

Reporting to Parents and Families

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ABSTRACT

Informing parents and family of a student's progress in school is an important function of school personnel. School newspapers, monthly newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and teacher and principal visits to the home are methods used to inform the home of school activities and student progress. The report card is another method. The value of such reports is unquestionable. In this paper, I discuss the difficulties in assigning grades and review some methods of reporting student progress to parents and family.

Keywords: community, family, grading, parents, reporting, student progress

The educational program of a school is limited by the amount of cooperation it receives from the home (Olender, 2010). Students are not educated by removing them from all of their activities for six hours each day and causing them to study English, mathematics, social studies, and science. They are educated as they live. This places a demand on the school to be interested in the whole of the student's life—her interests at home, her interests in the community, and her abilities and talents demonstrated in school and in all of the interrelated activities of the school community (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006). The more congruence there is among the student's school life, home life, and community life, the more nearly the student will be accomplishing the fulfillment of a true education (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Epstein, 2011). School newspapers, monthly newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and teacher and principal visits to the home are methods used to inform the home of school activities and student progress. The report card is another method of informing parents of the child's progress in school (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

The value of such reports is unquestionable (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). The time and effort involved becomes one of the biggest clerical tasks the teacher must perform. In addition to recording school grades on the report cards, the teacher must devise a system for rating each pupil that is fair, accurate, and consistent (Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Marzano, 2010). Following, I examine the difficulties in grading and methods of reporting grades to parents and families.

Difficulties in Grading

There are several fundamental difficulties teachers experience in assigning grades to students. First, there is the variability of these measures from teacher to teacher. Research has shown that teachers vary in their grading of the same test, as much as four grade levels. That is, a sample of teachers rated a high school essay test from A to D (O'Connor, 2009). With more careful preparation of examinations and training of examiners, the reliability and validity of grades can be markedly improved (Gallavan, 2009a,b).

Not only do grades teachers assign to students show great variability, but they also do not measure the same kind of accomplishment as do standardized achievement tests in the same subject (Popham, 2010a,b; Stiggins, 2008). Teachers' grades are an undefined composite into which enter estimates of effort and attitude. Thus, in addition to recording scholarship, grades usually include the teacher's personal feelings and reactions to the pupil. Standardized tests, on the other hand, provide a measure of achievement or aptitude not subject to personal bias. By definition, a *standardized achievement test* is a series of questions designed to provide a systematic sample of performance, administered in accordance with uniform (standard) directions, scored according to definite (standard) rules, and interpreted in reference to normative (standard) information (Popham, 2010a,b). Furthermore, administration and scoring of standardized tests are determined so precisely that the same procedures could be conducted at different times and places. Both standardized tests and teacher grades are of significance in understanding the student, and neither should be eliminated as appraisal tools (Salend, 2009; Stiggins, 2008).

Second, relatively few schools have a reliable aptitude or IQ score for all of their students. Without this information, it is difficult for teachers to estimate a student's achievement in relation to his ability. Appraisals of students must somehow attempt to relate achievement and ability to determine if the student is performing up to his potential or beyond it.

Third, there appears to be different grading policies in operation at various educational levels: elementary school, middle school, high school. For example, at the elementary school level, a child's achievement may be judged in terms of her own ability, whereas in secondary schools a student may be graded on a strictly competitive basis.

Finally, new approaches to educational assessment, in particular, constructed response, performance testing, and portfolio assessment provide a full range of alternatives to traditional testing methods (Belgrad, Burke, & Fogarty, 2008; McMillan, 2008; Salend, 2009). These new approaches are useful in all types of large-scale testing programs, including classroom use. In order to implement these new approaches effectively, however, teacher training will be necessary (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008).

Methods of Reporting Grades

Over the years, a number of methods of reporting grades to parents have evolved. In view of the aforementioned difficulties existing in various degrees in different

communities, grading systems will vary with the situation. A few of the more common methods of measuring school progress follow (Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Marzano, 2010; McMillan, 2008).

Percentage Method

The *percentage method* is one of the oldest. Student ratings are based on a scale that ranges from zero to 100. For example, a mathematics test contains ten problems. If all problems are answered correctly, the student would receive 100 percent. If half of the problems were performed correctly, the student would receive 50 percent. Each test given during a marking period would be averaged to determine an overall percentage grade for the period. The percentage method is difficult to use. There are so many points along the scale that the teacher must make fine discrimination among a class of students.

Letter Method

The *letter method* offers more flexibility in determining a student's grade. A letter grade on a five-point scale is commonly used: A, B, C, D and F. To make these letters understandable, two practices have arisen. First, the letters are interpreted in terms of percentages, where, for instance, A = 90 to 100, B = 80 to 89, C = 70 to 79, D = 60 to 69, and F = any mark below 60. Second, definite standards are established for each of the five letter grades. For example, standards for an A might be (1) always hands work in on time, (2) completes all work assigned in a creditable manner, (3) completes more than the assigned work, (4) shows some creativity in mastering the work assigned, and (5) has an excellent record of attendance. Successively lower standards can be established for the remaining letter-grade categories.

Descriptive Method

Letters to or conferences with parents are used in place of percentages or letter grades in the *descriptive method*. Descriptive statements can also be used to supplement the aforementioned estimates of achievement with explanations of the meaning of the grades, or other open-ended information supplied.

Percentile Method

A percentile score of 72 means that 72 percent of all students on whose test scores the scale is based have scores lower than the examinee. The *percentile method* is frequently used in interpreting standardized achievement test scores. The principle reason for using the percentile is that it enables the parent to know just where the child ranks in the group.

Three-Group Method

The *three-group method* involves reporting the student's achievement as "above average," "average," and "below average." The definition of these terms is based on the percentile technique. If a student rates among the middle 50 percent of his class group, he is considered an average student. This includes all students between the 25 and 75 percentiles. "Above average" means, therefore, that the student is in the upper quartile of his group. "Below average" means that he is in the lower fourth of the group.

Rank Method

The *rank method* indicates whether the student is first, second, or any position in her group. Most high schools rank their graduating seniors in this way. Some colleges and universities use rank in class as one criteria for admission. Parents of students in a college-bound track often want to know how their child ranks in the group.

T-Score Method

Like the percentile score, the *T-score method* is very difficult to interpret. The T-score represents one-tenth of the standard deviation of the scores for the group considered. The T-score is not based on the class group or on a grade group, but instead on a local or national norm for an entire age group. These scores are more prevalent when reporting standardized achievement test data to parents than when reporting school grades.

Each method of reporting student progress to parents has merit. A school must decide, in light of all the factors, what type of report to adopt. Ideally, the best kind of report appears to be the descriptive account supplemented by quantitative estimates of achievement, aptitude, and personality.

Conclusion

Teachers experience several fundamental difficulties in assigning grades to students. First, not only is there variability of these measures from teacher to teacher but also teacher grades do not measure the same kind of accomplishment as do standardized achievement tests in the same subject. Second, relatively few schools have a reliable aptitude or IQ score for all of their students. Without this information, it is difficult for teachers to estimate a student's achievement in relation to his ability. Third, different grading policies appear to be in operation at various educational levels: elementary, middle school, and high school. Finally, new approaches to educational assessment provide a full range of alternatives to traditional testing methods.

Several methods of reporting grades to parents and family exist. A few of the more common methods of measuring school progress include, percentage, letter, descriptive, percentile three-group, rank, and t-score. Each method of reporting student progress to parents and family has merit.

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