

Reporting Student Learning

Guidelines for Effective
Teacher-Parent-Student
Communication



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PART 1 The Importance of Effective Teacher-Parent-Student Communication



Introduction

Effective teacher-parent-student communication is fundamental to student success. *Reporting Student Learning* focuses on strategies and practices that teachers can use to establish effective ongoing communication with students and their parents, particularly with respect to assessment and evaluation.

One aspect of communication among teachers, parents, and students is the information teachers provide on report cards. Personalized, clear, precise, and meaningful report card comments are essential for informing students and their parents¹ about what students have learned, their strengths as learners, and the next steps for improvement. Yet, as the policy document *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* notes, “Although there are three formal reporting periods, communication with parents and students about student achievement should be continuous throughout the year, by means such as parent-teacher or parent-student-teacher conferences, portfolios of student work, student-led conferences, interviews, phone calls, checklists, and informal reports” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 53).

Teachers are encouraged to develop a range of practices and strategies for effective communication with parents and students. *Reporting Student Learning* is a resource that educators can use to review and reflect on understandings and practices related to writing report card comments as

1. In this document, the term *parents* is used to refer to parents and legal guardians.

well as practices for providing ongoing feedback to parents and students and engaging them in ongoing dialogue, with the goal of improving student learning.

To engage both students and parents, all communications, including report card comments:

- should be in clear, meaningful language that students and parents can understand;
- should provide essential information to parents and students to help students improve their learning.

“Learning opportunities, resources, and supports are provided to help parents support student learning and have productive parent-teacher-student conversations.”

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 37)

Ongoing and Effective Communication

In classrooms across the province, teachers and students engage in a variety of assessment practices to help improve student learning. These practices include “assessment *for* learning” and “assessment *as* learning”, which involve, for example, sharing clear learning goals and success criteria, providing descriptive feedback, and providing opportunities for students to develop their skills of peer- and self-assessment.

The Elementary Progress Report Card supports assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning. It also provides an opportunity to:

1. establish a positive relationship between teachers, parents, and students;
2. involve parents as partners in a conversation about learning and assessment, and what they can do to support their child’s learning;
3. identify concerns about student progress early in the school year and develop strategies to improve student learning.

In their comments on the Elementary Progress Report Card, teachers provide descriptive feedback that indicates to parents whether their children are “on track” and progressing appropriately.² In the case of students who are experiencing difficulties, the descriptive feedback acts as a “red flag”, indicating the need for additional supports or interventions.

Teachers also engage in “assessment *of* learning” (or *evaluation*) – that is, gathering evidence and making judgements about how well students have achieved the curriculum expectations and developed the learning skills and work habits. They communicate those judgements to students and parents primarily through the Elementary and Secondary Provincial Report Cards. In addition

2. Where students are taught by more than one teacher, teachers may choose to collaborate to write effective comments.

to the letter grades or percentage marks teachers assign and record on the Provincial Report Cards to represent a summary of their judgements about the student's achievement, they give descriptive feedback in comments, indicating what students have learned and need to learn as well as providing guidance to help students improve their learning.

For some students experiencing significant academic or behavioural challenges, communication with parents and the development of supportive interventions may have to begin even earlier than the Elementary Progress Report Card. For example, the updating of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and communication with parents as part of that process must be completed in the first weeks of the school year.

Teachers and schools can share information with parents about assessment practices through newsletters, school websites, and parent information nights.

Equitable and Inclusive Communication

It is important to recognize that, in Ontario's diverse society, there may be challenges in communicating with some parents. Teachers may need to use interpreters, settlement workers, or other community support personnel to assist in communicating information about student progress and achievement. For First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, teachers should consider involving Aboriginal counsellors and/or members of the extended family.

"Ontario is Canada's most diverse province ... We must ... address the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society by ensuring that our policies evolve with changing societal needs."

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 9)

PART 2 Elementary and Secondary Provincial Report Cards

“... we must acknowledge that if parents do not understand the information in the report card, it’s not their fault. As communicators, it is our responsibility to make sure that our message is clear and comprehensible to those for whom it is intended. This is the communication challenge involved in developing a standards-based report card.”

(Guskey and Bailey, 2010, p. 122)



The provincial report cards are designed for teachers to provide feedback in the form of comments on students’ “Strengths” and “Next Steps for Improvement” with respect to both their achievement of curriculum expectations and their development of learning skills and work habits.

The Elementary Provincial Report Card provides separate sections for comments on the development of learning skills and work habits and for comments on the achievement of curriculum expectations. The Secondary Provincial Report Card provides a single space for comments, in which the teacher may include comments on the development of learning skills and work habits in addition to comments on the achievement of curriculum expectations. Although the guidelines provided in this chapter often apply equally to the writing of comments related to each of the two areas, the comments are normally separate, as is the evaluation of student achievement of the curriculum expectations and the evaluation of the development of learning skills and work habits.

Comments Relating to the Achievement of Curriculum Expectations

On the provincial report cards, it is essential that the comment and the assigned letter grade/percentage mark for a subject/course work together to convey a clear and consistent message about the student’s achievement of the curriculum expectations. The grade/mark should reflect the student’s most consistent level of achievement, with special consideration given to more recent evidence of achievement. The comment should provide clear, meaningful, and personalized reflections on the student as a learner in the particular subject/course.

Comments Relating to the Development of Learning Skills and Work Habits

Growing Success emphasizes the importance of six learning skills and work habits – responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative, and self-regulation. Teachers report students’ development of these skills as “excellent”, “good”, “satisfactory”, or “needs improvement”. The comment relating to the development of learning skills and work habits should work together with this evaluation to convey a clear and consistent message about the students’ development of the skills and habits. In preparation for writing report card comments that focus on the student’s strengths and next steps for improvement with respect to the skills and habits, teachers may wish to consider how they will support the development of the learning skills and work habits and how evidence of this development will be collected for each student.

Criteria for Effective Report Card Comments

Report card comments should provide students and parents with *personalized, clear, precise, and meaningful* feedback.

- Effective comments focus on and refer to:
 - specific aspects of knowledge, skills, and other criteria identified in the curriculum, or on the learning skills and work habits, that are most relevant to the student’s achievement or development in the reporting period;
 - significant strengths that the student has demonstrated and should try to continue to demonstrate;
 - key next steps for improvement that:
 - address the student’s most significant learning needs;
 - provide concrete next steps for the student;
 - provide specific suggestions for how parents can support the student’s learning or the development of learning skills and work habits.

- Effective comments are personalized – that is, tailored to the individual student – and refer, where possible and appropriate, to:
 - specific evidence of learning, or of learning-skill development, gathered from conversations, observations, and student products;
 - the student’s interests, learning preferences, and readiness to learn.

- Effective comments are written in clear and simple language, using:
 - vocabulary that is easily understood by both students and parents, rather than educational terminology taken directly from the curriculum documents;³
 - a positive tone.

Teachers will use their professional judgement to decide which aspects of learning, which student strengths, and which next steps it is most important to comment on for any given reporting period. Ongoing communication throughout the year will have given parents a more comprehensive understanding of their child's progress in a broad range of aspects of learning. Teachers need to be aware that the report card comments are a distillation of feedback provided over time and give special consideration to the student's more recent evidence of achievement. Similarly, teachers need to be selective in the evidence of learning that they cite in their comments, knowing that they can elaborate and draw attention to a range of evidence, if appropriate, in conversations with parents. It is important to remember that overly long or detailed report card comments may result in a loss of focus with respect to the information that is critical for the student and parent to take away.

Examples of Report Card Comments

The following tables illustrate some of the guidelines outlined above. It is important to note that, when writing report card comments, teachers cannot be expected to address all curriculum expectations or other elements (e.g., fundamental concepts or big ideas, strategies and processes) and all learning skills and work habits, or to write extensively about various sources of evidence of student learning.

It is also important to note that what follows are examples only, focused on several different aspects of the preceding guidelines for the purpose of illustration. Individual teachers would naturally use their own voice and their own preferred forms of expression to address specifics relevant to every student's achievement and development in a given reporting period.

3. For some senior courses, teachers may find it necessary to include specialized subject-specific terminology. Students can be encouraged to explain and discuss such terminology with their parents; or teachers can communicate to parents that they are available to explain unfamiliar terms.

Strengths

Achievement of Curriculum Expectations

The following examples illustrate comments reporting on the student's strengths in learning related to the curriculum. Notice that comments are connected directly to the curriculum (e.g., overall expectations, strands, fundamental concepts, big ideas, subject-specific processes, and/or categories in the achievement chart). Notice too that the comments are written in clear language and that they are personalized, referring to specific evidence of learning in activities and student products.

Reference in Curriculum Documents <i>(Note: The information in the two columns below is for reference only and would not be included in the report card comment.)</i>		Sample Comment
Overall expectations (Grade 8 music)	<p>Creating and Performing: apply the creative process to create and perform music for a variety of purposes, using the elements and techniques of music</p> <p>Reflecting, Responding, and Analysing: apply the critical analysis process to communicate their feelings, ideas, and understandings in response to a variety of music and musical experiences</p>	Samnang has shown that he can apply the steps needed to learn to play and to appreciate music. He uses proper technique and shows creativity and feeling when he plays the trumpet. In our presentation on Remembrance Day, he played his solo with thoughtful expression.
Fundamental concepts (Grade 10 science)	Energy comes in many forms, and can change forms. It is required to make things happen (to do work). Work is done when a force causes movement.	Petra shows considerable understanding of energy and of the different forms it can take. Her interest in climate change led her to explore, and produce an excellent report on, the environmental impact of different sources of energy.

Big ideas (Grade 3 science)	<p>There are several types of forces that cause movement.</p> <p>Forces cause objects to speed up, slow down, or change direction through direct contact or through interaction at a distance.</p>	<p>Todd understands that forces (pushing and pulling) cause movement as well as changes in speed or direction. He explained how forces act on objects in the investigations he conducted and through diagrams, in discovery groups, and in conversations. He always shows a lot of interest in questioning and exploring.</p>
Subject-specific processes (Grade 5 mathematics)	The Four-Step Problem-Solving Model	<p>Roberta is starting to think about how to solve problems, and is trying different strategies, using models and classroom materials. She is starting to use a model she developed when we worked with fractions to solve problems in measurement, geometry, and patterning.</p>
Categories of knowledge and skills (Grade 12 Canadian and world studies)	<p>Knowledge of content (e.g., facts, terms, definitions)</p> <p>Understanding of content (e.g., concepts, ideas, theories, procedures, processes, methodologies, and/or technologies)</p> <p>Use of critical/creative thinking processes (e.g., inquiry process, problem-solving process, decision-making process, research process)</p> <p>Making connections within and between various contexts (e.g., past, present, and future)</p>	<p>Ian's knowledge and understanding of historical facts, ideas, and theories are solid. He plans his research and writing carefully and uses critical-thinking skills effectively. His major research paper revealed a good grasp of the causes and events of WWII, strong analytical skills, and an ability to make connections to current world events.</p>

Development of Learning Skills and Work Habits

Notice that, because there is a single comment box for both achievement of curriculum expectations and development of learning skills and work habits in the Secondary Provincial Report Card, the comment in row three, below, for “Strength in organization (Grade 12 student)”, is repeated from the table above. The portion that relates to learning skills and work habits is emphasized.

Learning Skill/Work Habit	Sample Comment
Strengths in collaboration and responsibility (Grade 7 student)	Warren responsibly manages his behaviour in class and participates well in groups and in class discussions. He listens to his peers and contributes appropriately. In group work, he takes on different roles and completes his share of the work.
Strengths in initiative and organization (Grade 5 student)	Jelena shows initiative. She always has curiosity and interest in learning. She is starting to develop plans for her work to make sure she has enough time to complete assigned activities.
Strength in organization (Grade 12 student)	Ian’s knowledge and understanding of historical facts, ideas, and theories are solid. He plans his research and writing carefully and uses critical-thinking skills effectively. His major research paper revealed a good grasp of the causes and events of WWII, strong analytical skills, and an ability to make connections to current world events.

Next Steps for Improvement

As the following examples illustrate, comments should identify specific strategies that will support students' achievement and provide specific suggestions for how parents can help at home. Notice too that the comments are written in clear language and that they are personalized.

Achievement of Curriculum Expectations

Grade/Subject/Course	Sample Comment
Grade 8 music	Samnang will continue to explore a variety of forms of music from the past and the present. At home, to help him connect what he is learning to his own playing, you could ask Samnang to tell you about the music he hears in movies, on television, or on the radio and how it affects him as a listener.
Grade 10 science	Petra needs to check her understanding of facts and concepts at regular points as she is learning, and to take steps to clear up difficulties – for example, by attending lunch-time tutorials or making use of the interactive software we have in the classroom. At home, you could ask Petra to tell you about what she is learning and how she is checking her understanding.
Grade 3 science	Todd understands how plants are important to humans, but needs to be able to identify similarities and differences among various plants. At home, you could ask him to describe and compare the plants he sees in the neighbourhood or in books.
Grade 5 mathematics	To further improve her problem-solving skills, Roberta needs to clearly identify what the problem is, what information she has, what she needs to find out, and what strategy she will try first. Roberta can practise these steps in class and with the homework club before and after school. At home, you could ask Roberta to show you how she does these steps when she is solving math problems for homework.
Grade 12 Canadian and world studies	Ian needs to improve his communications skills, and should review how to cite sources properly in research papers. At home, Ian could tell you about his research sources and explain how he is using them in his papers.

Development of Learning Skills and Work Habits

Notice that, because there is a single comment box for both achievement of curriculum expectations and development of learning skills and work habits in the Secondary Provincial Report Card, the comment in row three, below, for “Self-regulation (Grade 10 student)”, is repeated from the table above. The portion that relates to learning skills and work habits is emphasized.

Learning Skill/Work Habit	Sample Comment
Independent work (Grade 7 student)	In independent work, Warren is learning to develop plans so he is not frustrated by the demands of research and investigations. We are breaking up the learning goals into small steps, so he can complete some activities each day. At home, Warren could be encouraged to review the steps and talk about what he will complete in class the next day.
Organization (Grade 5 student)	We are working with Jelena by using agendas in class to record goals and plans. At home, you could encourage Jelena to review the agenda for the next day and remind her to complete any unfinished assignments she brings home.
Self-regulation (Grade 10 student)	<i>Petra needs to check her understanding of facts and concepts at regular points as she is learning, and to take steps to clear up difficulties – for example, by attending lunch-time tutorials or making use of the interactive software we have in the classroom.</i> At home, you could ask Petra to tell you about what she is learning and how she is checking her understanding.

Special Considerations

“Our commitment is to every student. This means ... [ensuring] that we develop strategies to help every student learn, no matter their personal circumstances.”

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2)

Teachers need to write clear, precise, meaningful, and personalized comments on all students' provincial report cards. However, the comments for some students need to address special considerations. This is true for students with special education needs, English language learners, students whose achievement of the curriculum expectations falls below level 1, and students for whom insufficient information is available to assign a grade.

Students With Special Education Needs

A student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) describes his or her program and specifies whether the student requires accommodations, modified learning expectations, or alternative learning expectations. Using the IEP helps teachers to write personalized, clear, precise, and meaningful comments on report cards for students with special education needs. Such comments provide essential information for parents.

Modified expectations: Expectations in which changes have been made to the age-appropriate grade-level expectations for a subject or course in order to meet a student's learning needs.

Alternative learning expectations: Alternative learning expectations are developed to help students acquire knowledge and skills that are not represented in the Ontario curriculum expectations. Because they are not part of a subject or course outlined in the provincial curriculum documents, alternative expectations are considered to constitute alternative programs or alternative courses.

Accommodations: Special teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or individualized equipment required to enable a student to learn and to demonstrate learning. The provincial curriculum expectations for the grade are not altered for a student receiving accommodations.

The chart that follows indicates how the use of accommodations, modified expectations, and alternative learning expectations for students with special education needs affects how teachers approach the provincial report card, including information that must be included in the teacher's comments.

Category	Grades 1–6	Grades 7–8	Grades 9–12
Students with modified curriculum expectations	Check the IEP box. Include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This letter grade is based on achievement of expectations in the IEP that vary from the Grade X expectations (and/or) are an (increase/decrease) in the (number and/or complexity) of curriculum expectations."</i>	Check the IEP box. Include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This percentage mark is based on achievement of expectations in the IEP that vary from the Grade X expectations (and/or) are an (increase/decrease) in the (number and/or complexity) of curriculum expectations."</i>	Check the IEP box. If some of the student's learning expectations for a course are modified from the curriculum expectations, but the student is working towards a credit for the course, it is sufficient simply to check the IEP box. If, however, the student's learning expectations are modified to such an extent that the principal deems that a credit will not be granted for the course, include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This percentage mark is based on achievement of the learning expectations specified in the IEP, which differ significantly from the curriculum expectations for the course."</i>
Students with alternative learning expectations	Check the IEP box. When a grade is assigned (see <i>Growing Success</i> , p. 62), include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This letter grade is based on achievement of alternative learning expectations in the IEP, which are not based on the Ontario curriculum."</i>	Check the IEP box. When a grade is assigned (see <i>Growing Success</i> , p. 62), include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This percentage mark is based on achievement of alternative learning expectations in the IEP, which are not based on the Ontario curriculum."</i>	Check the IEP box. When a grade is assigned (see <i>Growing Success</i> , p. 63), include in your comments the phrase: <i>"This percentage mark is based on achievement of alternative learning expectations specified in the IEP, which are not based on the Ontario curriculum."</i>
Students with accommodations only	Do not check the IEP box when the student's IEP requires only accommodations since the letter grade/percentage mark is based on regular grade/course expectations.		

English Language Learners

When curriculum expectations are modified in order to meet the language-learning needs of English language learners, assessment and evaluation will be based on the documented modified expectations. The teacher will check the “ESL/ELD” box for the appropriate subject(s), strand(s), or course(s), and the modifications will be explained to the parents. Because the parents of students in ESL/ELD programs may have difficulty understanding the information in the provincial report card, special measures may have to be taken. As noted in the Ministry of Education report *Many Roots, Many Voices*, “To ensure that students and parents understand what the mark or grade really means, it is a good idea to meet with them in person, using an interpreter if necessary” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 34).

When an English language learner requires modifications to curriculum expectations to address both language-learning needs and special education needs, both the “ESL/ELD” box and the “IEP” box are checked.

Students Whose Achievement Is Below Level 1

Growing Success states, “For students in Grades 1 to 8 whose achievement is reported as ‘R’ on the provincial report card, and for students in Grades 9 to 12 whose achievement is recorded at below 50 per cent, teachers should describe specific remedial measures that are planned or strategies that have been developed to address the student’s specific learning needs and promote success in learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 65). Teachers’ comments should also specify the kind of parental support that will be required. When students are struggling, teachers should contact the parents as soon as possible in order to consult with them and involve them in supporting the student.

Cases of Insufficient Evidence

Growing Success states:

For Grades 1 to 10, the code “I” may be used in a mark book and/or on a student’s report card, including the final report card, to indicate that insufficient evidence is available to determine a letter grade or percentage mark. For the report card, teachers will use their professional judgement to determine when the use of “I” is appropriate and in the best interests of the student. For example, teachers may find it appropriate to use “I” when evidence of a student’s achievement is insufficient because the student has enrolled in the school very recently or because there were issues or extenuating circumstances beyond the student’s control, such as protracted illness, that affected his or her attendance and/or ability to provide sufficient evidence of achievement of the overall expectations. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 42)

In cases where the teacher does not have sufficient evidence to determine a letter grade or percentage mark but has been able to collect some evidence of what a student has learned, strengths and the next steps for improvement are indicated in the report card comments. The report card comments should indicate why an “I” has been assigned.

The Importance of Planning for Writing Effective Report Card Comments

The comments that a teacher writes in a student’s report card are grounded in the processes of planning, assessment, and evaluation. In order to write clear, precise, personalized, and meaningful comments on report cards, teachers must carefully plan for assessment, regularly monitor students’ progress and provide feedback to students, and review collected evidence thoroughly when evaluating student achievement. For further resources related to planning assessment and evaluation, teachers may wish to review the print and video illustrations on the EDU GAINS website, at edugains.ca/newsite/assessment/assessgains.

“Studies show that students perform better in school if their parents or guardians are involved in their education. This is the basis for the principle that students and parents should be kept fully informed about the student’s progress.”

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 8)

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