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Differences in the Strictness of Grading and its Impact on Student Educational Aspirations²

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Summary

- For students and their parents, school grades are a key piece of information that helps to shape educational and career ambitions. We find that 87% of Czech ninth graders with an A in mathematics want to go to university. Among students with a C, only 39% have the same aspiration.
- There is wide variation in the strictness of grading across Czech primary schools. On average, grades awarded can differ by as much as a full letter grade between stricter and more moderately grading schools.
- Even when they in fact have measurably equivalent skills, students from schools that grade more strictly have lower academic aspirations than students from schools that grade more moderately. Grades on report cards are also often among the admissions criteria for secondary schools and high schools. Differences in the strictness of grading and the crucial roles of grades in planning future educational paths can therefore lead to misguided decisions by students and parents, inefficiencies in the education system, and suboptimal allocation of talent.
- Girls and students from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds generally receive higher grades than boys and students from disadvantaged backgrounds who otherwise have the same level of tested skills. In fact, it has been shown that teachers' grades reflect the students' socio-emotional characteristics and attitudes towards learning, in addition to their educational performance.
- Girls and students from advantaged backgrounds have significantly higher aspirations to attend university than do boys and students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the same level of math skills. These differences persist even after we consider grade effects.

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- The aim of school assessments should be primarily to support the learning process and to shape educational aspirations. Grades should therefore be based on objective and standardized criteria and should be supplemented by more detailed qualitative assessments. Aspects of behavior and attitude should be communicated separately from the evaluation of student achievement.
- The Czech ministerial decree on evaluation standards in primary education leaves schools and teachers a great deal of autonomy in assessment. Given the central role of grades in the Czech education system, it is appropriate to pay much more attention to the issue of student assessment, grading, school inspections, educational policies and research, and data collection.