“WHAT DID YOU GET ON YOUR MATH TEST?”
“HOW CAN I GET AN A IN THIS CLASS?”

Questions like these echo through the hallways of schools across the country, but a visitor to the Urban School will not overhear such conversations. Since its founding in 1966, Urban has relied on an evaluation system in which students receive detailed written feedback on assignments, essays, and projects, and in place of report cards with grades, they receive comprehensive written performance evaluations at the mid-point and conclusion of each term. Quizzes, tests and exams are also regularly used to evaluate student learning and receive numerical scores and comments.

The written evaluations at the end of term provide specific feedback on all aspects of a student’s performance in the course and help the student understand in depth their strengths and areas for improvement. Along with the written evaluations, the teacher also completes a performance rubric, which indicates the level of achievement in the key habits, skills, content and understanding specific to that subject and further defines areas for needed improvement and growth.

In addition to written evaluations and performance rubrics, grades are recorded on a transcript for the purpose of college admissions. A cumulative grade point average is available to students and parents at the end of freshman and sophomore years, and at the end of each term in the junior and senior years.

At the center of Urban is a commitment to meaningful learning for students. Detailed feedback on their performance across the term, combined with written evaluations and rubrics at the conclusion, support students in developing a powerful, lasting motivation for learning based on authentic engagement with the subject itself. Students focus on what they are learning rather than on the grades they are getting, and as a consequence, learning rather than ranking becomes the highest priority. In this way, our policy directly supports the mission of the school – to ignite a passion for learning and to inspire students to become enthusiastic, self-motivated participants in their education.

Urban teachers are committed to the success of our students, writing two, thorough reports each term. These reports set specific goals and strategies for improvement, and challenge students to perform at their highest potential. Faculty advisors review the mid-term and final course reports with students, and the school meets regularly with parents to help them understand the evaluation process. Students are also asked to reflect on and formally evaluate their work, at both the mid-term and conclusion of the course, developing the habit and skill of self-assessment that is critical to future success in higher education and the workplace.

EVALUATION FAQ

Q: Do students get grades at Urban?
A: Yes. Teachers submit grades at the end of each course students take. These grades are recorded on a traditional transcript, which is used during the college admissions process. In addition to two, thorough written evaluations – one at mid-term and one at the conclusion of the term (see main article) – students and parents receive a cumulative grade point average (GPA) at the end of their freshmen and sophomore years; juniors and seniors may receive their GPA at the end of each term to aid them in their college admissions process.

Q: Why are written evaluations and performance rubrics so important?
A: We have seen in our 42 years of educating Bay Area students that in-depth written evaluations challenge students to perform at their highest potential, as well as prepare them for the kind of feedback we all receive in the workplace and in our lives.

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A host of studies in social psychology have demonstrated that extrinsic motivators, such as grades, actually diminish intrinsic motivation. Summarizing these studies, educator Alfie Kohn states, “People who are promised rewards for doing something tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to obtain the reward . . . These findings are consistent across a variety of subject populations, rewards and tasks, with the most destructive effects occurring in activities that require creativity or higher-order thinking.” (Educational Leadership, October 1994).

Other educational research has focused on the differences between students who have a learning–orientation versus a grade-orientation, concluding that students with a learning-orientation are more inclined to choose challenging tasks, take greater intellectual risks, persevere in the face of difficulties, and see their teachers and peers as resources rather than as potential obstacles. (How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School National Academy Press, 1999)

Education loses when the classroom becomes a competitive struggle to succeed, with the implicit message for students that some of them are “winners” and other are “losers.” Stress and competition do not make students smarter; great teachers who inspire a thirst for learning do. Written evaluations reflect the progress and achievements that each student makes in a class, allowing teachers to set individual goals for improvement based on clear standards of performance without overt comparison to other students. Students are challenged to compete against themselves, not against their classmates, to do their best work.

Our grading policy has served our graduates remarkably well for more than 40 years. Each year our alumni matriculate at the most competitive, selective colleges and universities across the country, and they are exceptionally well prepared for the challenges and demands they face. Additionally, our evaluation system mirrors the type of feedback that all adults receive in the workplace, further preparing our graduates for their professional lives.

Urban’s approach to igniting a passion for learning helps transform our graduates into engaged, confident, resourceful learners who will thrive in today’s knowledge-based society that demands that they actively engage learning. Urban graduates are individuals who see learning not just as a means to an end, but as a fulfilling, lifelong process. That truly is the Urban mission in action.