APPENDIX D: GRADING POLICIES

Grading Policies

David Levine is the chairperson of Henry Hudson High School’s Social Studies Department. Because of the size of the student population, several sections of certain courses are offered each year, and each is taught by a different instructor. In the case of Modern American History, three teachers offer courses. Students are assigned to these courses according to a simple alphabetical rotation. But this simple system has created a complex problem for Mr. Levine, for each teacher uses a different approach and parents and students are complaining that this is unfair.

The first section is taught by Albert Foley. Mr. Foley is a young, somewhat idealistic teacher who believes that stimulating learning experiences form the core of an education. In his class, he relies upon the study of current events from newspapers and television, and he encourages his students to initiate independent study projects. Mr. Foley is not as concerned about command of exact facts as he is about the personal significance that modern American history may come to hold for his students. In that direction, he believes, lies the promise of good citizenship and authentic personhood. Students are graded on the basis of essays they write about topics they select and journals of personal response to classroom discussion and current events. He grades because he has to, but he does not believe grading is what education is really about. Among the students, he is known as “Easy A Foley.” In a typical year, 40 percent of his students will receive A’s and another 30 percent will receive B’s. The rest are given C’s, with an occasional D for serious cases. Mr. Foley says that a student will pass his class if he is able to find his way to the classroom. In his opinion, it is hard enough being a teenager, and he is not going to make it any tougher. He believes that his students really learn and grow in their sense of self-worth because of his teaching and grading policies.

“Historical knowledge broadens and deepens the mind” might be the motto of Mr. William Sampson, the teacher of the second section, for he believes that subject matter is all-important in getting students to understand the world they have inherited. Mr. Sampson relies on the textbook exclusively, and he delivers detailed lectures. He demands that his students know the facts about American government and recent historical events, and he has little patience with uninformed opinion. He wants his students to use evidence from historical events and documents to back up their claims. In his view, good citizenship must rest on a sound foundation of knowledge and the ability to think critically. He tells his students that they must learn American history backwards and forwards or they will not pass his course. But his exams are not on the specific facts of history. Rather, he gives rigorous and demanding essay exams that force his students to think about history. In a recent class of forty students, Mr. Sampson’s grades were distributed in the following manner: three A’s, five B’s, eighteen C’s, nine D’s, and five F’s. Mr. Sampson contends that his tests are fair measures of his students’ ability to think. The students call him “Slasher Sampson.”

Nancy Wright, the teacher of the third section, has taught history for twelve years, and each year she tries out new ideas and techniques she has read about in Social Studies, a national journal for teachers. This year she has developed a behavioral-objectives unit on the New Deal and has designed an evaluation instrument for it that gives her very accurate ways for grading a student’s knowledge of FDR’s policies. She has found that specifying her own objectives not only helps her but also helps her students see clearly what they need to study and learn in her classes. Each year she feels that her teaching is still improving. One thing she does not change, however, is her policy of grading according to a curve.

In her most recent group of forty students there were five A’s, ten B’s, fifteen C’s, seven D’s and three F’s, a distribution of grades which she came to favor long ago after taking a course on statistics and evaluation. Ms. Wright uses both essays and objective tests in order to provide an unbiased basis for her judgments. She believes that her proportional approach to grading avoids the possibility of favoritism and accurately reflects the performance of each student as it compares to that of others in the class. Ms. Wright’s students have no nickname for her.

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