

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT STANDARDS-BASED REPORT CARDS

Q. *How will students be motivated without letter grades?*

A. Letter grades do not motivate students to learn. They do not motivate the highly gifted students; they do not motivate the average or below average students who feel discouraged with such marks. Intrinsic motivation is the most powerful kind of motivation—when a student is involved in the learning process by knowing their strengths and where they need to improve, the student can work with teachers and parents to set meaningful goals of excellence, strive to achieve these goals, and experience success.

Q. *Doesn't eliminating letter grades lower the expectations for achieving the standards?*

A. Actually, the reverse is true! Our goal is to achieve a higher standard of excellence for ALL students in Branchburg. Letter grades encourage a lower standard because all students are “ranked” according to an averaging of scores, not on their level of proficiency in achieving the grade level standards.

Q. *How will teachers know when a student has mastered a standards benchmark?*

A. The standards require students to understand more than just facts—they must understand concepts and demonstrate that understanding using the skills they have acquired while learning the content. Teachers determine when a student achieves mastery by that student's performance on assessments given throughout each trimester.

Q. *Parents already know what letter grades mean. Why change to another system?*

A. The new report card tells whether or not a student is reading at, below or above grade level AND whether or not that student can apply reading strategies and comprehend what is read. A standards-based report card gives more information than traditional letter grades, and reports how well the student is progressing towards achieving the standards expected for his/her grade level.

...and isn't this new system just another way of labeling A-F letter grades?

What does a “C” in reading really mean? Does it mean that the child is reading on grade level? Or below grade level? Does it mean the student is reading above grade level but is bored and choosing not to read more challenging books? Or is the student choosing not to complete homework assignments?

Q. *Isn't a “3” just another way of saying the student earned a “B”?*

A. One of the biggest differences between a traditional letter-grade report card and a standards-based report card is assessing what students have “learned” not “earned” based on very clear and specific expectations defined by the Core Curriculum Content Standards. A “B” is an average of the points earned on tests, quizzes, assignments, and so on but does not tell us what the student has really learned and achieved in terms of standards-based expectations for a specific grade level. Often, students are given “extra

credit” assignments to boost their grade average so they can earn a B or even an A, but this doesn’t mean the student learned more or achieved a higher level of proficiency.

Q. *I still do not understand what a student needs to do in order to achieve a “3”?*

A. This requires a shift in how we look at and measure student progress and achievement. Instead of asking, “What do students need to know or do in order to earn a B?” we need to ask, “What do students need to learn in order to achieve the standards for their grade level?” This also requires a change in how we assess or measure student progress and achievement of the standards. Instead of asking how much do tests and quizzes count towards a student’s final grade average, teachers are rethinking the role and purpose of assessment by asking what assessment evidence will I use to determine student growth towards and mastery of the standards.

Q. *Isn’t a “4” just another way of saying the student earned an “A”?*

A. On a traditional report card, an “A” is the average of grades on tests, quizzes, projects, homework, and so on, given during each of the marking periods covering the grade-level curriculum. Earning all “A’s”, then, means the student has accumulated a sufficient number of points that, when averaged, fall within the range of an A (for example, between 90 and 100). An “A” student has a higher average than a student with a B or a C. This does not mean that the A student is performing “above” the grade level since all students were given the same assessment. Every student has the opportunity to go beyond what has traditionally been considered “A” work. A “4”, however, is performance that exceeds mastery of a grade level standard. The student’s depth of learning is demonstrated at a much higher level beyond what is expected by the standards for that grade. A “4” does not mean doing additional work showing “more” mastery of the same standard.

Q. *Shouldn’t special education students receive only a “2” or a “1”? After all, they receive accommodations to help them learn the same grade-level materials that general education students are learning.*

A. Depending upon the disability, some exceptional learners may not achieve certain grade-level standards without special services and supports. For students with accommodations, the content of the standard remains the same, but the method for learning and demonstrating mastery of that standard may be adjusted. If a student with accommodations is still not making progress towards achieving the grade level standards (similar to his/her peers who are also progressing towards meeting the standards), then the accommodations are not working or other accommodations may be needed.

Modification, on the other hand, means changing the standard itself. The IEP team should determine how best to communicate what is actually being measured when standards are modified. For example, a supplemental report of progress might be provided that lists the modified standards on which the any “grade” is based along with a narrative of progress on each. This lets parents know, as federal legislation requires, how the student performed on appropriately challenging learning tasks.