

# Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 331.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Angela: Well, hello empowered principals. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to today's podcast. I have a very special guest here with me today. His name is John Camp, and we met online. What I love about John's work is that we're going to have a conversation today about the relationship that we as educators have and students have with grades.

Camp is doing really an innovative approach to this work with kids in shifting away from more traditional gradings and assessment formats and moving into a little more what I would call just like authentic way of practicing and studying and tracking our progress and our growth as students, as adult students and as children students. He's doing some phenomenal things. So I'm going to let him introduce himself, his work. We're going to dive into a conversation on the relationship we have with grading. So Camp, welcome to the podcast.

John: Thanks so much. Thanks for having me. I'm pumped to be here and have this conversation. So I'm year 29 of being an education. Although I went to public school as a student, my entire professional career has been in independent schools. So I do have that, coming at you from that angle.

So right now I'm the head of teaching and learning at New England Innovation Academy, which is a startup school. We're in year three, which is super exciting. Really a caveat to your listeners is that I'm going to say a lot of things today where your listeners might feel like oh, we can't do that

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

because of our structures or our systems. But what I'm hoping to convey is how we are the type of school where we are able to try a lot of things. Then hopefully there are threads or cool things that you can pull from this that you can impart around the really important concept and reality of quote grades in the educational system.

Angela: Yes. Here's the thing that I love that you said that because what I want to highlight here is that there are two camps, if I can say that. There are two components of this to me. There's the mindset piece and the belief systems around the purpose, the value, the reason we grade, the meaning behind those grades. There's the mindset around it. Then there's the actions, the actual set of systems or processes or approach that we take.

So there's the mindset piece, and then the doing. I think like believing and doing. We're going to talk about maybe some things that you are doing and actually implementing, but it's coming from a mindset. That's mindset is what we want to share with the listeners because you can be thinking in this progressive like innovative way and then looking for little ways to start to take action towards shifting the actual approach. Right.

John: Yeah, I totally agree with that. I would say most people have, if not all people, have a mindset about grades. That's what we want to talk about a little bit to start off, about the relationship that they have with grades. Some people use it as that extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. That's both of those things. But it's all about a certain mindset. We're just sort of collectively we follow this one concept in education of a letter grade is the grade system. But like how we all enter that on a daily basis is pretty complicated and complex. So exactly. That mindset is really important.

Angela: Yeah, because one of the things I notice is I coach school leaders. Obviously people listening to the podcast know that. But what I have found

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

is there is an intensity around how we feel about ourselves when it comes to grades.

We have that as a student that we learn from a very young age about how we feel about ourselves and our capacity to learn and our self-identity as it relates to grades. I'm an A student. We actually say things like she's in A student. He's a D student. They're above the line, below the line. They're making. Our self-identity from a very young age has been crafted around our relationship with our grades, the grades that we earn and what we make that mean about ourselves.

Then you transfer that into teaching and leading schools. We have that same attachment to that identity where teachers are freaked out if their kids aren't making a certain kind of progress. They're scared for themselves, for their students. They're worried like the world's going to fall apart, or they're going to lose their job.

Then you go to the principal level, and they're doing the same thing at the admin level, right? That's the state's going to come in and take over my school, or I'm going to have to fire people, or I'm going to get fired. Like, there's a lot of fear. There's a lot of almost identity crisis around what the weight that we put on the value of the meaning behind the grades.

John: Yeah, that's so true. I think that there's so much weight about the grades. That's what we want to think about. What's our relationship with grades? What's our feeling about it? I think as like a teacher, you may have a relationship with grades that you had as a student, and however you felt about it. But then as a teacher, it gets even more complicated because sometimes like oh, the student tried really hard, but they only got a B or something like that. When, again, like you're not assessing their effort. You're assessing their actual product and those types of things.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

So it's really complicated for the system that we have that is grade based that transcripts for college admission, all those types of things are all based on these letter grades. Yet, down here on the ground level, it's very complicated relationship that we all have at it coming at it from different angles.

Angela: Yeah. So tell the listeners about what you're doing. Like, just tell them your background, tell them what you're doing because I find it so intriguing and so interesting. I think that what you are doing out in the world is going to inspire people to think differently, just to have conversations about eventually how to do it differently. So tell us more about that.

John: Yeah. So the system that we have at my school NEIA that we call it a competency based system, but it's not like true to the word competency based system. I call it a mash up. That's how I describe it when I talk to groups of people about it. It's got elements of traditional standards based, competency based, mastery based, and no grades based. So we sort of built it around that.

So just briefly how it works is we have 14 competencies, which is just a fancy word for skills. They're verbs. Our competencies are verbs. I connect, that verb. I connect new ideas to previous learning. So there are 14 of those that any teacher can use. We're a six through 12 school that any teacher can use in their subject area. Because what we're trying to focus on is it's about the skill that a student isn't just playing school. That it's a skill is something that they should be able to apply to their eventual work life, their relationship with their friends, how they are as a family member, those types of things that are really important.

So we are really trying to make like, quote, real world converge into their academic world as much as we can. So there's 14 competencies that a

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

math teacher could tag one the same competency that a humanities teacher does that a science teacher does.

Then underneath that, each subject area has three subject specific competencies. The reason those are important is so that if we only had like across the board, across the school competencies, then somebody could likely say like oh well, how do I know how this student is performing in say math or something like that?

So we're able to look at both the competencies that go across the school and also the ones within a subject area for a student who may, for a summer program or college or something, really want to articulate how they are in a certain subject area. So it's like, again, a blending of both of those situations. So that's how we assess.

So here's probably the one of the things that's very different for how we do it. So when a student gets an assessment back, it will have three to four, usually, it's a ballpark, three or four tagged competencies, and they don't get an 87 at the top or B at the top. Instead, they get a measure of what we call surface immersion deep on each competency with feedback. So a student doesn't get an assessment back and be like oh, I got to an 82. Instead, they're like oh. They can see how they did on each one of the skills that's being assessed in that assessment.

So that's really important from my standpoint because I call it the single data point. If you get a B plus, that's just a single data point for how a student get on an assessment. That data point actually doesn't, it doesn't tie to any skill other than what's been correct or incorrect.

Whereas the competency system is we're actually identifying the specific skills performed in that assessment and giving feedback towards them. So you may have done something really poorly. Like I'm a humanities teacher.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

So maybe you really struggled on comma usage or something like that. That doesn't affect your whole assessment. It affects one part of the assessment where maybe you did something else like really well.

So from a relationship with grades standpoint, that student doesn't come away necessarily feeling badly about oh, I got this one data point. Instead, they have these multiple data points to really balance out that feeling towards their grades.

Angela: That is so important because I think the way we're grading traditionally, it's a very all or none. Like you passed, or you didn't. You got an A or a C. It doesn't give any specific feedback. It actually is leaving them in the dark and trying to figure out what did I do right and what did I do wrong?

This, what I hear you saying, is the competency thing. It's very specific so that a teacher can articulate that here's where you've got it. This is amazing. Like, let's celebrate that. Then this is the next step. This is what we're going to work on. We're going to work on these comments and not, whatever.

But I like that because it actually neutralizes the grade. It doesn't make it mean something about the student. It just makes it mean like here's what's working. Here's the next thing that we want to tweak, which it takes like making the grade mean something about you as a human. You're either capable or you're not into like you're on this progression of learning. It actually becomes a lifelong journey of learning. Of course, there's always something new to learn. So it's not that we're incapable. It's just that we're learning the one next step.

John: Yeah, that's so accurate. Just to clarify a couple of things. One, I totally agree with you. It's like all or nothing. It always amazed me when a

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

student would be like oh, I got this grade, but I don't know how I got that grade. That infuriates me as a teacher being like no, you should definitely know why you got that grade. If you don't know, you should go talk to your teacher.

So whenever anybody says data, it really makes me worried because then it is all about like you described. Like I'm a B plus student, or I got a B plus in this assessment without anything attached to it.

I do want to clarify how our system is traditional in that although on an assessment, a student doesn't get a letter grade or a number grade at the top, each one of those competencies does funnel into a course grade. So rather than have a grade for each assessment, they do get a quote, traditional grade that is funneled from every single competency that's assessed during the year actually all funnels into it. That's how they end up with a letter grade for a course.

So they're always, every time they have a competency assessed, that's funneling into a course grade. But it's not like the traditional system where each assessment they're getting a grade on that then they have that feeling of worth or not worth or complexity and just the relationship with it. So I think that's another way that we are trying to work on like the traditional element of them needing a grade but at the same time, definitely deemphasizing that aspect of the single data point.

Angela: Yes, yeah, that is so good. So obviously the work that you're doing now in this, is it like -- What year is this of the school?

John: Third. We're in the third year.

Angela: Third year, okay. So it started from somewhere. It started from mindset, right? It started from a thought. It started from like something



## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

doesn't feel like it's working for staff and students. So can you tell us a little bit about the journey that you have been on? Then how, I think what I think listeners are going to wonder is like okay, this sounds amazing, but how do I move from it being like an inspiration myself into like how do I start those conversations and collectively create a mindset where we're engaging in conversation about how to use grades more effectively?

John: Yeah, so in my career, I've pretty much been one of the most progressive students at every school, students. One of the most progressive teachers at every school I've been to. I've always been obsessed with assessment, probably because of my own relationship with grades as a student, right? Like how I felt about that and how that affected me emotionally like internally, intellectually, etc.

So as I progressed through my career, I've been experimenting a lot with assessment, studying, reading. Most of where we are, as a school right now is a lot of it's rooted in a ton of research I've done in my life and conferences and everything about all different types of assessment systems.

So given the opportunity to be starting a new school, we had the opportunity to put what we, not just me, but all of our founding team put together our mindsets around what's the best way to create an equity system and a fairness system for students in assessment. So that's really where that grew from.

The other thing that we're very fortunate is that every teacher in the school uses the system. So one thing that that I was alerted to very early in my career that I was cognizant of is that you could walk down the hall and one teacher is using a 10 point scale, one person's using 100 point scale, one person is using a letter grade scale. So for the student experience, that's super confusing. We have to acknowledge that.

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

We have to acknowledge that in the United States how any one person gets a B is very different from one classroom to another, one school to another, etc. Like, yes, we all understand generally what a B means. But how, in any system, that's arrived at is very different. So we've been lucky to sort of standardize how we do that.

So a student at our school who goes from humanities to math to science to Innovation Studio, they know they're being assessed the same way. The conversations, the vernacular is how did you do on these competencies? Those sorts of things. So that's one thing I think like at a school, you could operate at a department level or grade level. Hey, let's work and make sure we're all on the same page and see how that benefits the students' relationship with grades.

It goes back to that I think in elementary school, you always get these wonderful report cards with breakdown of several different skills or content areas. The report cards are three or four pages long. Then for some reason when you get to middle and high school, it becomes one letter grade.

That doesn't, how did we go from that stark transition where you are given so much information in elementary school about different things that you could really feel like oh, your ability to take notes was a little bit lower, but your ability to lead in group settings was like that. So that's cool. So you could see variation in somebody's learning style and their experience. Where then you get to high school is just you get to B in English. Like, what? That doesn't make any sense.

So I really think that what our system does by focusing on the competencies, it brings us back a little bit more to that like elementary school model where you're getting feedback on many different parts of your academic experience rather than just one letter grade for being in a class.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

Angela: Yeah, I really agree with that. Something that I love that you said was it can start with as simple as a grade level conversation or department conversation. That's free. It doesn't cost anything. You don't have to get approval. You can have these conversations in your grade level meetings where we're looking at not just like this child, like I think I taught kindergarten, right.

So we gave a lot of detail with parents, but not just did your child pass the writing assessment or not. But what components? What were we looking for? What areas of that writing assessment? We're looking for punctuation. We're looking for space between words. We're looking for phonetic spelling. We're looking does the picture match what the child is trying to articulate in his or her writing?

So when you think about it that way, it's like if we could just do that throughout, and give the child very specific feedback and then we as a teacher, actually, I think the competencies are better for teaching, it sounds like, because then you know exactly where to teach. Like, if you go in and see traditional grades, and you're like B's, C's, or even like percentages, or however people score or rubrics even, it's like okay, but where do I take this teaching to the next level to get this student to the proficiency that they want?

John: Yeah, I love your kindergarten example because I literally, like that's how I, let's just say on a writing assignment that I'm doing with 12th graders, right? Like, there are all these different components. You're not just a single entity. I always think about it in terms of like parenting, to be honest.

I don't think I deserve a B for making breakfast, right? There are all these different components that go into it. Wow, I was up late doing my work last night or whatever. I'm not a bad parent, because I gave you Eggos this

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

morning instead of like doing the whole batter and making cool waffles or whatever.

So unfortunately, though, in school, you are branded that way, right? You have just one assessment. Boom, that's it. Then it's part of the record, things like that. So it really just is, I think, if we could blow up the whole system and rethink it, it'd be great. We can't do that, right? Because it's really this inertia of the system that we're all locked into. But we can definitely chip away at it without a doubt.

However, we can do that. Like you said, it's free. I failed many attempts of trying, like pitching different ideas to different, to administrators in my own career about hey, I want to do standards based or whatever. You can do a lot of experimental things. Like I ran a no grades program for an entire year where I kept like parallel system where I was doing it as if it was no grades but also doing like how my school wanted grades to be done. So I can analyze that too.

Again, like it wasn't me going no grades. It was me like experimenting and being like okay, I see how this works. Oh, that really could work. Then I could take it to the next level of having a conversation with the administrator and be like, let's look at the benefits of this and those types of things.

So yeah, I think it comes back to the mindset. It's super easy in our educational systems to be like that's the way it's always been. It's too difficult to fight the system. But I think it's invigorating. I think it feels empowering and awesome to think about how to do things better, improve to innovate. In there's like if you can get caught up in that aspect of it, it's like so energizing and refreshing, I think.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

Angela: Yeah, and it's fun. Like when you said, I was doing what I was asked to do. I wasn't being noncompliant as an employee. I was just experimenting and kind of playing around with what would this look like? So one mindset would be like oh, that's just double the work. But the other mindset is I am a lifelong learner. This is fun. It is invigorating. It's interesting. We are in the business of evolution. I mean, that is what education is.

We have stagnated, I would say the system, has stagnated because it's so slow. It's like a glacier moving through, right. So it's like we're not going to stop the glacier from moving, but we're also like, it's not going to melt away tomorrow. So what we can do is that gives us time and space to play within the system, whether you're in a classroom or you're a principal or you're at district level listening to this.

There are things that you can do right here, right now within your system or your current little cosmos of where your seat on the bus. To just to think about it differently and to play with it and make it playful. So let me ask you this. You mentioned in our conversation before that you are also teaching. You're admin-ing, but you're also teaching to keep boots on the ground. So tell me about the mindset. How does it feel from the teacher perspective to be working with grades in this capacity and competency basis?

John: Yeah, I love it. I think one thing about the competency system is it makes me as a teacher, you have to think. You can't just roll out the same quiz or test or project or whatever. You have to see it through the actual skills, the actual competencies you want the students to perform.

So it puts the onus on me to defend, okay, did I prepare the kids well enough to do this assessment that I'm going to measure them on? So I love that. I love that it forces me as a teacher to be attentive to what I'm

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

teaching and to what I'm asking students to do. That, to me, again, like sort of like a lifelong learner, lifelong.

Like I said, I've been teaching for 29 years. I love that it makes my job fresh. It makes me really think about oh, I really, we've been stressing this skill. I'm going to tweak the assessment so that we're emphasizing that so I can see the students performing that way. So that's one.

Then the other thing is definitely as deemphasize grades. Like I said, when you return something, a student isn't saying how do I get more points back? It's not about points in that way. Instead, it's about their skill set and their competency and what they did. Again, back to so they know how they get assessed. There's feedback there.

So they can, and I say to any student. If I assess you, and I gave you a quote and immersed on something, come talk to me. Because if I didn't explain myself clearly enough or you think you did something differently that I wasn't fully aware of, let's have that conversation. You might change my assessment of it, or you might not. But either way, like that conversation, I think is really empowering to give students like ownership of their system. Whereas I think that's a part of the educational system that's sort of missing.

I know that like yeah, we don't want every teacher, every student coming to us and like questioning everything we assess them on. That's not what I'm proclaiming right now. But we do want them to care. We do want them to care about what they're learning and why rather than like why didn't I get two points for this? So it's definitely more of that type of a mindset shift for students, and I definitely have seen that. Definitely the deemphasis of a grade on a daily basis has definitely been refreshing.

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

Angela: Yes. You work with sixth through 12th graders. So they're at an age where you really want them to understand that they're not coming to school for performative measures, for you to do a song and dance, for us to do a song and dance so that you can get the grades that we feel good as teachers because the state requires it.

It's not a compliance issue the older that they get. We want them to see that this is actually impacting real life. This is impacting you in a way that you do want ownership of your life, and you want power and agency and control in your life. This is one way that you do that.

We can teach them advocacy skills and when to bring something up and when to be like I'm going to self-assess on this for a minute. I don't need to go argue every point because I can see where this might be true. But I think that, the decision a child makes to come and discuss it with you or not, we have to teach them that discernment, that skill of are you, do you get why you got this? Or why we're at this level or not? I mean.

If there's a real question there, that is the learning right there. Why did you assess this when I thought I was here? Or like I did better than I thought, and I want to understand. I want to see that. I want. That conversation is also the learning.

John: Definitely, I completely agree with you. There are all these elements of education that go beyond like that simple grade, like how you are as a student, how you are as a learner. One thing I wanted to bring up because, as he's talked about like on the district level, and having certain state requirements and things like that, like I do think obviously we're an independent school. So I don't have those pressures. So I'm sure many people are like oh, it's different for us. We're also not an AP school.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

But I do seriously believe that the system, like using a competency based system or a version of standards based system, you can still do everything you need to do for your state. In my humanities classes, all my -- We're in Massachusetts. So all of my skills are tagged to Massachusetts standards. You can still do all that. You can still assess an AP class the same way because either way the student's still performing the skills and about the content that you want. You're just assessing them a little bit differently than the traditional mode.

So I do think even if you're like oh, we could never go away from having a letter grade or a number grade on each assessment, you could still do this type of system where you still achieve that. It's very doable either way. So that's one thing I think is really important. Like how you actually arrive at that letter grade for an individual assessment, if that's how you need to be doing it. It's doable definitely to problem solve that out into use a system where you're able to articulate better how a student's learning on whatever that assessment is that they're doing.

Angela: Yeah. Oh, I love that so much. So I think one of the questions that are going to come up in people's mind, I think it's just a default like objection that our brain offers us. But it's like, this sounds like a lot of work. This sounds like a lot of effort. This sounds really hard. It sounds like putting more on the plate. Can you just speak to that? Like, where is that true? Then where is it maybe it's a little easier than we anticipate?

John: Yeah, I don't think it's necessarily more work. I think you're making an assessment anyway. So just thinking about like how you're going to assess that assessment actually, like what particular skills you're going to assess on. It allows you definitely to target your feedback. So as a traditional English teacher, if I was reading an essay, I'd be doing like marking up all this type of stuff.



## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

But now I know that like okay, I'm assessing these three competencies. So my focus in that essay is really targeting those competencies because that's where I'm giving the feedback on. It doesn't mean that I'm not doing margin comments. I still am, but they're more targeted. That's empowering.

Because sometimes I think in any assessment of any kind, if you're doing a math assessment, and you're marking things wrong or adding comments and things like that, that feedback that you're doing in the margins or on the actual artifact, can then inform much more specifically that feedback you do give. Because I think traditionally it's like oh, here's an assessment. Then a teacher will write a little narrative at the end of some way.

But those narratives aren't attached necessarily. They're talking about the thing in totality. So this way, it actually lets you narrow in more specifically on targeted skills to give feedback on. So one, I think it's more liberating than you think. Also, in terms of the aspect of like what's good about it, I think it definitely.

So, we primarily use a single panel rubric here. So with a single panel rubric, you have the competency in the middle, the very important explanation by the teacher of how that competency looks on that assessment, and then you have exemplary on the right hand side and developing on the left hand side. So that's the concept of the single panel rubric.

Then you just, you give a little targeted feedback in those boxes. It helps you assess because you're like oh, I see comments in the developing and comments on the exemplary. That's probably immersed. That's like clearly there's things on either side, but it definitely makes it better for a teacher because you're able to really focus on these particular things for your feedback and then move on.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

Angela: Yeah. Just for my information. When you're doing, first of all, how often do you guys assess it? I hear a lot from principals it feels like we're always testing, or teachers will say I feel like we're always assessing or pre-assessing, post-assessing, district assessment, state assessments,. How does testing, like the schedule of testing, look like in your school?

John: I would say there's no definite way. Like another thing that's innovative about us is we don't have quarters or semesters.

Angela: Oh, cool.

John: So our school goes through the whole year because one of the things that we, again, with our mindset of how we go about these things, like having a first quarter grade that then that counts is 25% of a grade. For us that doesn't make any logic into how our system works. So I would say what we say to teachers is you assess when you're ready to assess rather than on any type of school schedule.

Again, because of the how it works, you could be like I'm going to give a very small assessment today on one competency, right. So it doesn't need to be a whole class. It doesn't need to be whole fully, like full time commitment. You can manage a system so that it's not based on needing an entire class period and things like that.

I mean, that's something else I should say about our system is it's about the skills, not about the assessment method. So you can give a quiz, a test, multiple choice, an essay, a project, a speech, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what your assessment method is. It's about the skills that you're articulating that the skills of the students will be working on.

So obviously, we don't weight a test is worth two times as much as a quiz or anything like that. It's not about that. It's about the skill. So really,

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

assessment you build should be based on what skills the students are going to show. Could it be something that would take an entire class period? Sure. Could it be something that'd take five minutes? Sure.

Angela: Nice. Oh, gosh, the freedom that teachers, I mean, I just feel excited thinking about it. I love that we're planting the seeds of just thinking about grades in a totally different way that's actually liberating for everybody, teachers and students. That sounds so wonderful. I mean, I would love to experience it in real time.

But so what I hear you saying is that teachers are designing like lessons and assessments, probably integrating lessons and assessments a little more fluidly. They're not, I think, about back when, again, when I was teaching elementary school. There was a time period like. The assessment starts here. It ends here. It's this exact assessment. This is how you have to administer it by this date and time, whatever. This is how you have to grade it. It was very like rigid.

What I hear you saying is like teachers can kind of go in. They don't have to assess everything all at once. They can be looking for individual competencies and looking for the growth or like areas for growth. So it's a much more fluid process. So how does you're, just now I'm getting like in the weeds here. But how does like if there aren't semesters and like a schedule, like that structure, what is the structure? How do you communicate to parents and to students? What does that look like at your school?

John: Yeah, great question. So we have a, we use Google Classroom as our LMS, like our day to day LMS. So anything that's assessed or assigned or whatever all goes to Google Classroom, but Google Classroom cannot operate on our competency system. It can't, doesn't know how to compute like the way we do it. So we have an entire separate gradebook, and it's

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

from a company called Otus. Otus has completely personalized our gradebook with all of our competencies and how they go into the assignments and things like that, how they get computed, all that. So it's awesome.

So we tell families you can go to Otus at any time and see a very live updated grade. That's never going to change. That's not going to be oh, here's a stopping point. Then you have to calculate oh, this is 30% of the grade or whatever. Like, it's always there. So, that will go through the end of the year.

Then we report out. Like most schools, we'll do teacher reports a couple of times a year where we're giving narrative feedback. We emphasize in that narrative feedback like certain competencies about how a student is performing.

So the one way we do have semesters, we do have some semester classes. So when those semester classes ended, they got a final grade. So we produced a, quote, report card for those classes because that was their final grade. Some parents reached out and were like how come I don't see the other classes on there? I had to explain like don't forget. You can go to Otus right now and see any of the year-long grades at any time. You don't --

Once we made a report card, if that was the case with our system, that report card would be obsolete the next day. So final grades all appear report card at the very end of the year. For families to be involved, they can sign up for Google Classroom weekly summaries. They get the reports from us two or three times a year. We have an advocate system, which is like an advisor system where we communicate.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

We are very open. I know a lot of your listeners will be like oh, I'm not sure we want that. But we let parents contact us at any time with questions about their child's learning and what's going on. We're big believers that parents are partners in learning journey for students. So that can be, obviously, as we know there are some parents who might be a little bit more intense than others. But, again, but we always say like oh, but look. Here are your resources. Are you worried about grade? Just go to Otus. It's there all the time.

Angela: Yeah. Oh no, that's, again, I think that is more liberating because it almost sets a sense of like trust and safety and foundation because parents do. The nervous ones, they have access at all times. They can look as often as they want. If they have questions, they can ask.

But because they have access and because there is an invitation to have a conversation, for the parents who just need to know, that have a pulse on what's going on, the majority of parents in my experience as a principal and as a teacher, the majority of parents just want a pulse. They want to know their kid's doing well. Their kid's happy. Their kid's safe. Their kid's progressing, and that they're having the best student experience that the can. That's what most parents want.

80% of your parents are going to be okay with that as long as they have that pulse. Then you can deal with individuals as need be. But I'm curious to know what's the feedback from parents on the system? Then I'm curious to hear what the feedback from students is around this system that you guys have innovated?

John: Yeah, I think that parents are they're still trying to understand it. Because one thing that's really interesting is how the grade system that's always been in existence is what they know, right? They're like well, what do you mean? I know A, B, C, D. We'll say like go to Otus, and you can see

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

that, but that's not how the individual assessments come out. So you just need to educate parents about that a little bit.

So what I do as the head of teaching and learning, I'll do a webinar at the beginning of the year and be available for any questions at any time that anybody wants to ask about those things. So what we don't have is anybody really complaining about the system. Sometimes I think it's a parent who's confused and just needs it explained to them a little bit more definitely.

Then students, same thing. If a student comes to NEIA, so we're a six through 12 school. Say a student comes in ninth grade who wasn't here in seventh or eighth grade. It's a whole new system to them, right? So they have to unlearn the traditional mode of what they're used to. But how we do it is, it's really important for a teacher to explain like every time is an assessment what the competencies are and how they'll be assessed. So that that part is important for the students to understand.

I think largely, the students, because they are getting a course grade, they know where they're at. Actually, like they know their pulse, definitely. Then you're just you're missing that daily fret over the relationship with a grade that they get. So you don't hear students complaining at all. As a matter of fact, it's great when a student is like will ask about a certain competency or be like oh.

I had a great student send me an assignment the other day and was like I don't want you to look at the I write competency on this. I'm just looking for like this part of thing. I was like, thank you so much. It's awesome. Like the I write competency is all about like their grammar and things like that. They were like don't look at that right now. But she articulated the competency. Like, you don't have to worry about that right now. I'm good with that. Can

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

you look at this? So the goal, right, we're in year three. The goal is that that vernacular is part of our entire fabric of our school within a few years.

Angela: Yeah. Have you heard from, so I was just thinking it's three years in. So you've had students that were in 12th grade, 11th grade, and 10th grade who have now promoted out, right, that graduated out?

John: No, we have our first 12th grade class this year.

Angela: Oh, I see they're coming up.

John: Yeah, because they're coming up. So we have our first 12th grade class right now.

Angela: Okay.

John: Obviously that group, right, those families had some anxiety about quote their grades, but they didn't really because they still get course grades. So our transcript looks the same as any school ever. It's got courses and letter grades.

The students are doing great in that our first ever graduating class, we have 15 students. Their college acceptances so far are going great. Like we have really good college counselor who hit the, she was hired last year at the beginning of the year. She hit the ground reaching out to colleges explaining our system, what our profile is, how all these things work. But obviously, that was important for us to know that we needed to do that as a new school anyway. So yes.

So yeah, so we feel like the external reporting of our program is the same as any school, to be honest. If I can just tell a quick story. We originally

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

started as a no grade school. So we used our competency system without grades attached to it. In year one, there was definitely some people weren't cool with that.

So we actually, we changed, without changing at all the integrity of the competency system. It's the same as it is now. We did adjust it so that it could compute to that course grade that I've talked about. One thing we said was we don't want to hurt a student's chances after being at our school externally because we do things differently.

So the biggest thing was if we were no grades and there was just all of our competencies, like a page of our competencies on a college admission person's desk, they would be like I don't have the time to like understand all this, right. So we said as an innovative school, let's have the one traditional thing we do be these letter grades so that our transcript looks the same.

Then I call it turning the page. We just want the college admission person to look at the transcript and be like okay, great. Then turn the page and see all the cool things they do at the school. Or hear a student in their materials talk about how they really grew in the I construct competency or something like that.

Angela: Yeah, that is pretty cool. Because we want to be innovative, but people are afraid or they think they can't. They think there's too big of an obstacle in the way from doing that. So like the bridge, how you close that gap was like okay, we're going to function this way. But we're going to translate. It's almost like another language, right? We're going to translate our language into a language that the colleges understand so that the student has equal advantage when it comes to the admissions process.

John: Yeah, that's what I would say too about like even from an admin level or a teacher level. I personally can't, from the I perspective, I would love to



## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

be a no grade school. I would love it. Our system would work totally. But I understand that for the external world that isn't like NEIA right now, like we have to do this. That's okay. We still are able to do both, right?

So like, what are the compromises you need to make to be able to move the needle of the academic system, the educational system the best you can. So, I would say from an admin perspective, the one thing that's really important is if a teacher has an idea about innovating assessment in some way, I would encourage it.

As long as they're communicating about it, maybe they're doing like I described. I'm going to do the innovative way, but also the traditional way. Keep them side by side so that I have data to give feedback on, but I think one thing that's rough is sometimes when like oh, this is the way it's always been. We're just going to keep doing it that way. If you have a way that can potentially do better, I think you could have the courage to do it, to try it.

Angela: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I know for the go getter listeners that are out there, they're going to be like oh, I love this. This is vibing with me. This is what I where I want to go. They're going to want to know how did you get started? What were some of the first initial steps you did to get started?

This is a little bit separate question, but how did students, did they opt into this program? What was the, they're going to want to understand what the structure and the framework? How did this originate? How did you get to be where you're at right now? Then how do students have access to this program?

John: Yeah, I would say first of all, you can share my contact information because I could talk to people about this for days about all that process. But I think, again, having something that most listeners out there can't understand is we literally started a school, right? So we were able to all

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

start with the system. So anybody who came to the school, they were buying into the system. We're like this is our assessment system. Okay.

But I was able to get to this point professionally by exactly what you described, what was the process. So, for example, when I started experimenting with standards based, I was upfront with my classes being like this is what we're doing. This is how we're doing it. This is why we're doing it, those types of things.

So it's just all that communication is the biggest tool you have to be able to do the innovative things while also being cognizant of like all the constituents around you so that you're not creating crazy waves or you're not getting hauled in from an admin or something like that for being a renegade or something like that. I think you've got to be thoughtful, very thoughtful, about the things that you want to do and go about it from a communicative standpoint.

I'm a big believer in like a positive standpoint too. I wouldn't be like oh my God, the educational system sucks. We need to burn it down, right? Instead it's like no, listen. I think this is might be a way for students to understand and learn better. I'm going to try this. So we should try this, that sort of thing.

Angela: Yeah, I love that. Oh, my gosh. This has been so insightful. So do you have any last words of wisdom, or is there anything that you really want? There's traditional educators out there. They feel this in their bones and in their hearts. They know that this system isn't working for all kids and all staff members and students, but they're like oh, but what? How? Can you just give them some guidance on the next steps?

John: I would say, Angela, like we talked about what's your relationship with grades? Realize that every student in your room, if you put the student at

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

the center, they all have different relationships with grades. So is the same system that everybody's ever for all time is used, is that really the best system?

If you don't think it is, be courageous. What are some ways you can start taking to address that, to experiment, to see how that lands with students, to see how they feel about it, those types of things. I really think that is the thing. If you have that feeling inside you, look around, be aware. How can I experiment? How can I do this and think about this differently?

Then to back to your point originally about the mindset and the action, like what are the action steps I can take that fit within my current system, whatever that system is?

Angela: Yes, yes. Your actions are going to be driven by the belief system and the mindset. So taking some time to contemplate this with yourself, whether you're a school leader or a teacher or district level, you don't have to run out and start an initiative and try to force something forward just because you're excited about it.

You want to actually slow your brain down and be thoughtful about why would we go to the effort of making changes like this and even holding these conversations. Because we want to understand the purpose. When we're in a system that already has such rigid systems and processes, it's easy just to acclimate to those processes without questioning them. We're not questioning them from the place that that we're criticizing them. We're questioning them on their effectiveness for all students.

I just, I have one more question that I think is going to pop up for people. They're going to want to know the demographics of the school that you serve because a lot of people will come to me, and they're like yes, but I'm a Title I school, or I am in an urban environment, or I am a low income

## **Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp**

socioeconomic status, disadvantaged school setting. So would something like this work for kids that typically have disadvantages in their way?

John: So I think yes because it's like we talked about before. If you think of elementary school report cards, right, it's like that system works. That system is effective for all students. That this is really just sort of like an adaptation of that, on some level. Our school, we're an independent school so where tuition driven, but I would say that we, our current year three student body is diverse. It's neurodiverse. We opened in 2021 so post-COVID. So you had students from all different levels and abilities coming in. Actually, I think it really having this type of system is helpful for that.

Because there might be times where you're adjusting something for where students are at. I think that's something post COVID we've definitely seen as, as educators that you might have the greatest plan ever, but where the students are at post COVID, it's going to need some adjustment. This system allows you to adjust. Let's look at these skills that we want to hone in on.

If I can just, I want to really thank you for your you extrapolated really well about the patience that's needed if you're going to try something. I teach a 12th grade class on TV script writing. One of the main components of that is I say that you've got to have patience. Like in the beginning, like you're just forming a TV series. You might have this amazing idea, but it's not going to come into place until like episode eight or episode 10. You've got to have the patience to keep doing all the things you need to be doing to get to that point.

So when you said that, that's what I thought of. That you're exactly right. Like, you don't have to come through and like change the whole system. Be

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

patient. You have this idea about how this can be better and just start planting the seeds for it. I think that's like a really awesome point you made.

Angela: Yeah. Oh, thank you. I just know I've worked in this system. This is actually my 29th year too. I was calculating that when you said that. I'm like wow. So yeah, we've been doing this for a while. We know that I think when you're planting seeds, there are seeds that grow quickly, and they will mature and pop. Then there's things that take 12 months, 18 months, two years, maybe five years. So we're planting all different kinds of seeds.

Mindset seeds can kind of evolve more quickly because you can have different thoughts in an instant. You can have different feelings about something, and you can see new perspective. Then you start to have conversations, which plant seeds that might take a little bit longer as you're starting to grow a culture around these conversations. Then you're starting to plant seeds around like the actions and the processes which might take a little bit longer.

So there's layers to this. But I think the takeaway here is that this one podcast can spark a seed that you can plant in terms of your thoughts around it and your mindset around it and your excitement and energy around really giving kids the information that they need to take ownership of their learning, to be authentically engaged, to have teachers feel a little more autonomy and authenticity around teaching, and bringing back the purpose of the humanity of instruction and the humaneness that comes with that.

Then the system will follow that like, eventually. But that we have to be patient for the system. Because we can make instant change internally, but it's going to take more time to have that show itself in the system. Yeah.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

John: Even just our conversations you and me. You're inspiring me. I love bouncing ideas off you. So one of my other recommendations would be if you're an educator and you have an idea, like find some other people that you can vibe with. Because then it's just not you like oh my God. Get some other people who get excited about it and exchange those ideas. That's where so much richness comes out of that.

Angela: Yes. So if people are super interested to learn more about you, the school that you're working with, the initiatives that you guys have been able to create into the school setting, where can they contact you?

John: So anybody can contact me anytime at my email. It's real simple. It's [camp@neiaacademy.org](mailto:camp@neiaacademy.org). Or you can just go to [neiaacademy.org](http://neiaacademy.org) and find me there. But maybe on your when you post the podcast, you can put my email there.

Angela: Yes, I'll put it in the show notes.

John: I'm really happy to really happy to talk to anybody about any of these things. Like I said, we definitely don't think we have all the answers. There are a lot of things were figuring out. It's always iterating. So I'm happy to talk about any aspect. As much as I could help somebody, they'll be helping me as well.

Angela: Yeah, no, this is definitely a collaboration. I'm excited that this conversation's coming out into the world and into the hands of the Empowered Principal® audience because I can feel with my clients and my audience that they're hungry for this conversation. But they might be a little bit afraid to have it because they don't think that there is a possibility for change. You are living breathing proof, your school is the example of that this is possible.

## Ep #331: Time to Ditch Letter Grades? Alternative Grading Systems with John Camp

So thank you for sharing your time, your insight with us today, Camp. I love your energy. I love the mission and the values and the vision that you have. I can hope one day that like our traditional schools will be able to embrace some of these components.

John: Thank you so much. Again, I just appreciate you having me on and vibing with our conversation. Thank you so much.

Angela: Yeah, so good. All right. Have an amazing rest of your week empowered principals. We'll talk to you all next week. Take good care. Bye.

Hey empowered principal. If you enjoyed the content in this podcast, I invite you to join the Empowered Principal® Collaborative. It's my latest offer for aspiring and current school leaders who want to experience exceptional impact and enjoy the school leadership experience.

Look, you don't have to overwork and overexert to be a successful school leader. You'll be mentored weekly and surrounded by supportive likeminded colleagues who truly understand what it means to be a school leader. So join us today and become a member of the only certified life and leadership coaching program for school leaders in the country. Just head on over to [angelakellycoaching.com/work-with-me](https://angelakellycoaching.com/work-with-me) to learn more and join. I'll see you inside of the Empowered Principal® Collaborative.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit [angelakellycoaching.com](https://angelakellycoaching.com) where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.