Communicating About Student Learning

Introduction

Many jurisdictions have revamped their reporting systems over the past several years. Whether a jurisdiction is creating a new reporting system or reviewing an existing system, many variables and multiple audiences need to be considered.

The Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following individuals for sharing information about what is happening in their school/jurisdiction.

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Linda Inglis	Former Principal, G.H. Luck
Janice Ottewell	Teacher, Foothills School Division
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AAC would also like to acknowledge the contribution Ken O'Connor has made in heightening awareness of the important principles of communicating about student learning.

Purpose of a Report Card

Report cards, sometimes called progress reports, provide written records of student performance on curriculum outcomes over a period of time. The *School Act* states that one of the roles of teachers is to "regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students, the students' parents and the board" (2000 cS-3 s18(e)). The *Guide to Education* (2013) states that "The assessment of student progress in relation to outcomes outlined in the programs of study is important…" and "…required for reporting student progress clearly to students and parents." These two documents provide the legal basis for reporting student performance to both students and parents.

An effective report card is a document that can be easily understood by those for whom it is intended – parents and students. The report card should provide straightforward information about what a student knows and can demonstrate relative to the graded curriculum and what the student needs to do next. Educators have a responsibility to ensure that the judgements reported are an accurate and current reflection of student learning. Elements not related to the curriculum or not reflective of the student's typical performance must be factored out. The report card should acknowledge actions that need to be taken by partners in learning – student, parents, and teachers.

Definitions

The following definitions are consistent with those used by Alberta Education and endorsed by the Alberta Assessment Consortium.

achievement	a student's **demonstration** of **knowledge, skills and attitudes** relative to grade level learner outcomes
assessment	**process of collecting information** on student achievement and performance that includes a variety of assessment tasks designed to monitor and improve student learning
assessment **for** learning	**assessment experiences that result in an ongoing exchange of information** between students and teachers about student progress toward clearly specified learner outcomes (also called diagnostic and formative assessment; refers to information not used for grading purposes)
assessment **of** learning	**assessment experiences designed to collect information** about learning to make judgements about student performance and achievement at the end of a period of instruction **to be shared with those outside classrooms** (also called summative assessment; refers to performance data compiled as a grade)
evaluation	**making decisions** about the quality, value or worth of a response for the purpose of providing descriptive feedback (formative) and marks (summative)
learner outcomes	**what we expect students to learn**; the provincially mandated knowledge, skills and attitudes we expect students to demonstrate as a result of schooling
mark	a **letter, number or comment** as a **statement** of **student performance**
performance	**how well** a student **demonstrates** grade level **learner outcomes**
performance assessment	a **meaningful, real-life task** that enables students to **demonstrate** what they **know and can do** in situations like those they will encounter outside the classroom as well as in situations that simulate how people do their work

NOTE: The term 'progress report' is sometimes used interchangeably with report card.

Frameworks for Communicating about Student Learning

A number of changes have occurred over the past few years in regard to the process for reporting student learning, such as

- introduction of electronic reporting systems;
- a move by some jurisdictions to outcomes based reporting;
- increased awareness and implementation of assessment for learning practices;
- implementation of new programs of study; and
- heightened interest by the public in regard to assessment issues.

Two reporting frameworks are in use throughout schools and jurisdictions in Alberta. An outcomes-based report card lists detailed statements that typically represent clusters of outcomes in each subject, with student performance reported according to each statement. In a holistic reporting framework, student performance is reported globally in each subject. Both reporting frameworks typically provide specific details about student performance through detailed teacher comments.

Choosing a Framework

There is a diversity of opinion as to which approach is the most effective way to report to parents. Factors such as the manner in which assessments are designed; the way evidence is collected, stored and recorded; and the amount of information parents want/need will impact the decision as to which reporting format is selected.

Bryan explains why his jurisdiction chose holistic reporting.

Lois explains why the jurisdiction chose outcomes based reporting.

Selecting the Outcomes that Will Be Included in Outcomes-Based Reporting

Determining the clustering of outcomes to be used in the reporting process should be a collaborative process that involves an in-depth examination of the curriculum. Teachers need to be aware not only of the curriculum at their own grade level, but also what curriculum students have had in the previous year, and what the curriculum expectations are in the succeeding year. This will assist in the process of identifying high priority outcomes.

Lois describes teacher involvement in determining the reporting outcomes.

Janice describes how teacher groups determined the essential understandings.

Supporting Teachers in Implementing a New Reporting System

The process of implementing a new reporting system requires a great deal of time and effort. Different jurisdictions have found a variety of ways to provide support for the individuals who are most involved in the process. A key factor that emerges is the need for collaborative time for teachers to work together.

Bryan describes the various processes used in the jurisdiction to support teachers.

Dorothy describes supporting teachers with collaborative time.

Making Decisions about Student Performance Categories

Regardless of the decision to use outcomes based or holistic reporting, decisions must also be made as to how student performance will be reported. The Guide to Education defines performance levels in terms of letter grades and percentages. Jurisdictions need to decide if this is the scale they will adopt for their reporting practices, or if they will define their own levels.

Possible options for reporting student performance include letter grades, descriptors, percentages, or 'comments only'. These decisions may well take into account the age and grade level of students.

Lois explains their jurisdiction's decision to use a three-point scale.

Janice explains why she believes numbers are de-motivating.

Dorothy describes how students benefit from the use of descriptors.

Deriving Input from Parents, Students, and Educators

A report card is only one way that teachers communicate with parents and students. As such, the report card does not need to duplicate information that is shared in other ways.

Since parents are one of the primary audiences for report cards, it is critical that they have a voice in what will be included in the document. This input can be obtained in a number of ways:
- survey prior to report card redesign
- focus groups

- survey after implementation

Once feedback has been obtained, there needs to be a balance between willingness to make changes based on feedback received and research based practices. Getting input from parents may involve compromises as not all parents will agree about what information or how much information is needed.

Students are also a primary audience for report cards. Finding out from students what they think is important to communicate is also a critical step. Even more important, it is crucial that students understand what the report card is saying.

Educators also need to have a voice in any initiative to implement a new reporting system. Teachers, as front line staff, have in-depth understanding of what needs to be reported to parents and students, and what needs to be in place to support enhanced student achievement.

 Bryan describes the process used to derive input from parents, students, and educators when developing a new reporting system.

 Linda describes a process for finding out what parents want in a report card.

Collecting Evidence of Learning

Evidence of learning is collected within the context of student performance relative to curriculum outcomes. This evidence does not include extraneous factors such as behavior, tardiness, or assignments not completed. When data about these factors is included, then information about student performance becomes distorted. If teachers, for whatever reason, are unable to collect sufficient information about learning to make a valid and reliable judgement of student performance, then the most honest communication is to indicate that no mark is awarded due to insufficient evidence.

To arrive at a meaningful representation of student performance, teachers require multiple pieces of evidence derived from a variety of assessment strategies. Teachers need to consider carefully how much evidence is required during a typical reporting period. The actual amount of evidence required may depend in part on whether or not the evidence collected confirms a typical pattern of performance. If the evidence shows an erratic pattern of performance, then additional evidence may be required. As such, a mathematical calculation of marks must be mediated through the eyes of teacher professional judgement.

Supporting Collaboration among Teachers

Jurisdictions have found creative ways to provide collaborative time for teachers. When new reporting systems are being introduced, teachers require time to develop lessons and assessments, and to grapple with new technology.

Dorothy describes how teachers work collaboratively to develop lessons and assessments.

Jill describes the value of developing common assessments across the jurisdiction.

Judging Student Performance in Relation to Curriculum Outcomes

Teachers need to be cognizant that performance is only based on what the student demonstrates relative to curriculum outcomes. While other aspects of what students do can be reported (e.g., behavior, attitude, work habits) these factors must be kept separate from the demonstration of outcomes.

Janice describes ensuring that student marks accurately reflect performance.

Gathering Evidence on the Full Range of Curriculum Outcomes

Whether the decision has been made to use outcomes based or holistic reporting, it is the teacher's responsibility to gather and report evidence for the full range of curriculum outcomes. It is generally appropriate to cluster knowledge and skill outcomes when designing assessments. This not only ensures that the skill outcomes are not being overlooked, but also makes assessments more robust. A variety of mechanisms are in place for tracking the outcomes that have been assessed in order to fit with the reporting categories.

Colin describes the role of the principal in ensuring that the full range of outcomes are assessed.

Linda describes the use of assessment templates ensure that the full range of outcomes are assessed.

Dorothy talks about the big ideas in curriculum.

Using Teacher Observation, Anecdotal Comments, and Checklists as Part of the Body of Evidence

These processes are valid ways of collecting evidence about student learning. The intent of the outcome may well guide the selection of specific strategies to most effectively capture the assessment evidence required. For example, an outcome that requires students to 'demonstrate' would likely best be assessed through teacher observation. Efficient mechanisms for collecting and storing this information must be devised so that it can become part of the body of evidence used by teachers to make judgements about student performance.

Janice discusses the need to allow students to express their learning using their strengths.

Jill speaks to the importance of observations and conversations.

Dorothy describes the value of collecting evidence of learning in a variety of ways.

Amount of Evidence Required to Arrive at a Meaningful Representation of Performance

Having a myriad of marks in the marks book is not necessarily a desirable objective. What is critical is that the assessments are providing information about high priority outcomes and enduring understandings. Having a major part of the Language Arts mark based on spelling quizzes in no way reflects the intent of that Program of Studies. Likewise, in mathematics, using marks from the administration of timed math tests is antithetical to the pedagogical intent of this curriculum. It is not about the number of assessments, but rather about the quality of assessments that are used.

Linda describes an example of how teachers can share the big ideas of curriculum with parents.

Bryan speaks to the value of teacher professional judgement.

Colin describes the role of school based leadership in determining the amount of evidence required.

Gathering and Recording Evidence of Student Learning

Technology can support a variety of processes for gathering and recording student learning, i.e., anecdotal records, video/audio files in electronic portfolios, regrouping of data, and so forth. However, the technology platform must not dictate the way evidence of learning is gathered, calculated or recorded. These are professional decisions that rest in the hands of educators.

Bryan describes how teachers gather and store evidence of learning.

Lois describes having key learner outcomes included on the assessment.

Working Together to Determine What Acceptable Work Looks Like

Looking at student work collaboratively is a valuable process for coming to a common understanding of standards. A variety of protocols are available to enhance the effectiveness of this process.

Lois explains why determining what acceptable looks like was left to individual schools.

Colin describes the district's work in developing exemplars for writing (HLAT), mathematics and critical thinking.

Linda describes the how teachers at her school and teachers from other schools work together to develop exemplars.

Looking beyond the Use of the Mean

Teachers need to have confidence in their ability to make judgements about student work. Often, the use of an arithmetic mean does not validly represent what the student has demonstrated relative to a course of study. Teachers need to put more credence in the most recent evidence and be prepared to discount earlier evidence that no longer represents the student's current learning. This practice is particularly important when reporting on student skill development that occurs over the course of a term or the entire year.

Janice describes the benefits of using the mode.

Communicating with Parents – More than Just the Report Card

While report cards are one way that teachers report to parents, they cannot provide all the information that parents need about students' ongoing learning. Teachers communicate information about students to parents in a number of other ways as well – conferences, telephone conversations, agenda books, and e-mail. These alternate forms of communication can provide additional rich information, and also allow for dialogue.

Report cards provide a legal written record that summarizes information that should have already been shared in other ways. There should be no surprises on the report card for either the parent or the student.

It should be noted that the *School Act* does not define the number of formal reporting periods required. Decisions as to what constitutes regular evaluation and periodic reporting are left to the discretion of the jurisdiction.

Helping Parents Understand the Relationship between Assessment for Learning and Assessment of Learning

For most parents, the concept of assessment for learning is not well understood. Parents may not have experienced these strategies as students themselves. As such, they may require support to understand the principles and practices associated with assessment for learning such as second chances, peer feedback, self-reflection, and so forth. It is critical to work with parents to enhance their understanding of why these research-based practices support enhanced student learning.

Bryan shares how his jurisdiction accessed resources to help parents understand the difference between assessment *for* and *of* learning.

Colin explains how a large jurisdiction relies on school based leadership to help parents understand the difference between assessment *for* and *of* learning.

Linda describes the process used in her school to help parents understand the difference between assessment *for* and *of* learning.

Helping Parents Understand the Language Used to Communicate Learning

Teacher need to be cautious about using education jargon when communicating with parents. This does not necessarily mean oversimplifying what is communicated to parents, but rather ensuring that the message is straightforward and clear.

Lois describes processes for helping parents understand the language of report cards.

Bryan describes the development of support documents to help parents understand the language of report cards.

Linda speaks to the need to keep the language simple and direct.

Ensuring that Parents Receive Ongoing Information

Student agendas, e-mails, phone calls and interviews are all effective mechanisms for sharing information with parents. At report card time parents should already know about areas where their child is experiencing success, and where additional support may be required.

Bryan describes how teachers in his jurisdiction maintain ongoing communication with parents.

Lois highlights the importance of e-mail in maintaining ongoing communication with parents.

Colin describes how a weekly learning log can be a valuable method of communicating with parents.

Janice talks about the benefits of parents having on-line access to their child's performance.

Linda discusses how to 'hook' parents into knowing their child as a learner.

Timing of Formal Communication

Relying on current research, teachers now know that more formative and less summative assessment is in the best interests of student learning. According to Dylan Wiliam (2011), "...attention to minute-by-minute and day-to-day formative assessment is likely to have the biggest impact on student outcomes."

Creating report cards is a time consuming exercise for teachers. With other effective communication structures in place, there may be an argument for fewer formal reporting periods. What is important, however, is that communication be ongoing and effective. In support of this, many schools have adopted the practice of conducting parent/student/teacher conferences prior to report cards being issued.

 Colin describes pros and cons of various reporting schedules.

 Lois speaks to the benefits conferencing with parents prior to issuing the report card.

 Janice shares how a pre-report card conference leads to a focus on habits of mind rather than the mark.

 Bryan describes the September meeting with parents to set learning goals for the upcoming year.

Making Report Cards 'Parent Friendly'

Teachers need to find ways to communicate what students know and can do in parent-friendly language. Few parents have the time or the inclination to read excessively long documents, nor do they typically understand the educational language that is used in written curriculum. Parents want to know what their child has achieved, and what the next steps are in furthering their learning.

Helping Parents Understand Performance Standards

Exemplars of student work at various performance levels are an effective way to share standards with parents. Sharing their child's work alongside exemplars helps them to see their own child's strengths and areas for improvement.

Dorothy describes the power of using student work to illustrate standards.

Providing a Meaningful Summary of What Students Know and Can Do

A single mark cannot provide sufficient information about what a student knows and can demonstrate relative to curriculum outcomes. Comments with respect to what the child does well and where additional support may be required provide a more comprehensive picture.

Janice describes the limitations of a single mark when reporting to students and parents.

Lois discusses the need to find the right balance with curriculum based report card comments.

Colin speaks to the work of the district in providing guidance to teachers.

Collecting Consistent Evidence about Student Behavior

Teachers often feel the need to report on other facets of the student as a learner, such as work habits and behavior. Since judgements made with respect to these areas may be somewhat subjective, it is critical to carefully consider the most effective way to communicate this information to parents.

Teachers need to have consistent mechanisms and processes to collect information about student behavior. Students need to be aware of how this information is being collected, and the consequences associated with inappropriate behavior. Concrete evidence must be available to support the judgements that have been made.

Teachers need to be cognizant that report cards are legal documents that may have long lasting impact. It is worth considering that reporting on behavioral issues might be more effectively done through face-to-face conferences with parents rather than through written comments on the report card.

Bryan describes rubrics that have been developed to assess behavior and effort.

Lois explains the categories and rating scale used for personal growth and work habits in her jurisdiction.

Bryan discusses benefits and limitations of including student behavior on the report card.

Lois describes the challenges of separating performance from behavior.

Colin describes the legal responsibilities associated with reporting behavior.

Lingering Thoughts…

Helping Students Reach their Potential

As educators, our goal is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their potential. This goal permeates our work as we plan, teach, coach, assess, and report.

Lois describes the importance of articulation from grade to grade.

Linda talks about the importance of communication, connections and relationships in helping students reach their potential.

Bryan describes how effective report card comments help students reach their potential.