

# HOW TO TRANSLATE JUNIOR'S REPORT CARD INTO ENGLISH

By MYRON ROBERTS

My seven year old daughter, dutifully trotted home with her report card recently and, with an air of bored sophistication, bluntly announced "I passed to the third grade."

This may not strike you as terribly significant, but having known a few moments when I wondered whether she would ever make the third grade, I accepted the news gladly and sat down to study teacher's judgments.

Unfortunately it wasn't as simple as all that. In place of the old, harsh piece of cardboard I remember using for a report card, daughter turned up with a rather formidable looking document done up in three colors and folded like the menu at the Mocambo. Inside was no bare list of subjects and grades, but an abundance of information telling everything about daughter from her willingness to abide by Safety Rules (Satisfactory) to her progress in comprehending the mysteries of something "Dairy, Bakery and Grocery" (Excellent).

Having had some experience with the principles and practices of the Higher Mysteries Involved in Modern Education, I thought it might be useful to take this occasion to explain to parents these modern report cards are supposed to explain about children, and how to decipher the Code.

First of all, a pretty good rule for school systems is By Their Report Cards Shall Ye Know Them. That is, the system used in reporting to parents about the progress of their children is a subject school people devote a good deal of attention to; for while it may or may not tell much about their kids, it is certain to tell them a lot about the school. Thus the report card has become in itself a prime factor in what is known as "public relations" or the gentle art of keeping the parents off the educator's neck.

This, incidentally, is why most report cards today list so many subjects and activities — even those so trivial nobody would dream of spending more than five minutes "studying" them. It gives an impression of thoroughness and activity.

### Razzle Dazzle

Generally the more "modern" a school system is the more razzle dazzle to its report cards. In the public mind the terms "modern" and "progressive" are sometimes used synonymously but the fact is Progressivism is now somewhat dated and old hat. The True Progressive school, for instance, doesn't believe in any report card—arguing that it is impossible for one human being to judge another particularly in terms of a single letter or numeral and that the whole system of reporting is competitive and undemocratic.

The traditionalist, on the other hand, doesn't even try to grade the "whole child"—a favorite phrase of the Progressives—but simply attempts to record what a given student has achieved in a given subject. He tends to prefer that this be expressed in a single letter (A, B, C, D, or F) or even a number because this is something that both the child and the parent can easily understand and strive to improve — particularly if enough heat is turned on at home and at school.

Most modern schools try to find a middle path between these two extremes. And their report cards reflect this compromise.

### Progress

First of all my daughter's card is not called a Report Card at all, but a Progress Report — a more positive approach to what is happening to the child at school and hence more desirable from the standpoint of psychology and public relations.

Opening daughter's Progress Report I find a list of old-fashioned 'subjects' — i.e., Writing, Reading, Spelling, Arithmetic, etc. This is supposed to make the traditionalist happy. But underneath these subjects are specific statements such as "interest in reading," "ability to read aloud," etc. It is these specifics, not the general subject Reading, that get graded. Thus if the Progressive objects to giving Johnny a "C" in Reading and the traditionalist objects to no grade at all — the modern school compromises by asserting that my daughter has made "satisfactory progress" in reading aloud.

Gone are A, B, C, D, and F, and in their places we have three general categories called excellent, Satisfactory and "capable of doing better." Note particularly the last — Johnny has not flunked, he is not a no-good, lazy, mutton-headed "F" — he is simply "capable of doing better" — and what parent would care to argue about that?

### Bad Old Days

In the bad, old days when I went to school we actually got two grades — one for subject matter and another for something known as "citizenship" — which was understood to mean how well teacher liked you. The latter grade wasn't supposed to mean much except how good you were at polishing the old apple but it was always something of a problem because teachers were forever letting their opinion of one's "citizenship" get in the way of one's marks. And it was an almost inviolate rule that bum citizens didn't get good grades in subject matter, while good students were inevitably good citizens.

Well, daughter's school faces up sternly to this problem with Page 3 of the Progress Report dedicated to "Character Growth."

It was George Bernard Shaw who once observed that "the vilest abortionist is he who attempts to mold a child's character." But apparently my daughter's authorities are no Shavians because they are hard at work trying to mold hers.

In place of the old arbitrary "citizenship" grade we have three major categories called "Group Relations," "work habits" and "health and safety." Under these main headings are further specific statements such as "Respects other rights and opinions" and it is these statements that are graded.

As complex and painstaking as this system is — it doesn't always work. Witness daughter's card which is graded "excellent" in Following plans and Directions, but merely "satisfactory" in "acceptance of constructive suggestions." Since we must assume that teacher's Plans and Directions are constructive, it puzzles me how daughter can be real good at one and only fair at the other. On Page 3 is the section reserved for teacher's written comments. This, again, illustrates the essential compromise which governs the spirit of the modern school. Traditionalists like marks, progressivists like descriptive statements — so teacher winds up doing both.

By a happy coincidence during the past year my daughter has had two teachers and her report card is adorned with a written statement by each. Teacher No. 1 commented thus:

"Cathy is making very good progress in all of her work. However, she talks too much in class."

This, as any educator will leap to inform you, is Bad. It is Bad first of all because it is Negative — the No. 1 soul-scorching sin of modern education. As a parent it is likely to cause me to become defensive and antagonistic and perhaps, to vote "no" come school bond time.

It is also bad because it starts out with a generality rather than a simple, descriptive statement of behavior. And it so happens that the generality is not true. Obviously Cathy is not making very good progress in ALL her work for even with so talented a father she falls somewhat short of perfection.

Finally if a child must be criticized, then criticism should be couched in terms of specific behavior. Thus "Johnny is having difficulty with multiplication" not "Johnny is bad at arithmetic." Or "Johnny lacks the ability to cooperate with the group" not "Johnny is a spoiled brat."

Beneath this is another report from teacher No. 2 which reads as follows: "It is a pleasure to write a report about Cathy. She is doing particularly well at reading, is enthusiastic, well behaved and liked by other children. I have enjoyed reading her delightful stories."

What about the seeming disparity between these two reports? Well, first of all, the difference is more apparent than real. Actually both teachers were correct — Cathy does yak too much and she is enthusiastic and well liked. What is different is only what each teacher has chosen to emphasize. Teachers, like most

human beings, are for certain traits and against others, and what is enthusiasm to you may be rudeness to me. And this is one reason why moral judgments are suspect — even when they come from trained teachers.

On the other hand when teacher tells you that Johnny's reading is poor or that he can't catch a ball for sour apples — she is probably right. For this is specific behavior which she is trained to recognize and, after all, she had no reason to try and kid you.

Finally, we turn to the fourth and last page of daughter's

report. It contains a message from the Superintendent informing me that "no two children are exactly alike" and that "the capabilities of a child should be considered in any evaluation of student progress."

Why has the Superintendent taken up a whole page to state two such obvious truths? Mostly because he wants me to understand that two kids are not supposed to be in competition with each other — they are all in school for the same purpose — to get an education, and each is to be assisted along this worthy path at his own best pace.

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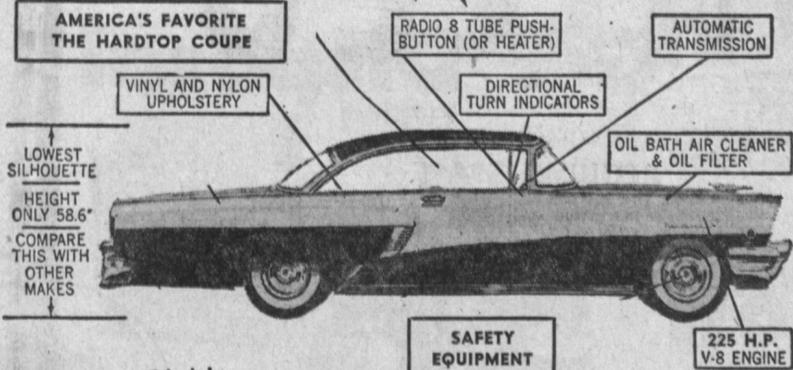
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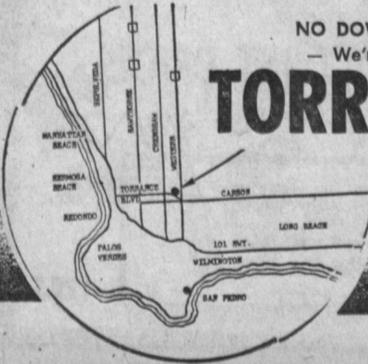
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