the rise of new educational reforms, particularly the small schools of choice that emerged in many New York City districts.

These projects not only kept the fires of integration burning; they also revealed the limits of school- and district-level programs of integration, in ways that have tremendous relevance to today’s efforts. This is important both because struggles over integration remain, as Bonastia shows, at the community-district level (at least for now), and because the language of educational equality is still regularly repurposed by advocates of reforms—schools of choice, gifted and talented programs, charter schooling—that do not, as currently constructed, promote integration or equality. Those who fight for educational equality in New York City should indeed look back to the heroic, highly visible struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, but they also have much to learn from those organizers and activists who carried the torch for school justice in the many lean years since.

doi:10.1017/heq.2024.9

Jack Schneider and Ethan Hutt. *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don’t Have To)*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023. 296 pp.

Wade H. Morris 

United World College East Africa, Moshi, Tanzania

Email: morriswh@gmail.com

In *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don’t Have To)*, Jack Schneider and Ethan Hutt stare into the abyss of modern school-

ing and accept its hard truth: we need grades, we want more data, we love testing. However, instead of descending into Nietzschean nihilism, Schneider and Hutt pull their readers back from the edge of the abyss. “We are muddling through together,” they write at one point (p. 159). Ultimately, Schneider and Hutt have written a book that leaves the reader with a sense of hope—not for a revolution that will remake the world, but for incremental reforms that might lead to a more humane system of schooling.

Off the Mark is, on the one hand, epic in its ambitions and, on the other hand, accessible in its prose. The authors have synthesized mountains of research and historiography, writing a single volume that is diagnostic of current challenges, historical in its context, and linear in its reform agenda. Adding to their list of ambitions, Schneider and Hutt take their readers on an overseas tour around the world’s educational systems. It is all here in *Off the Mark*, making the book an excellent option for a supplemental text in a graduate course or a summer reading assignment for classroom teachers.

In part 1 of the book, Schneider and Hutt outline the strange world of schooling that we all inhabit. Educational testing is trying to do too much for too many constituencies, they write, serving as a means of communication to parents, a signaling mechanism to colleges and employers, and a supposed avenue for social mobility (p. 31). To a layperson, part 1 will be revelatory. It says out loud what a lot of students instinctively feel: that testing is unfair, reductionist, and robs them of their innate curiosity (p. 51). And yet, testing is also incredibly efficient at tracking and motivating students, though a cynical approach lies behind that motivation (p. 64). Part 1 captures this paradox—the practicality and the cruelty of grades. The authors therefore begin their book in a way that will resonate with current students, former students, teachers, parents, administrators, and so on. In other words, part 1 will resonate with *everyone*.

Part 2, the section dedicated to the history of grading, is the natural habitat for the authors. If you are like me and enjoyed their 2014 article “Making the Grade: A History of the A-F Marking Scheme,” then part 2 is what you were most anticipating from *Off the Mark*. Schneider and Hutt do not disappoint. They write a history of US education for a general audience while also giving fresh meaning to the roles the Carnegie Foundation (p. 104) and the National Association of Educational Progress (p. 110) played during different periods. While Schneider and Hutt paint their picture in broad brush strokes, they still empathize with the major figures who built the US’s educational system and the difficult choices they had to make. Therefore, the reader comes away not with feelings of judgment toward the inventors of modern testing, but with an understanding of the calculated trade-offs that gave rise to our current system. In the process, the authors do what historians do best: they remind us that we might not like the schools that we have now, but we also can’t look to the past for an ideal alternative.

In part 3, Schneider and Hutt attempt a delicate balancing act. They outline meaningful reforms while also articulating how nearly everything has been tried before and nearly every reform effort in the past has—in the end—crashed into the harsh barricades of reality. Their approach is above all honest, sprinkling these examples of failure

throughout part 3: Kentucky and Vermont's attempt to create portfolio-based assessments (p. 175), and UC-Santa Cruz's experimentation with narrative reports instead of grades (p. 181), and the University of Illinois's pass/fail grading system (p. 186). These reforms are almost always limited by the problems of scale or by the pressures of time, or both. Should we, as Americans, look overseas for new models to emulate? Schneider and Hutt evaluate that, too, and recognize that schools from Singapore to Cameroon are drowning in similar types of tests and equivalent levels of anxiety. "No one is coming to save us," Schneider and Hutt conclude (p. 239).

I found this realization both sobering and hopeful. Schneider and Hutt show that classroom teachers like me can do our best to make the system more humane, at least on the margins, doing things such as integrating our grades with portfolios, making tests "overwritable," and not assigning so much busywork (pp. 218-34). There are no silver bullets, but teachers still have some agency. By the end of part 3, the authors have established themselves as trustworthy scholars, not educational entrepreneurs trying to sell the newest innovation that will someday land on a trash heap.

There are limitations to the effectiveness of an ambitious book like *Off the Mark*. Perhaps part 1 could have benefited from a bit more of a journalistic touch, following the example of the anecdotes that Robert Putnam integrates into each chapter of *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2015). I would have loved even more detail in part 2 on the broader context that gave rise to reformers like Horace Mann and John Dewey, and to the voices of dissent that each educational era produced. Part 3's most interesting insights—the moments when reforms come up short of their promises—could have included more reflection on the part of reformers themselves. However, implementing these suggestions would have led to a thousand-page volume, or perhaps necessitated a trilogy. Schneider and Hutt have wisely decided to leave their audience wanting more.

In the end, Schneider and Hutt's superpower is empathy. My guess is that their intended audience is people like me—career classroom teachers, an overeducated bunch who are in the trenches each day with students. Perhaps many of their readers will have experiences like mine, living a double life of sorts. At night, I used to sit in continuing ed classes and listen to pedagogues righteously condemn the brutality of testing, while during the day I earned extra cash by grading hundreds of essays as an AP reader. Schneider and Hutt cut through the hypocrisy and judgment that permeates colleges of education, a hypocrisy that leaves teachers feeling bombarded on all sides. They explicitly return to the fact that teachers inherently understand the challenges, that teachers see the usefulness of testing but also recognize their destructive effects. "Teachers are not unthinking automatons," they write (p. 117). Teachers recognize that the "utopian ideas" and "high theory" coming out of academia are usually impractical (p. 8).

In Schneider and Hutt's vision for educational reform, the world is not separated into good guys and bad guys. *Off the Mark* stares with us into the abyss and pats us on the back. We are in this together, they say, and it will be okay. I find that sentiment comforting.