



## Rethinking Report Cards

Linking report cards to state standards is the newest report card trend. Here's why schools are doing it and what you can expect if your school makes the change.

By GreatSchools Staff

Did your grandparents give you a dollar for each A on your report card? Did you spend your high school years hoping you would squeak by with C's in important classes? Did you ever see the dreaded F on a paper, test or your report card?

For a growing number of today's elementary school students, those days are gone. They may not see letter grades on their report cards until middle school or later. As the No Child Left Behind law pushes schools and educators across the country to center their teaching on content and learning standards, report cards are beginning to look different, too. From Nashville, Tennessee to Marlborough, Massachusetts and Honolulu, Hawaii, schools are pairing standards-based report cards with their standards-based teaching, and parents are getting more information about their students' achievement.

### What should I do if my child's school is switching to a standards-based report card?

Ask lots of questions! If there is anything about the report card that you don't understand or that is confusing, ask your child's teacher to explain. If you are not sure if your child is doing well, ask the teacher to explain the system. For example, if your child is not proficient in some skills, ask his teacher if you should be concerned about his progress. Is he on track to be proficient by the end of the year?

Be sure you find out whether your child is completing assignments and developing good work habits. That may not be clearly indicated on the report card. Because the academic marks on a standards-based report card usually do not

### What are state standards?

Every state has adopted its own list of the skills that students should learn at each grade level from kindergarten through high school. These lists are the state content and learning standards. Here are some examples:

- In Arizona, fifth-graders are expected to be able to compare whole numbers, fractions and decimals. For example, fifth-graders should be able to determine that 0.6 is larger than  $\frac{1}{2}$ .
- In California, first-graders should be able to read common, irregular words like the, have, said, come, give and of.
- In Nebraska, twelfth-graders should have an understanding of the structure of the atom, and be able to describe different types of nuclear reactions.

Teachers are responsible for teaching the skills for their students' grade level, although standards do not say how teachers should teach. Education World has links to the standards for each state.

reflect a child's effort, attitude or work habits, it is important for parents to be sure they have a complete picture of their child's learning. Some children may be able to show mastery of the standards in the lower grades without good work habits, but that will get more difficult as they progress through the grades. If there is a problem with attitude, effort or study skills, parents need to be able to intervene as early as possible.

Take advantage of the extra information. Standards-based report cards give you more detailed information about how your child is doing in each subject. You can use this information to help your child. Choose a skill you're concerned about and ask the teacher how you can help your child with it at home. You can also ask the teacher what he can do to help your child at school.

Let your child's teacher and principal know what you think of the new report card. Because report cards are designed to communicate with parents, they need to be easy to understand and helpful to parents. If you have any suggestions or concerns about your school's report card, share them with the teacher and principal. Your comments may help improve it.

### **What is a standards-based report card?**

A standards-based report card lists the most important skills students should learn in each subject at a particular grade level. For example, in writing, a second-grade report card might list these skills:

- Writes in complete sentences
- Uses capital letters, periods, question marks and quotation marks correctly
- Uses the writing process (prewriting, first draft, revision, and final draft)
- Writes a friendly letter with a greeting, body and conclusion
- Knows the purpose and use of a dictionary, thesaurus and atlas

Instead of letter grades, students receive marks that show how well they have mastered the skills. The marks might show whether the student is advanced, proficient, basic or below basic for each standard or they might be numbers representing whether students meet, exceed or approach each standard. Students usually get separate marks for effort and work habits, which are important for parents to keep tabs on even if these characteristics aren't included in the assessment of the student's academic skills.

### **How are standards-based report cards different from traditional report cards?**

On many traditional report cards, students receive one grade for reading, one for math, one for science and so on. On a standards-based report card, each of these subject areas is divided into a list of skills and knowledge that students are responsible for learning. Students receive a separate mark for each standard.

The marks on a standards-based report card are different from traditional letter grades. Letter grades are often calculated by combining how well the student met his particular teacher's expectations, how he performed on assignments and tests, and how much effort the teacher believes he put in. Letter grades do not tell parents which skills their children have mastered or whether they are working at grade level. Because one fourth-grade teacher might be reviewing basic multiplication facts, while another is teaching multiplication of two- or three-digit numbers, getting an A in each of these classes would mean very different things. The parent of a child in these classes would not know if the child were learning what he should be to meet the state standards.

Standards-based report cards should provide more consistency between teachers than traditional report cards, because all students are evaluated on the same grade-appropriate skills. Parents can see exactly which skills and knowledge their children have learned. According to Hoover Liddell, special assistant to the superintendent in the San Francisco Unified School District in California, the marks on a standards-based report card show only how well the child has mastered the grade-level standards, and do not include effort, attitude or work habits, which are usually marked separately.

### **Why are some districts switching to standards-based report cards?**

Diane Mead, a teacher on special assignment in the Beverly Hills Unified School District in California, believes students are the biggest winners when standards-based report cards are used. These report cards give students specific information about how they're doing and pinpoint where they need to improve.

This approach can carry over to classroom assignments, too, as the report card influences the way teachers assess student learning throughout the year. In the first two years of using a standards-based report card in Beverly Hills, teachers worked together to describe clearly what student work that meets the standards looks like. Teachers share these expectations with students, often posting them on the classroom wall. Now when students get an assignment they know exactly what they have to do to be proficient or advanced. That's a big change from the way assignments used to be given and graded. "If you get a 90%, it doesn't tell you much about where to go from there," said Mead.

Liddell, who leads a standards-based report card pilot project in San Francisco, said that the new report card is part of an effort to close the gap in achievement among different groups of students. Because concrete skills and knowledge are listed on the report card, it is one way to help monitor whether all students are being exposed to the same curriculum and learning the skills they should learn in each grade.

The new report cards also make the standards very clear to parents, noted Liddell. "Parents should know exactly what their students should be able to do." The new San Francisco report card is based directly on the California standards, although not every standard is listed on the report card. Parents will receive a complete list of the California standards along with the report card.

### **How will standards-based report cards affect my child?**

Al Friedenberg, principal of Grant Elementary in Santa Monica, California, jokes that kids will get rich if they get \$5 for each good grade on a standards-based report card, because students receive many more marks than on a traditional report card.

Joking aside, one of the biggest adjustments for students and parents is that many standards-based report cards focus on end-of-the-year goals. This means that in the first or second grading period, instead of getting A's for trying hard and doing well on tests, a high-achieving student might have several marks indicating that she is not yet proficient in some skills. Although this is normal since most students will not meet all of the year's goals in the first quarter, it can be disconcerting to parents and kids used to seeing all A's or B's.

Another big change for students is understanding the concept of "advanced" or "exceeding standards." Advanced is not necessarily the equivalent of an A on a traditional report card. For example, if a fifth-grader received A's on every math test during the semester, she would probably receive an A on a traditional report card. If those math tests measured only the concepts fifth graders are expected to

master, those A's would be the equivalent of "proficient" on a standards-based report card; the student is doing what he should be doing, but not necessarily more.

Friedenberg noted that this means teachers need to provide opportunities for students to show they can exceed what is expected and be truly advanced. Standards-based report cards can encourage teachers to make sure their lessons offer students chances to go beyond "grade level." Mead said one analogy her district uses to explain this difference to parents is: "You climb up the hill to be proficient, but you have to fly off to be exemplary."

Standards-based report cards provide the added benefit of keeping teachers and parents focused on student learning goals from the very beginning of the year. Friedenberg said this gives his students a chance to get help where it's most needed, sooner rather than later.

### **Are there problems with standards-based report cards?**

As with any new program, students and parents should also expect some glitches and changes in the first few years. Both Mead and Friedenberg noted that the first couple years with their standards-based report cards were challenging for teachers as they dealt with technical difficulties at the same time they were working to align their teaching and assessment with the new report cards. Patience and understanding from parents and students go a long way when schools are working out bugs in a new program.

Friedenberg also said the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District has significantly revised its standards-based report card each year. He said the first year students received 54 different marks, which proved too many for most parents to comprehend. "A lot of parents said there were so many categories that they couldn't figure out what it meant, so they just looked at the teacher comments," said Friedenberg. For this year, the report card was scaled down to include a smaller number of key standards.

### **Why don't we see standards-based report cards in middle or high school?**

Although states have standards for middle and high school classes, there are many challenges to using a standards-based report card at these levels. According to Liddell, one of the biggest concerns is that students need traditional grade-point averages and transcripts to be competitive in applying to college. He also noted that the large number of subjects students study in high school would make standards-based report cards unwieldy.

Mead suggested that middle and high school teachers think their method of averaging scores to get letter grades is fair and precise in contrast to looking at pieces of work and deciding whether they are advanced, proficient, basic or below basic. She believes most middle and high schools need to focus on developing standards-based instruction and assessments before they will be ready to use standards-based report cards.

Despite the challenges, a few pioneering schools are experimenting with standards-based report cards. For example, six middle schools in Portland, Oregon began using a standards-based report card five years ago, according to Cynthia Gilliam, Director of Accountability for Portland Public Schools. While the report cards are being used successfully at the pilot schools, consistency in interpreting the standards between teachers and schools across the district is important to the report card's success, according to Gilliam. Portland has put on hold plans to use the standards-based report card at more schools while it fine-tunes common curricula and assessments across the district. Gilliam said the district did not plan to push ahead

with the report card until there was a "clear calibration of how good was good enough [to meet a particular standard]."

In High School Report Cards, Carol Boston suggested that a report card that combines traditional grades with information about progress toward standards might be a good option for middle and high schools. If standards-based instruction continues to grow in importance, there may be movement toward combination report cards at the middle or high school level.

