

MEMORANDUM: ACTL COUNCIL INPUT on REPORTING STUDENT PROGRESS AND GRADES

To: Cristina Diaz-Torres, School Board Chair and Board liaison for ACTL
David Priddy, Interim School Board Chair
Dr. Francisco Durán, Superintendent
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From: Advisory Council on Teaching & Learning; Jenny Roahen Rizzo (Chair),
Katie Cochran (Vice Chair), Anne Paris (Co-Secretary), Mike Cieslak (Co-Secretary)

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to share feedback from ACTL reps and their communities about implementation of the new PIPs for Reporting Student Progress and Grades (I-7.2.3.34 [PIP-1](#) and [PIP-2](#)) to inform future discussions between the School Board and administration.

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METHOD

During the 2023-24 school year, the ACTL Council conducted learning sessions, community engagement, and conversations on Reporting Student Progress and Grades.

February ACTL meeting	<p>The Office of Academics shared potential adjustments to the elementary PIP and an update on the recent adjustment to the secondary PIP.</p> <p>In elementary and secondary groups, ACTL reps discussed input on the PIPs and the potential and recent changes.</p> <p>ACTL provided a memo summarizing this initial discussion to the Office of Academics.</p>
February – May	<p>ACTL reps solicited input from their communities on Reporting Student Progress and Grades.</p>
May ACTL meeting	<p>Reps discussed input from their communities.</p> <p>Reps also had the opportunity to provide additional feedback in writing.</p>

FEEDBACK FROM ELEMENTARY REPS

Schools represented at one or both meetings: Barrett, Cardinal, Discovery, Escuela Key, Innovation, Oakridge, Randolph, Taylor, Tuckahoe.

Written feedback provided by: Barrett, Discovery, Oakridge, Taylor.

What is going well

- **Some parents feel they get more information from standards-based grading (SBG) than with traditional letter grades.**

- At some schools, teachers collect at least **3 pieces of evidence for every standard**; when teachers share these pieces of evidence with parents it helps the parents feel they are aware of their child’s progress and how their child’s “grade” was determined.
 - Innovation collects 3 pieces for every standard; Tuckahoe collects 5.
- Anecdotal evidence from Oakridge that, with SBG, **parents get more and better feedback when they talk with the teacher** (compared to just looking at the report card) because the teacher can demonstrate the connection between the child’s work and the child’s progress on the standards.
- English Learner parents at Barrett report that **when they meet with their child’s teacher, they receive a lot of helpful guidance on what their child needs support on and how the parent can provide that support in an effective way.**
- Anecdotal evidence from Cardinal supports the idea that SBG does result in **less stress**, less negative competition, less emphasis on grades for the sake of grades.
- When **weekly (or biweekly) newsletters** are sent to parents about what standards are being taught that week, parents find them very helpful.
 - Star example: Tuckahoe’s 4th grade e-newsletter includes every standard being taught that week, presented in a visually friendly, color-coded table.
- Positive feedback on **Dibels**.

The challenges

- **Difficulty in assessing how their child is doing overall:** A majority of reps present, from a variety of schools, emphasized that a downside to SBG is that it’s hard for parents to determine an overall sense of whether their child is doing well or whether their child is struggling.
 - *“SBG seems to provide more information and less information at the same time: more skills/knowledge are rated, but the ratings tell us less.”*
 - *“You have to read everything closely, and even then you might not have that overall snapshot understanding.”*
 - *“I never really know where my son needs additional support and where he is excelling.”*
- **Difficulty understanding SBG:** Overall, a lot of parents still don’t understand the SBG levels and what the levels are communicating about a student’s progress. Simplifying/clarifying the language, plus more parent education, is strongly desired.

- **SBG introducing additional challenges for students in transitioning to middle school:**
 - Being assessed using SBG is very different from being assessed using letter grades and the 100 point scale.
 - Eighth graders take at least one HS-credit course (World Geo), and many take two to three (Algebra I/Geometry, Immersion Spanish). Even some 7th graders take HS-credit courses(Algebra I, Immersion Spanish). Thus, students only have the first one or two years of MS to make that transition to letter grades and the 100-point scale before they start to get grades that count in their HS GPA. Having a longer, more supported transition time would be helpful to students.
 - An additional trouble spot that was identified in the transition from ES to MS is that, in ES, students and parents presume “Meets” equates to “A” and then have an inaccurate understanding of their own / their child’s level and an unrealistic expectation for how they / their child will do in MS.

- Additional areas discussed:
 - Regardless of the grading system, there is some concern about whether aiming to “meet” the Virginia standards is “excellence.”
 - Some reps expressed concern about the degree to which keeping and organizing the “exhibits” of student progress is a huge administrative undertaking for the teachers. Doing the report card comments also takes a lot of time.

- One additional note regarding whether adding an “exceeds standards” level would necessitate defining the criteria for that level for each standard: Several reps did *not* feel it is necessary to articulate detailed criteria for “exceeds standards.” They felt it would be sufficient for there to be an “exceeds standards” level and then expand on the degree to which a student exceeds standards in the comments on report cards.

Suggestions for improvement

At the February ACTL meeting, the Office of Academics shared information about changes to the PIP under consideration. All elementary reps present agreed with these:

- ***Revise/include more proficiency levels*** – STRONG AGREEMENT

- ***Include a way to show growth over the year; grade to end-of-year standard*** – AGREEMENT

- ***Modify reported standards to show student growth/progress*** – AGREEMENT

- ***Include a “not yet taught”*** – AGREEMENT

- ***More meaningful comments*** – STRONG AGREEMENT

- **Provide more support to help parents/guardians understand the reporting – STRONG AGREEMENT**
 - Reps shared that education throughout the year is needed for parents (and maybe students, too) on SBG vs traditional grading: **in-person and virtual information sessions, info sheet, posters, FAQ, etc.**
 - Some reps noted that talking about SBG at Back to School Night is not enough. *“There is so much information presented that night it can be overwhelming. Presenting at PTA meetings is also not enough because such a small portion of parents are there.”*
 - If an “exceeds expectations” level is added, communication will be needed about whether this level equates to an “A.”

There were mixed reactions to these potential changes:

- **Condense the number of standards reported – MIXED**
 - Reps present in Feb didn’t comment much on this one way or another.
 - In feedback reps received from their communities after the February meeting, some parents were not on board with this potential change. They want more information, not less.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

- **Supplement the SBG reporting on report cards (and potentially on assignments, too) with a more user-friendly snapshot indicator.** This would be beneficial to all parents, but especially EL parents.
 - The Barrett rep suggested color coding.
 - Several reps said a number system would be helpful, as Campbell uses.
- **For 4th and 5th grade, provide both SBG and letter grades.**
 - This would help parents have an overall sense of how their child is doing.
 - It would also help students (and parents) prepare for middle school (and high school classes they take in middle school).
- **An overview (in lay language) of what students should be learning to help parents know whether their child is excelling, on track, or needs extra support.**
- **Parents want more information about what to do to support their child when the child is “developing” or “approaching” standards.**
- **Send more graded work home** so parents can see examples of their work and what the feedback on it is.
- Parent-teacher conferences:

- **Shift the timing of parent-teacher conferences** to right after the 1st marking period report cards come out, so teachers and parents can have a pithy conversation about the child's progress and about screener results.
 - **P-T conference discussions should include the big takeaways**, such as “Is the child reading at grade level?”
 - Hold conferences without the child present.
- Consider the importance of **expectations for student responsibility** in regards to their own report cards. Reps discussed whether or not many students view their own report cards, as well as some of the pros and cons of students handing their hard-copy report card to their parent/guardian.
 - Make **graphs of individual student's standardized test results available** to parents.

FEEDBACK FROM SECONDARY REPS

Schools/orgs represented at one or both meetings: Gunston, Hamm, Jefferson, Kenmore, Swanson, Shriver, Wakefield, Yorktown, The League of Women Voters.

Written feedback provided by: Kenmore, Wakefield.

What is going well

- Some best practices were highlighted during the discussion (many coming from Jefferson's positive experience with the grading policies during the 1st semester, before the change to the retake policy):
 - **Incorporating retakes into the instructional plan** so that the reteaching/retake process becomes part of how students are taught, not an additional task for teacher/students on top of the existing learning plan.
 - To the extent possible, having **consistent retake/remediation policies** across the school so students aren't having to learn and understand multiple, different standards and processes.
 - **Include reflection in the remediation process** so students are not only correcting work but also thinking through why they got things wrong. Was it lack of understanding the material, failure to study, going too fast on the test? This encourages both learning the content and thinking through what practices will make them successful in school more broadly.
 - For non-test summatives (papers, science projects), **encourage formative work where drafts are turned in for feedback** and students are given the opportunity to improve as part of the formative process.

Concerns about the new retake policy

- Widespread **lack of knowledge** by parents about what the new retake policy aims to correct.
- **Contradictory to the goal to accurately measure** student knowledge/ability.
- **Makes tests even more high-stakes**, which is especially problematic given that the PIP requires these tests to be the majority of the grade. Would like to see more emphasis on formative work.
- **Specific concern about the 80% cap on retakes:**
 - *“It feels less supportive of student learning.”* It limits and disincentivizes students at the margins earning Cs but who could earn Bs or even As with the additional work put in for the retake.
 - There are still opportunities for growth in the B range, yet those students now don't have the incentive or opportunity to grapple with and master the concepts they still don't fully understand.
 - It has the potential to penalize a student more than averaging scores would, eg, earning a 75 and then a 95, which would average to an 85.
 - The 80% cap is a particular hindrance for some English Learner students. Quote from an English-speaking parent who has an EL high school student: *“Our observation is that students with language gaps are particularly susceptible to mis-understanding word problems and test instructions. The first take of the test is often undermined by these issues, which are often completely unrelated to course standards. **This means that without retakes our EL students are challenged to demonstrate what they actually know in the core subject area. In other words, language barriers are obscuring the students' knowledge, skills and abilities.** Further, capping the retakes at 80% would create more “learned helplessness” for these students. The students will ask “Why should I bother if I can't even improve my situation?” In fact, he begged me to respond to this policy, for these very reasons.”*
 - Similar challenges exist for students with health conditions that cause them to miss a lot of school – and make it hard for them to spend extra time getting extra help from the teacher.

Suggestions for improvements

- A potential compromise mentioned in follow up with ACTL leadership was to **raise the cap to 90%**, which would address some of these issues while also limiting the focus on point accumulation at the mastery level.
- Consider bringing more **consistency to the retake procedures** in each class. Retake procedures/rules are different from teacher to teacher, which can be confusing for students.
 - However, there is some recognition that variances in retake procedures can be valid based on the particular subject being taught and/or the needs of the students in that class.
 - A possible support would be for **each teacher's retake policy to be clearly posted in their classroom and on their Canvas home page**. (Describing it in the syllabus alone seems to be insufficient.)
- Students **need more instruction in how to study for tests**. *"If students were better at preparing for tests, their tests would more accurately reflect their knowledge and abilities."*
- There are equity concerns about the policy of allowing (but not requiring) teachers to offer retakes above the 80% cap because then some students have an opportunity to retake for higher grades and others don't. Potentially consider whether there should be **departmental or even course-specific standards to address this**.
- **Require teachers to grade assignments and input grades in a specific time period, such as every week or every two weeks, so students can understand how they are doing in a class and make informed decisions about requesting retakes**. The PIP currently does not give a specific expectation for timely updates.
 - It's likewise important to **grade late work in a timely manner**, so students know where they stand and can identify what they need to do to be successful.

STAFF COMMENTS

We appreciate the time and effort ACTL members invested in providing us with detailed feedback regarding Reporting Student Progress and Grades. The positive feedback and suggestions for improvement will be considered as we outline our next steps.

Elementary

We acknowledge the concerns raised regarding the overall assessment of a child's progress and the clarity of SBG levels. Implementing refinements and providing more comprehensive parent education are priorities for us in the 2024-25 school year.

We are committed to the following improvements at the elementary level:

a. **Streamlined Template:**

A revised template would show the same essential standards across all four quarters/grading periods for better readability and growth tracking. We will also include a "not yet taught" category to clarify the progression of learning. This is in response to families seeking information that shows students' growth over the school year.

b. **Kindergarten Reporting:**

We will report kindergarten progress four times a year, aligning with other grades.

c. **New Performance Level:**

Include "Extending the Standard" level to report progress of students who have met the standard and are able to extend their thinking and application within the standard.

d. **Numerical Indicators:**

Use 4-3-2-1 number indicators with performance-level descriptors for a more parent-friendly approach.

e. **Strengths and Goals Section:**

Redefine the "Comments" section as "Strengths and Goals" section to support an asset-based communication approach.

f. **Enhanced Communication through Comments:**

Help provide more meaningful comments by enhancing current comment "stems" and developing a comment bank to bring more consistency across schools/grade levels.

g. **Support & Education:**

Provide additional support to help parents/guardians understand the reporting system through different resources and information sessions

Secondary

Thank you for the additional feedback regarding the current secondary grading policies and retake procedures. We appreciate learning about the best practices

identified during the discussions, particularly those highlighted from Thomas Jefferson's positive experiences. The integration of retakes into the instructional plan, consistent school-wide retake policies, inclusion of reflective practices in remediation, and encouragement of formative work are all powerful strategies that we will strive to emulate across all schools. We acknowledge the concerns regarding the new retake policy, particularly the lack of understanding among some parents about its goals and the perception that it may contradict the objective of accurately measuring student knowledge. The feedback about the 80% cap on retakes is especially noted, as it appears to limit student motivation and does not fully support learning.

Based on your feedback, we will consider:

1. Review of the Retake Cap:

ACTL suggests raising the cap to 90%, which could better support student learning while still managing grade inflation concerns. The Student Advisory Board put forward a similar request in their end-of-year report to the School Board.

2. Standardize Retake Procedures:

To reduce confusion, we will work toward more consistent retake procedures across classes, while still allowing for subject-specific adaptations. We will address the equity concerns by potentially setting departmental or course-specific standards to ensure fair retake opportunities for all students.

3. Timely Grading:

We will review practices of grading assignments and updating the Synergy gradebook in a timely fashion. We want students to be well informed about their progress so they can make decisions about retakes.

We are dedicated to ensuring that our grading practices are supportive of all students' learning and growth. Your feedback is invaluable in helping us achieve this goal, and we will continue to work collaboratively with ACTL to refine our practices.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ACTL is grateful to the many people who have provided information, experiences, and perspectives that have informed our discussions and input on Reporting Student Progress and Grades.

Staff: Dr. Gerald Mann, Sarah Putnam, Kerri Hirsch,

Communities: administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians who gave input to their ACTL representatives