

Assessing and reporting student progress during distance learning

Since distance learning began, we have urged you to put the needs of your children and yourself first. We continue to urge you to take that action, as your family's health and wellness are our top priority. With that idea in mind, over the past few weeks teachers and administrators have been engaged in discussions on how to assess and report student progress during distance learning.

As we worked on the complexities of assessing and reporting, we kept what is best for your children and your family's well-being foremost in our minds. We believe everyone in the Fairfield Public Schools community, students, families, and teachers, have done their best during this unprecedented time. As we engage in the discussion about assessing and reporting student grades or progress, we are wary that the progress report or report card grades will now be interpreted as how successful your child and you have been during distance learning and will not be about communicating student progress. We base this concern on how marks and grades are often interpreted as "awards" to be earned and won. Our foremost guiding principle in the discussion on assessing and reporting was "do no harm" to students, so that the conditions of distance learning could not negatively impact their achievements. As educators that is not the purpose of assessing or reporting as I will explain below.

Before I begin that explanation let me take a minute to denote the difference between elementary and middle/high school grading. Elementary progress reports contain standards and 6-12 report cards contain only courses. In elementary school, English/Language Arts is divided into reading and writing and then each of these areas is further divided into learning standards. Standards are the skills that students are working to master. In 6-12, English is English. The grade contains a mix of reading and writing assignments that may include skills based on learning standards but also includes understanding of content.

Where we get into trouble is when we interpret elementary standard progressions (M = Mastery, P = Progressing, etc.) as letter grades. Mastery (M) does not equal a grade of a "B" or Progressing "P" is not the same as getting a "C". Standards acknowledge that elementary students progress at different rates, reading skill development transcends the timeline of PK -5. It is natural for a student to end grade 3 mastering grade 3 reading skills but begin grade 4 progressing towards grade 4 standards. Standards are not time-bound. Secondary grade-levels are time bound; courses begin and end within one academic school year.

During distance learning two primary communications have emerged from the family perspective. The first is that students and parents are working very hard to complete assignments, engage in online meetings and lessons, and continue education as close to "normal" as possible. The second theme is that students and families are struggling with distance learning. Some of these struggles are related to distance learning itself and other struggles are created by factors beyond the family's control including illness and economic hardship.

Educators have also struggled with two issues. First is the inability to have ongoing understanding of student progress, as daily personal contact is key to assessing growth. So much of the teacher's craft lies in the lesson to lesson adjustments they make in response to student understanding. This is a greater issue in the elementary grades, particularly in the primary grades, as skill growth can happen quickly over the course of a few days and weeks. Distance learning strains this ability to assess. Second, many things in distance learning take more time than they do in the physical classroom. In some cases, particularly again at elementary, we have had to modify the curriculum, and the progress report, to reflect our ability to teach everything. This has led to prioritization of some skills and content over other skills and content.

Despite this difficulty, it is still important to assess and report out student progress whenever possible. At all levels, but particularly at elementary, parents and students need to know where they are in learning

progressions so that they know, and next year's teachers know, where to begin instruction in the fall. In grades 6-12 report card grades retain an importance for outside organizations such as colleges, secondary schools, and scholarship programs. Unfortunately, grades in high school can be interpreted less as measures of what has been learned and not learned but as a competition. This is a reality we need to acknowledge.

The assessing and reporting guidelines that are being shared today by the principals are differentiated by grade levels but acknowledge an understanding of both concerns shared by families and the educators.

At elementary the progress report will be modified by both the number of standards being assessed and how student progress is being reported. Certain standards will be grayed out so that other standards can be prioritized. Progress reports will not include an "E" (for exceeding) or "N" (for Does Not Meet Grade Level Expectations) mark in this quarter. We also may indicate an NA (not available for lessons) for students who were not able to engage in distance learning due to issues beyond their control. All students will receive comments on their progress.

In grades 6-12 the standard option for students will be traditional letter grading. However, some students, based on circumstances explained in the letter from the headmasters and principals, will have the option for pass/fail for the course. These decisions reflect the reality that our students have faced during distance learning. The process for accessing this option is explained in the principals' communications.

There is no right or wrong, good, or bad, better, or best, in any of these decisions. Our marks and grades are not intended to be competitive. Grades reflect an evaluation of the evidence of learning that has occurred and can be fairly measured during distance learning.

If there is an unseen benefit in the topic of assessing and reporting, I hope that it is a greater respect for the ability of progress reports to measure student learning towards clear and common outcomes. A transparent understanding of student progress honestly displays what students can and cannot do and points the way to better meeting the needs of all students.

We continue to encourage you to reach out to teachers to determine how your student is progressing in distance learning.