

**St. Francis School District**

**Assessment, Homework**

**And**

**Grading Beliefs and Practices**



## **Assessment Beliefs**

1. Informal and formal assessments are aligned with curriculum and administered in a timely and consistent fashion.
2. Effective assessments and rubrics are necessary to accurately reflect and report student progress toward skills, knowledge, and concept acquisition.
3. Balanced assessment programs will provide evidence that informs instructional decisions at all levels and provides students and parents with feedback to encourage growth, improvement, and ownership.
4. Balanced assessment programs are consistent across grade levels and provide accurate indicators of student growth over time. Aspects of a balanced assessment program may look slightly different at various grade levels.
5. Valid and reliable local assessments correlate with other assessment indicators, such as, standardized state assessments, Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), Explore, Plan, ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement, Accuplacer, etc.
6. Homework that is appropriate and meaningful can be part of a valuable formative process. Homework supports and enhances student learning. Minimal weight is assigned to homework when reporting student academic progress.
7. An effective balanced assessment program emphasizes useful interventions that prevent students from failing to acquire key knowledge and skills necessary for promotion to the next level.
8. Reporting progress represents a continuum of proficiency levels related to the skills, knowledge and concepts in a given content area or course.
9. Student progress reports represent the skills, knowledge and concepts acquired over the course of study.
10. Academic grading practices are non-punitive and should reflect student acquisition and application of knowledge and skills, as opposed to student behavior.
11. Reporting progress to students, parents and the community varies based on the grade level of students. Progress reports may look different based on student grade level.

## **Common Formative Assessment (CFA) Frequently Asked Questions**

As the St. Francis School District continues to revise curricula and assessments across the District, a few questions will surface.

**Q1. What is the difference between Common Formative Assessments (CFA) and other classroom assessments?**

A1. Just like Classroom-Based Assessments (CBAs), CFAs guide and inform instruction, providing meaningful feedback to teachers, students and parents. CFAs are designed collaboratively by grade-level or department teams and are administered periodically throughout the unit, semester, and/or year. CFAs allow teams of teachers to have professional dialogue around content and instructional strategies. This type of assessment for learning facilitates differentiated instruction.

**Q2. Where do I begin when creating a CFA for my course and/or grade level?**

A2. It is essential to begin with the critical components that are to be assessed for a particular benchmark. Teacher teams should focus on the skills, knowledge and concepts that need to be secure. Assessed items will have endurance (retain over time), transference/leverage (help students in other academic areas) and readiness (prepares students for the next level of learning). Ideally, a CFA can be administered efficiently (not beyond a class period) and should contain selected response items, as well as, constructed response questions that span Bloom's Taxonomy.

**Q3. What is the intended use for the data that is obtained from the CFAs?**

A3. Formative assessments immediately inform teachers, students and parents if students are moving toward proficiency relative to instructional goals. CFAs provide timely information to initiate/continue appropriate interventions, enrichments and/or extensions.

**Q4. How many times should a CFA be given?**

A4. A CFA is generally given one time, with the resulting information guiding instructional modification, such as remediation and enrichment. Grade-level and department teams may want to discuss and make a uniform decision, particularly in the early stages of CFA implementation. District pacing guides should provide some guidance as to when and how many times a CFA should be administered. Ultimately, if there is reason to believe re-

administering a CFA will improve student learning better than any other option, the CFA can be given more than once.

**Q5. What is an appropriate response when students are scoring well on classroom-based assessments, but not demonstrating growth on the CFAs?**

A5. It is imperative that CBAs and CFAs are clearly aligned to benchmarks and skills, knowledge and concepts. The questions on the CFA should be scrutinized to be sure the types, style and/or level of questions being asked are appropriate and aligned. The instructional strategies being used should be analyzed and discussed among the grade-level/department team. Individual reflection is also necessary to assure classroom activities and instructional strategies are aligned with the CBAs and best practice.

**Q6. How are CFA results communicated to parents and students?**

A6. CFAs are primarily used to provide timely feedback to teachers and students, so instruction and learning activities can be differentiated immediately. Parents may not always have CFA results as the data is meant to guide instruction. CFA results will be entered in an electronic gradebook that is accessible to parents on-line; however, student performance on the CFA is not factored into the student grade.

**Q7. How are CFAs graded?**

A7. CFAs are scored, not graded. The data obtained is not factored into a student grade, as the entire reason for administering CFAs is to guide instruction and learning. CFAs are an embedded part of the learning process and should be considered an instructional strategy, as well as, an assessment.

## Homework Practice Beliefs

**The Purpose of Homework:** Typically, the purpose of homework is to provide students with timely opportunities to reinforce skills, review information, and gain a better understanding of material to which they have been exposed. Teachers may also assign homework to introduce and build background knowledge for new material. Homework is completed by students with minimal, if any, assistance by parents.

Homework is a *formative assessment* strategy that immediately *informs* teachers, students and parents if students are moving toward proficiency relative to instructional goals. Not all work sent home should be considered “homework.” Occasionally, some summative assessments could be sent home for completion due to their comprehensive nature.

Homework must be designed to guide and modify instruction. Homework is only beneficial when the feedback is timely and specific.

### Misconceptions about homework:

1. Learning can't take place without homework;
2. Assigning high point values to homework will motivate learners to complete it;
3. There is a high correlation between homework completion and student acquisition of Skills, Knowledge and Concepts (SKCs);
4. Parents have the skills or time to help, or place the same value on homework;
5. Students have large amounts of time outside the school day to complete homework;
6. Punitive grading practices regarding homework develop responsibility and accountability.

### What does homework look like?

Homework assignments will vary depending on the subject area. Effective homework is engaging and relevant and helps students realize the importance of reinforcing skills. Homework must be highly aligned with the SKCs students are expected to obtain. Purposeful homework should be completed independently and in a reasonable time frame which will vary by student and grade level.

**The relationship between homework and student final grades:** Homework guides learning and instruction as a formative assessment strategy. Homework is scored or checked to identify student learning gaps.

A student's final grade is based upon performance demonstrated on highly aligned classroom and common summative assessments, rather than on homework completion, effort, obedience "schoolmanship," and/or respect to authority.

**Homework is formative – an assessment for learning that takes place during learning. Homework is not an assessment of learning; therefore, it is scored but not graded.**

### **Why should students do homework if it is not graded?**

Grades are not necessary for learning to take place. In fact, research indicates that grades on homework often get in the way of learning, de-motivate students, and create power struggles between students and teachers and between students and parents. The goal of feedback on homework is to improve learning, to improve performance on summative assessments, to promote student ownership of learning, and to encourage self-assessment.

Moving from grading to feedback encourages student ownership of learning. "Allowing students to take control of their learning makes learning personal" (Guskey & Anderman, 2008). "Students decide whether the learning is worth the risk and effort required to acquire it. They decide if they believe they are smart enough to learn it," (Stiggins, 2005, p. 18).

Once the threat of grades is taken away from the homework experience, "homework becomes a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills on the practice field or in rehearsals," (Christopher, 2007-2008, p. 74). As a coach once said about homework, "We don't keep score during practice."

### **How should homework be used in the St. Francis School District?**

There is virtually no correlation between homework and improved academic achievement in the early primary grades, and only slightly higher correlations as students progress through middle and high school.

Effective teachers develop efficient systems for checking student understanding and modify instruction immediately to help students fill the learning gaps. Consistent percentages are necessary across grade levels and departments.

The chart below depicts a 4K-12 model of consistent and best-practices in grading. We will be moving in this direction over the next few years.

Grade Levels	Homework & Other Formative Assessment Strategies	Common Formative Assessments	Classroom Based Summative Assessment Strategies Determine if Students have Obtained Skills Knowledge and Concepts	Common Summative Assessments Determine if Students have Obtained Skills Knowledge and Concepts
4K-5	Inform instruction & learning by providing feedback that leads to appropriate interventions.		Used to determine student proficiency levels as part of standards-based reporting system (i.e., Emerging, Developing, Secure).	
6-8		30-50%	50-70%	
9-12		20-50%	50-80%	

Summative assessment strategies may include lab reports, multi-paragraph essays, project-based experiences, culminating review assignments, take-home tests and multi-step problem-solving activities. These assessments could be completed outside of the school day, but should not be considered “homework.”

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## Grading Practices

The following excerpt was taken from *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs*, by Cathy Vatterott (2009), ASCD, Pages 112-116.

### **Moving from Grading to Checking: Focusing on Feedback**

All homework can be used to check for understanding if we can convince students not to be threatened by grades. **The purpose of homework should be to provide feedback to the teacher and the student about how learning is progressing. The purpose is all about what informs learning and what informs the teacher.** As we move into the feedback mode, we use completed assignments to revise future assignments (Popham, 2008). Feedback that revises instruction is often missing in the old paradigm. This omission is why the new paradigm changes the role of grading.

### **Grades are not necessary for learning to take place.**

In fact, research indicates that grades tend to interfere with learning (Guskey, 2003). Grades on homework often get in the way of learning, de-motivate students, and create power struggles between students and teachers and between students and parents. Grading is viewed as evaluative by students – the teacher is perceived as a judge (Guskey, 2003). Checking (providing feedback) is diagnostic – the teacher is working as an advocate for the student. Should all homework be graded? No. Should all homework receive feedback? Yes.

### **Feedback as Assessment *for* Learning**

Homework's role should be a formative assessment – assessment for learning that takes place during learning. Homework's role is not assessment of learning; therefore, it should not be graded. As a teacher who was also a coach once said about homework, "We don't keep score during practice." The goal of feedback on homework is to improve learning, to improve performance on summative assessments, to promote student ownership of learning, and to encourage self-assessment. "When homework is used as a formative assessment, students have multiple opportunities to practice, get feedback from the teachers and improve" (Christopher, 2007-2008, p. 74). "Good formative assessment gives students information they need to understand where they are in their learning (the cognitive factor) and develops students' feelings of control over their learning...the motivational factor" (Brookhart, 2007-2008, p. 54).

Focusing on feedback requires downsizing. Education consultant and author, Grant Wiggins once said, **"Teachers spend too much time teaching."** Concerned about covering a glutted curriculum, teachers often become too focused on coverage to assess what students are actually mastering. Downsizing requires teachers to have clear goals, to prioritize concepts and skills for mastery, and to pare down content to a manageable amount. Focusing on feedback requires

teachers to slow down – to teach less, assess more, and make time for re-teaching some students or providing other students with additional assistance.

For many teachers, providing feedback without grades is a new way of communicating progress. They've never done school without grades, and for many of them, grades are the only way they know to give feedback. **Letters and numbers are easy and fast, and they make up a language everyone thinks they understand.** But there's a whole network of communication that many teachers are unaccustomed to using. Good feedback on homework requires back-and-forth dialogue between the teacher and the student, each asking questions of the other (orally or in writing). "Some of the best feedback results from conversations *with* the student" (Brookhart, 2007-2008, p. 55).

### **Efficient Ways of Providing Feedback**

Busy teachers need strategies to help them efficiently create that dialogue. They need quick and efficient methods of checking for understanding – even if those methods are less than perfect. High school science teacher, Laura Eberle explains her process: "I take 30 to 40 seconds to glance down, I see if it's complete and I glance at their answers a bit. It doesn't take that long to get a general idea of where their hang-ups are. I do use [homework] as feedback for myself and what are they getting and what they are not."

Teachers who provide feedback efficiently often use their subjective judgment. Fifth grade teacher, Molly Heckenberg does a quick visual check of homework each morning while her students are working on another task. She scans each assignment and put the papers into two piles – students who appear to have understood the concept and students who didn't. Without marking papers, she then knows how to regroup students, re-teach, or assign students to buddy pairs to go over concepts again.

Similarly, third grade teacher, Ken Pribish explains his procedure. Other teachers say, "How do you do that? It takes so much time." It takes less than five minutes a day to correct homework because I'm not *correcting* homework. I'm looking at it to see if they did a good job, if they understood. Then I know I've got to meet with these three kids because they did not get last night's concept.

**Increasingly, teachers are checking homework only for completion, not taking off points for incorrect answers.** Many teachers use some sort of stamp to indicate complete or incomplete, on time or late. Laura Eberle gives a full stamp for completed work and a half stamp for incomplete work. Sixth grade communication arts teacher, Shannon Burger gives formative feedback on student notebooks with a symbol stamp; each time she checks the notebooks she uses a different symbol, such as a bear or a dog. A right-side-up symbol signifies a good

job, a sideways symbol signifies an OK job, and an upside-down symbol signifies the work is not adequate.

On specific projects such as essays, teachers may keep a list of common positive and negative statements they wrote on student projects one semester, i.e., “good use of descriptive words;” “punctuation used correctly;” “did not use correct grammar;” or “ideas do not flow well.” From those, the teacher can create a list of comments, similar to a rubric that can then be quickly checked off, with space for other comments, as well.

Teachers are not the only ones who can provide feedback. Feedback can also be given from student to student. Often, teachers will simply ask students to meet in groups to compare their homework answers, ask each other questions, and then report back to the teacher. The group discussions are often quite valuable; the back-and-forth conversation helps students clarify the goals of the assignment.

**Moving from grading to feedback encourages student ownership of learning.** “Allowing students to take control of their learning makes learning personal” (Guskey & Anderman, 2008). “Students decide whether the learning is worth the risk and effort required to acquire it. They decide if they believe they are smart enough to learn it” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 18). “Once the threat of grades is taken away from the homework experience, homework becomes a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills on the practice field or in rehearsals” (Christopher, 2007-2008, p. 74).

“When teachers stop grading homework, many of them see an attitudinal shift – students come to trust that teachers are working together with them to meet their learning needs, and they feel a sense of empowerment over their own learning” (Popham, 2008). The move away from grading is a move from what Kohn (1998) calls the **demand model** to the **support model**. Instead of demanding that students do their homework under threat of bad grades or punishment, we actively support them in taking responsibility for their own learning – we assist them in learning. Moving from grading to checking requires a total attitudinal change by both teachers and students about what homework is for. It’s not “gotcha,” not grading, but feedback for students about their understanding. This shift in the locus of control of homework is initially scary for both students and teachers.

“Students must overcome the hurdle of old-paradigm attitudes,” (Guskey & Anderman, 2008). Most students are so accustomed to experiencing assessment as reward and punishment; they at first tend to view even corrective feedback as judgmental. “They hear judgment where you intend description” (Brookhart, 2007-2008, p. 56). Unsuccessful students often bear scar tissue from negative grading experiences of the past. They view feedback as black and white, right or wrong. “Even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive if the student reads the script in an unintended way” (Brookhart, 2007-2008, p. 54).

Teachers need to be especially sensitive to this dynamic; they need to choose feedback language carefully and balance positive and negative feedback. **“Unsuccessful learners have sometimes been so frustrated by their school experience that they might see every attempt to help them as just another declaration that they are stupid” (Brookhart, 2007-2008, p. 56).** Students who have a history of failure on assessment fall into the homework trap discussed earlier and tend to shut down and refuse to work. But the trap is a problem for other students, as well. Those students who have been following the rules face a bigger problem – they have internalized the external nature of assessment as something “done to” them (Kohn, 2006). Their perception of the grading process is this: “Did I guess correctly what you wanted?” In reading corrective feedback, students may think, “She didn’t like it; it’s not right,” because the teacher did not make the feedback specific enough. Due to past experience, these students may have little sense of ownership of their learning, believing that it’s all about giving the teacher what the teacher wants, what gets the grade (Pope, 2001).

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