

Grading and Assessment - FAQ's for Teachers

Assessment

What is a formative assessment?

Formative Assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes. They are checks for understanding that take us toward the learning targets.

Why should I use formative assessment?

Formative assessment generates information on how students are learning.

What is the difference between a formative assessment and a summative one?

Formative – Assessment **FOR** Learning

Summative – Assessment **OF** Learning

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Measures a few things frequently	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Measures many things infrequently
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifies which students have learned a skill and which have not so that those who have not can be given additional instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attempts to determine if students have learned and met intended standards by a specified deadline
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides students with input on how to improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides useful information regarding strengths and weaknesses of curricula and programs in a district or school
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can inform teachers individually and collectively of the effectiveness of their practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promotes institutional accountability

Are rubrics necessary for all assessments?

No- some assessments lend themselves more to rubrics than others. Some things that are assessed are black and white-they can or can't do it.

Why should I provide detailed feedback on assessments/assignments?

A percentage grade or number grade tells students how well they have done, but gives them no information on the strengths and weaknesses of their performance. Feedback gives students specific information about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve.

Research has shown that giving students specific feedback helps to improve their achievement.

Susan Brookhart explains the importance of feedback in this article from Educational Leadership:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec07/vol65/num04/Feedback-That-Fits.aspx>

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Re-assessment

Doesn't giving retakes discourage students from studying and trying their best the first time?

For an assessment to accurately demonstrate achievement, students need to provide their best effort. Reassessment does not mean simply taking the same test over. Students need to demonstrate that they've improved their understanding of a learning target before trying again, but that doesn't necessarily mean a retest. If a student didn't do well on an assessment, a teacher might use a different method for the student to demonstrate how well he/she understands the learning target. The reassessment will sometimes be a completely different task than the original, for example, a project instead of a test. Remember, teachers are remediating the learning target, not a specific assessment.

Are we adequately preparing the students for the real world by allowing them to reteach and retest?

In the "real world" people retest frequently, especially when the stakes are high. How many of us took the test for our driver's license more than once? When applying for colleges, students take one of the most dreaded tests of all time--the SAT. They can take this as many times as they so choose. When becoming teachers, college students have to take the Praxis tests, and, again, they can take the test as many times as they want. We have excellent teachers on our faculty who needed to take a Praxis exam more than once in order to be certified to teach in Pennsylvania. Nurses, doctors, and attorneys are also permitted the opportunity to study and retest if they don't pass their licensing tests the first time.

By not allowing students to relearn the material, we are not teaching them discipline or responsibility; we're leaving them behind.

What are methods for re-teaching and re-testing?

Finding time to re-teach and re-assess is always a challenge, and doing it successfully will happen in different ways at each level and building. The elementary intervention period, COLT period at the middle school, and fifth period at the high school can sometimes be used for re-teaching and re-assessing. In addition to the classroom and learning support teachers, paraeducators, parent volunteers, and peer tutors can be helpful in the re-teaching process. Study Island and other digital resources can also be utilized for re-teaching. Many South Western teachers work with students before or after school for re-teaching and re-testing.

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Homework and Late Assignments

Why are the students not being held accountable for timeliness of assignments which is an important life skill? What is the rationale for not penalizing kids for late work? That's not how things work in the real world and in college. What am I supposed to do if students don't hand in their work/homework on time?

Requiring students to complete work, even if it is turned in late holds students more accountable than giving them a zero. According to Cathy Vatterott in her article *Attitudes about Homework Completion* there are five reasons students don't do homework:

- Academic – Task too hard or too lengthy for the student's working speed
- Organizational – Getting it home, getting it done, getting it back
- Motivational – Burnout, overload, too much failure, frustration with tasks
- Situational - Unable to work at home, too many other activities, no materials available at home for the assignment
- Personal - Depression, anxiety, family problems, or other personal issue

As educators, we need to consider the purpose for giving a particular homework assignment. If it's to practice something they have already mastered, do they really need more practice? If they haven't mastered a skill, they may be practicing it incorrectly for homework. Vatterott suggests that homework might be better used as an opportunity to learn something rather than an opportunity to practice something. Some examples of meaningful homework might include the following:

- A practice quiz/test to show them what they don't know
- One problem to do and a written explanation of how the student got the answer
- Essays

Vatterott suggests some possible solutions to help students who have difficulty completing homework on time:

- Let some students keep a copy of the textbook at home.
- Assign "homework buddies" to work with or call for help.
- Give all assignments for the next week on Friday, due the following Friday.
- Stagger due dates for each segment of long-term projects.
- Coordinate core-subject homework assignments and limit the number of tests given on the same day.
- Provide opportunities for students to complete homework at school after school hours under the supervision of a teacher.

What are appropriate consequences for students who do not complete homework, turn in work late, are not engaged in learning?

The most appropriate consequence for a student not turning in work is to make the student do the work. The consequences for late work would include communication with parent, indicating late work in Sapphire, and indicating it in the habits and behaviors section of the report card.

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The Change to Standards Based Grading

What is Standards-Based Grading?

In a standards-based system, teachers report what students know and are able to do relative to specific learning targets which are based on the PA Academic Standards. Student achievement is reported based on evidence from formative assessments of how the student is meeting learning targets at a given time. In a standards-based grading system, students' grades are based on the mastery of defined learning targets instead of the accumulation of points.

Why did we need to change our method of grading?

The purpose of grading should be to accurately communicate achievement of learning targets to students, parents and educators. In traditional grading systems, students' academic achievement is averaged together with characteristics such as work habits. By removing extraneous factors such as responsibility and focusing solely on a student's academic achievement, teachers are able to accurately report a student's attainment of learning targets.

Is this grading change some new trend in education?

Research shows that students learn and perform better when instruction and assessment are each implemented with great fidelity. The works of people such as James Popham, Doug Reeves, Rick Wormeli, Robert Marzano, Jay McTighe, Grant Wiggins, Rick Stiggins, Tom Guskey, Susan Brookhart, and Ken O'Connor are good sources of information about the research that supports the changes we made to our grading and assessment practices. Articles and digital video clips from some of these experts are included on this site.

What is the purpose for making the shift to a 3+, 3, 2, 1 system?

At the beginning of his article, *The Case Against Zero*, Doug Reeves gives an excellent explanation of how moving from a 100 point scale to a 4 point scale is fairer for students. <http://schools.esu13.org/bannercounty/Documents/caseagainstzero.pdf>

What does a 3+ really mean? Can all students achieve a 3+? If not, why?

A "3+" means that a student knows the content that was taught and can apply it appropriately at increasingly complex levels from basic application to strategic and extended thinking. Earning a score of 3+ indicates the student has exceeded the learning target.

Sometimes, especially when learning new content, teachers might give assessments that ask students to recall information without applying the information at a deeper level. In that case, students would be able to earn only up to a 3. However, in subsequent assessments, teachers may give students opportunities to demonstrate a higher level of critical thinking which would allow them to earn up to a 3+ for some learning targets. A score of 3 on a learning target indicates proficient progress toward that learning target at that moment in time. It means the student knows the content that was taught. It does not necessarily mean a student's learning is finished at that point. If the learning target is one that is revisited continually, or at another time later on, students might be given an opportunity to raise his or her performance to a higher level.

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Is the Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment a more accurate way to report reading than what we used to do?

Prior to the implementation of the Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment system, it was very difficult for teachers to accurately communicate information about students' reading achievement. When a student received a B in reading, it was difficult for a parent to know whether that B meant the child was reading below grade level expectations, but was trying hard or showing progress, or if the student was receiving a B because he or she was meeting grade level expectations. Teachers seldom gave students a grade lower than a C in reading because they didn't want to discourage them, even if their performance was well below grade level expectations. With the Fountas and Pinnell system, parents and other stakeholders can see the level at which the child is reading compared to grade level expectations, and they can see how the child is progressing throughout the school year.

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Determining Grades

What evidence is needed to determine the final grade for a marking period or trimester?

The evidence used to determine final grades is very similar to the evidence that was used in the past: running records, common assessments, teacher observations, students' written responses, projects, and essays.

What is wrong with counting participation, attendance, and punctuality into the grade?

Including participation, attendance, and punctuality in handing in assignments, a student's grade may be either higher or lower than his or her actual level of knowledge and skills. By removing extraneous factors such as responsibility and focusing solely on a student's academic achievement, teachers are able to accurately report a student's attainment of learning targets.

What's wrong with giving a grade based on a student's average percentage score on tests?

Every student starts a grading period with a certain amount of background knowledge, related to a topic/learning target. Through assessments during the grading period, teachers are able to determine students' levels of achievement of the learning targets. Since the goal is to document each student's level of achievement based on learning targets, averaging all scores throughout the marking period distorts determination of whether or not the student has achieved the targets. For example, a student unable to write a summary at the start of the marking period might be able to do so competently after receiving instruction, practice, and corrective feedback; averaging her most recent evidence of summarization with her early, unsuccessful attempts would be inaccurate and misleading.

Why shouldn't group scores be counted in grades?

Group grades are unfair because they don't hold students individually accountable for their learning. In fact, they communicate to students that forces beyond their control affect their grades. When students are fortunate enough to be in a group with very motivated students whose skills complement each other well, their group project is usually excellent and they all receive a top grade, regardless of their level of understanding or contribution to the group. On the other hand, when students are assigned to a group with unmotivated students, or with students whose abilities or styles simply don't mesh well, their group project usually suffers and they all receive a much lower grade. With group grades, two students with identical ability, work, motivation, and learning could potentially receive different grades.

Why shouldn't zeros be given for missing work?

In his article, *The Case Against Zero*, Doug Reeves gives an excellent explanation of the problem with zeros. <http://schools.esu13.org/bannercounty/Documents/caseagainstzero.pdf> Reeves makes two important points with regard to zeros: they are used as a punishment for students who fail to complete work, and they mathematically distort a student's grade.

Are grades gathered based on where the students are at the end of a trimester, or where they should be at the end of the year?

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The report card grade is summative information about the level of proficiency of the learning targets that are taught each marking period. Therefore, the grades throughout the year communicate a student's progress as compared to where we would expect him/her to be at that moment in time. The grade at the end of the final marking period indicates where the student is compared to end-of-year expectations.

What's wrong with giving bonus points?

Bonus points for things like bringing in tissues, making a poster, and other non-academic tasks distort the accuracy of grades. Bonus problems on tests, if assessing knowledge and skills different from those the test purports to be assessing also distort grades.

What's wrong with counting homework into a student's grades?

Students need to understand their responsibility to do homework and the difference that it makes in their learning, and therefore in their grades.

The purposes for assigning homework include the following:

- Preview - to prepare students to learn new material
- Practice - to help students master learning targets
- Evidence - to provide evidence to the teacher and/or the student of a student's progress toward a learning target. Failure to turn in this type of homework may negatively impact a grade, not as a punitive measure, but because a key piece of evidence needed to verify a certain level of student understanding or performance is missing.
- Integration - to provide opportunities to apply many different skills into a larger task. Examples of this type might be projects, essays, or research assignments.

Work ethic related to homework is reflected separately from the academic grade. Failure to complete homework should negatively impact a student's grade in the habits and behaviors area.

Where should effort and participation be included on the report card?

These should be included in the habits and behaviors section of the report card.

Why don't we put habits and behaviors on the high school transcript?

Although common descriptors are used to determine the habits and behavior scores students are given each marking period, they may not be accurately interpreted by colleges and/or employers. They are also more subjective than academic grades. Until this practice of reporting habits and behaviors becomes more widely used, we do not want to indicate habits and behaviors that may be less than desirable to employers and colleges when students from other schools don't have this information about them indicated on their transcripts.

Why is looking at a child's mode more effective than basing grades on the mean?

The mean is the sum of all grades divided by the total number of grades. The mode is the grade that occurs the most frequently. The advantage over the mean is that it is not affected by outliers (grades which are uncommonly far from the mean). Using the example below, the student's mean would be a 72%; the mode of his grades would be 90%. The mode is a more accurate

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reflection of what the student knows, since it does not include the low scores that student earned when first learning the skill.

Assessment 1: 40%

Assessment 2: 60%

Assessment 3: 80%

Assessment 4: 90%

Assessment 5: 90%

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Challenges with Students in a Standards Based Grading System

What can we do with students who just don't care about their grades?

Students who don't care about their grades (or don't seem to care) have been a concern for teachers long before standards-based grading began. We all like to do things that we are good at. Many of us are unmotivated to try or persevere with tasks at which we feel we have little likelihood of being successful. Under our new grading and assessment guidelines where students are given multiple opportunities to show success, and where students have opportunities for remediation and reteaching before retesting, they are more likely to develop the basic and prerequisite skills that are necessary for success on the more complex tasks they will be expected to do each subsequent year of their education.

How do I address cheating in my classroom?

Dealing with students who cheat or plagiarize is especially challenging under our new grading system. If you re-assess them, then there's no consequence; if they are given a zero or penalty, then their grade isn't an accurate reflection of what they know. Here are some possible options for dealing with cheating:

- Notify parents and give a detention or other more serious punishment for repeat offenders. Hopefully parents will also enforce consequences at home, although that doesn't always happen.
- Look at cheating as a choice on the part of the student not to demonstrate what he/she knows. When you catch a student cheating, that invalidates that assessment, so you just don't put it in. Cheating obscures that student's ability, and their true punishment is the lack of ability to receive feedback in order to improve for the next assessment.
- If you feel like you have to punish, move the score down to the 50% mark. Giving a zero can inadvertently dig a grave for a student that obviously needs help. You can defend the failing grade by arguing that cheating only happens when someone is not proficient, which in standards-based grading amounts to a failing grade.

Why has the responsibility for learning shifted from student to teacher?

Although responsibility for learning may have at one time been viewed by some teachers solely as the job of the student, most teachers have always viewed it as a joint responsibility of teachers and students. No Child Left Behind, however, placed schools and teachers in a position of needing to accept greater responsibility for student learning. The sanctions for failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) fall on schools, rather than on the students.

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Involving Students in Grading and Assessment

Why should students be involved in the grading process?

Student involvement in the assessment and grading processes can be a powerful opportunity for learning. Students can analyze their test results to determine areas where they still lack skills or understanding. Involving students in the development of rubrics can help them to have a better understanding of what is expected on an assignment and can increase their commitment to doing high quality work. Giving feedback to peers is another way to actively involve students in the assessment process. By participating in these activities, students can increase their learning and reach a deeper level of understanding.

In her book, *Grading*, Susan Brookhart shares information about how students can be involved in the grading and assessment process. <http://www.education.com/reference/article/student-involvement-assessment/>

How do we make Habits of Learning more meaningful to students?

As with most anything else we want students to understand, taking time to “teach” the habits and behaviors of learning is probably the most effective way to make them meaningful to students.

Some specific suggestions are as follows:

- Share the rubric with the students so they see the descriptions.
- Explain what exemplary performance looks like in each category.
- Give students positive feedback when they are demonstrating the highest level of performance.
- Give students specific feedback about what they can do to improve their performance in the habits and behaviors category.
- Have the students set monthly or marking period goals for themselves in the habits and behaviors categories. Have them describe the specific strategies they will use to achieve their goals.
- Have the students assess themselves on their habits and behaviors through a checklist and/or reflective essay.

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Other Issues

How can the district become more consistent with the grading and assessment policies?

Implementing anything consistently in a district of our size is always a challenge. The district-adopted *Best Practices for Grading and Assessment* provide the expectations for all teachers, regardless of grade level or subject area. Teachers should review these expectations at the beginning of each marking period and whenever they have a question about whether a grading or assessment practice they are using is correct. Questions about policies should be directed to your building administrator.

Are we providing our parents with too much information?

Grades should give insights to students, parents and teachers about how a student can improve. A single grade for a course gives no information about what the student needs to work on to become better at a particular skill. By including specific learning targets on the elementary report card and by separating achievement from work ethic and behavior on all report cards, grades more accurately let parents know how their child is achieving.