As we begin our transition to the coming school year, I want to take the opportunity to share with you some of the important work that our teachers have been engaged in over the past few years. While all of our ZCS schools are in constant pursuit of improvement, it's not often that I take time to share some of the "behind the scenes" work of our professional educators to continue perfecting the teaching and learning process. As we near the end of this school year, however, I want to share with you all a bit about the culmination of a very intentional process of program review that our teachers have worked on together at both middle schools.

No matter how well our students perform, nor how excellent our professional educators are at their work, we always strive to be better. For the past three years, one area in which we have been striving to improve is assessment of learning – specifically, how we determine our students' specific strengths and needs; how we give them quality, timely feedback and provide further opportunities to master skills and content; and how we accurately assess progress and report it in the form of grades to our students and to you, their parents.

In many ways, school assessment practices haven't changed for nearly 100 years. In others, new research about motivation, feedback, and the brain require us to update old processes. As we have studied our assessment procedures across all middle school courses over the past few years, our educators have engaged in thoughtful discussion about these important questions:

- What should a grade for a course represent?
- What is the purpose of student grades?
- Are our grades giving students feedback or vague labels representing broad averages?
- Does the grade from one teacher reflect the same level of learning as a grade from another?
- Are some things mixed into a grade that don't belong?
- What kind of feedback is most effective?
- If a student doesn't master something at first, should he or she be given more practice and another try at mastery? How many?
- How can we hold all students fully accountable for learning and meeting our course standards?

In the interest of best serving our students, our middle school teachers conducted research, learned from assessment experts about how best to motivate and evaluate student learners, identified best practices to fit our school community, employed new teaching strategies, and developed with much input a grade report to better communicate students' progress to them and to you. Next year, you'll see a change in the way our report cards look as a result of this process, and we hope they will improve the way we communicate with you more clearly just what your child's strengths and challenges are in the key content and skills for each course before he/she moves on to high school.

To help put our reporting system in context, it helps to consider how it transitions as our students grow from kindergarten through graduation (and beyond). As in many high-performing elementary schools, parents of ZCS students in K-4th grades receive quarterly report cards listing specific skills for each subject and describing student progress on each skill as "beginning," "progressing" on target, or "mastered". As students move to middle school, you'll see a change in the report card and the introduction of letter grades (A-F) for each standard in a course. Additionally, in middle school, standards will often be bundled into more complex sets of skills and concepts appropriate to middle-level learners, rather than the list of more discrete foundational skills of young learners. When our

middle school students matriculate to high school, they will see these separate grades for course standards converge to one letter grade for each subject on the report card/transcript representing an averaged performance on all skills for the course for the semester. As our students move on to higher education or careers, they share with us that they often see a semester grade in college based upon only a few high-stakes assessments or a work evaluation that is simply a narrative about their performance on the job. Thus, we build our feedback to students from specific detail about individual skills to grades on important sets of key skills/concepts to one grade for a course. We hope this gives each child (and you as parents) a chance to see more detail about strengths and the components of mastering the skills for success in each course at the time those learners most need that detail.

We believe that the purpose of grades is to clearly communicate how and what a student is learning. In essence, a grade should reflect what a student knows and is able to do, and the more specific we can be about areas of strength and areas in need of growth, the better. Our teachers also believe that it is important to report grades both for learning and for information on behaviors that tend to make people successful in work and school. It is important not to mix this reporting together which can cloud the message, however. Work turned in late in a math class, for example, indicates a problem with punctuality, but not necessarily a lack of mastery of fractions We believe that work ethic and a student's understanding of material are both important to assess. Moving forward, it is our intention to report these two items separately for each course, rather than mixing points for tardiness, or demerits for talking in class into reporting whether your student can write an essay or explain a scientific concept clearly and accurately, for example.

Beginning in the 2016-2017 academic year, both ZCS middle schools will begin utilizing a new format for our report card that reflects these goals of clear reporting of learning and work behaviors. ZCS teachers have identified the standards in each academic area and in each course that are worthy of reporting students' progress. Each of those areas will receive a grade (A-F) each semester. Teachers will typically report on 5 or 6 items per course. In addition to the academic grades, teachers will also report on students' participation, preparation habits and work behavior. Though student progress will remain constantly viewable in PowerSchool throughout the year as it has always been, formal reports will be emailed directly to you at the end of each semester. We hope you will find this a convenient way to see at a glance the final snapshot of academic achievement to date and work habits in each course for the semester.

You have likely already seen a number of the strategies of our assessment initiative in action. Most teachers in the last few years have, for example, begun allowing students to redo projects or to retake tests after requiring them to analyze what they needed to further practice and master. While this has always occurred in many of our classrooms, the insistence on every student learning has become widespread in the past year. Thus, instead of a philosophy which allows students to fall short of mastery and keep moving on, our teachers have begun encouraging or even insisting at times that students who are not successful on a first attempt complete additional practice, redo or rework, and continue to improve. I am proud of their firm insistence on growth and the fact that they value the importance of teaching our students to persist until they succeed. This is a critical skill for later success. Mastery, as we know, requires effort and commitment. So does excellence.

As educators, we know from some of the parent presentations and discussions we've had about these initiatives over the last years that some of these strategies feel a little unfamiliar at first to those of us

who came through school more than a few years ago. We understand. I invite further conversation, and it is my intention to continue communicating with all of you over the summer months and throughout next year about some of our most important goals and realizations about these best practices in learning. My goal is that all our parents and students clearly understand how learning will be assessed and reported. We will develop and share FAQs, and teachers and I will further explain and provide resources for you explaining individual course grading during open house. Our ultimate goal is to provide the best possible feedback to support our students in learning to their fullest potential.

Sincerely,



Matt Doublestein
Principal, Zionsville West MS