

Transitions



Communicate Student Data Constantly

Make assessments come alive through family partnerships to bolster student success

BY STEPHANIE KNIGHT-HAY, MARJANEH GILPATRICK, AND TRACY VASQUEZ

At a recent early childhood summit, the vice president of Scholastic's Family and Community Education division shared an anecdote about a group of teachers in a high-needs elementary school. They had implemented an approach that engaged families in understanding student test scores and other data while building community among families, and the collaborative atmosphere that resulted produced a significant improvement in student achievement.

If we can conclude that helping families understand data enhances student progress, we should look at sharing everything we learn about students, including strengths, areas of opportunity, grades, and scores. In addition, we can share information about students' preparedness and readiness to learn when they come to class as an information conduit between home and school.

To use data in the service of student success, teachers can share it on regular, planned occasions. Communication must be frequent enough for families to feel they are valued partners in their children's educational endeavors and have a real impact on student learning. When the flow of communication is continuous, teachers and families have the opportunity to take action if a student needs extra support or more challenging learning opportunities.

Let's explore two strategies for sharing and communicating data: direct and indirect.

Direct Sharing

Direct sharing of data is when teachers team with families to help them understand assessment measures as they relate to student learning goals. Some approaches to implement in support of this strategy are visual documentation, family-friendly rubrics, and family data nights.

Visual documentation. One way to communicate is visually. For example, why not document student progress with your smartphone camera? As you work the classroom, you might take a picture of a student working diligently on a fraction problem. Send the picture home to encourage the family to capitalize on the student's strengths or show an opportunity for growth.

Or perhaps your class is working on a graphic organizer, and you see a particular student adding extra detail. Take a picture of the student—with permission—applying their learned skills to offer encouragement to the student and family. To capture each student's improvement, have the students create their own online portfolios in which they can store artifacts that demonstrate their works in progress or proficient work, and share the link with their families.

Family-friendly rubrics. Make rubrics student- and family-friendly. Change the wording so families can understand how their child is assessed. For example, instead of saying that an essay is "lacking detail," say, "This writer can elaborate on the details and include more examples."

Rubrics can be used to communicate the "whys" of a grade. Putting them in comprehensible formats empowers families to reinforce the skills on which the teacher is focusing. For example, posting a student work sample and

associated scoring rubric—with personal identifiers removed—can help students and families understand the linkage between student achievement and scoring.

Family data nights. When parents and families are invited to family curriculum or literacy nights, teach them how to interpret the data. Walk families through various data sources and student artifacts; demonstrate how to interpret scores on assessments; collaborate on setting specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound goals; and offer simple strategies to achieve those goals at home.

For example, if students need to become proficient in addition and subtraction, teachers can suggest that families include their students in reviewing weekly supermarket ads. Together, they can identify the items they need, ask the student to compare prices at two or three stores, and have them report back on the difference in cost between stores.

An orientation should cover how to access and understand data such as standardized test scores. Explaining what the data means and the “whys” behind it—in this case, progress reports—communicates the desire to make the students’ needs a top priority.

Indirect Sharing

“Indirect” sharing of data to families usually refers to opportunities to increase the students’ awareness of their progress toward learning goals. As this awareness increases, students will begin to “own” their advancement and take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate their learning—ultimately leading efforts to share data with their families.

Educators can help students take on this responsibility by teaching them to self-monitor, self-reflect, and utilize student portfolios.

Self-monitoring. As students learn to appropriately self-monitor their learning goals, they will develop an intrinsic motivation to do well. Consider using a scaffolding tool such as a guided reading organizer to support students in monitoring their own reading comprehension. The ultimate goal for student learning is for students to think about their own progress, take control of it, and extend it into future achievements.

Self-reflection. Create an opportunity in your classroom schedules for students to self-reflect weekly to help them take ownership of their own learning. This might include summarizing what they have just learned or connecting it to previous experiences or lessons. Self-reflection time can heighten students’ awareness of their strengths and lead them to discover areas in which they want to improve. Ask students to share their reflections with their families, and keep a sign-off log to monitor this expectation.

Student portfolios. Having students maintain their own assessment portfolios gives them power over their learning. For teachers, implementing these portfolios can be as simple as identifying a folder and dedicating some classroom time weekly to organization. Remember to include a line for parents to sign on a monthly or weekly goal sheet for another layer of family involvement and accountability.

Gone are the days of teachers arbitrarily assigning grades to student work. Scientific approaches use rubrics and authentic assessments to strengthen lines of communication to students and families. Direct and indirect sharing of data can help educators achieve greater success in classrooms by empowering students to take ownership of their learning and celebrating their achievements with their families. ●

Stephanie Knight-Hay is a senior adjunct professor at Grand Canyon University’s College of Education.

Marjaneh Gilpatrick is chair of online and statewide academic programs at Northern Arizona University’s Online and Innovative Educational Initiatives.

Tracy Vasquez is an assistant professor and chair of professional growth and development at Grand Canyon University’s College of Education.