

Middle School Formative Assessment – History and Practice

You may have heard that University Prep Middle School uses a “non-traditional” or “non-graded” system of assessment. While the system is less traditional, it is widely used in middle schools and there are actually many grading points. In fact, these terms hardly tell the whole story of a wonderful and informative system of evaluation that gives students frequent and diverse feedback about their learning. What follows explains how this transition came about at U Prep, the implementation process, and what it means in our classrooms today.

Six years ago, then Middle School Director Ron Waldman (who is now head of Meridian School) began to discuss with the faculty a grading system called Formative Assessment. This kind of assessment focuses on giving abundant, immediate and specific feedback while the learning is happening, rather than a single grade at the end of the learning (i.e., A, B, C, or E after a test or quiz). Research has indicated over and over that presenting students with learning goals before the learning occurs and providing opportunities for them to track where they are doing well and where they need to increase their efforts strengthens the learning process. Working with a teacher, students get specific, targeted feedback on a regular basis about homework, in-class work, and projects while there is still time to make improvements. This system moves away from giving most of the feedback at the end of the unit via an exam. While this process is not new to education, it was a sea change for University Prep, and much discussion went into what kinds of changes would be made and when.

Discussions continued under the previous Middle School Director Luis Ottley and Interim Middle School Director Jessica Hanson until the faculty created a plan for the first phase of the formative process in 6th grade, which started in the 2008-2009 school year. During that year, a new report card was developed with twenty-one grading criteria developed by each teacher in each subject. The criteria mirror the content and learning goals in the classroom and are meant to give a broader picture of learning than a single grade at the end of a course. This grading system was developed to reflect a student’s progress in each area, rather than judging only mastery in the overall subject. In this new reporting system, teachers developed and began to use the following classifications:

E = Exceeds expectations in this area. Student is able to go above and beyond what was taught explaining patterns and ideas that are explicit and inferred. Student can make in-depth applications of what was taught, are able to think in the abstract and to synthesize ideas.

M = Meets expectations in this area. Student is able to handle more complex ideas, concepts and skills. Student makes no major errors or omissions in either simple or complex ideas or concepts. Student is able to work independently and apply basic ideas.

W = Working to meet expectations. Student is working at grade level with help, and understands some or most of the concepts, skills and processes of the course. Student makes no major errors or omissions on simple concepts and skills; however, the student exhibits major errors or omissions on more complex ideas, concepts and skills.

N = Does not meet expectations. Even with help, this student shows only partial or no understanding of the simpler concepts and skills. The student is unable to understand more complex ideas, processes and operations.

A common misconception has been that an E is equivalent to an A. But the letters do not correlate with the traditional A, B, C grading system. Here is an example: In math, Jason and Jackie are taught how to calculate the area of an object. Jason can demonstrate that he is able to do this accurately through class work and homework, so he is meeting the teacher's expectations and earns an M. Jackie had the same instruction, and she went home and calculated the area of her refrigerator and reported the findings to their teacher. Jackie is demonstrating a higher level of ability to apply the concept, and would earn an E for exceeding the teacher's expectations. Both are good grades. Jason and Jackie may have a greater or lesser understanding of other elements in math, and would earn different grades for each element.

As implementation continued over the first year, many teachers also adopted portfolio systems where student work was kept in the classroom along with the feedback, which gave each student a complete picture of his or her work during the course of the class. To complement this, advisors had conferences with parents twice during the year to discuss the progress of their advisees academically, socially and emotionally. At the end of each semester, teachers included narratives on the report cards to give parents a written summary of the student's progress over the term.

After gathering feedback from teachers, advisors and parents during the first year, some changes were made for the second year (2009-2010) to better tailor the formative process to University Prep. The reporting mechanism stays the same, but clearer definitions of the marking system were developed and distributed to families at the parent nights in fall 2009. Those definitions are included above. Instead of having just advisors meet with parents, the students now lead the parent conferences and will develop their portfolio of work to explain their academic progress and challenges to their parents. Advisors will help their advisees reflect on their progress and prepare for the conferences, and the information presented will include teacher feedback as well as the students' own assessment of their learning. This should create a fuller picture for the parent of what goes on in class day-to-day for each child.

One issue that has surfaced about this process is that students don't know how they "rank" and that they will never learn to take a test. In middle school, it is

most important for students to understand their own learning rather than how they “stack up” against others. Socially, middle school students spend a lot of their time worrying about what others think of them, and in the academic realm, that can be demoralizing rather than motivating. Our formative system gives students a personal picture of the areas of accomplishment and those that need work. It is a more balanced picture that reflects the learning process, not just the final grade. Many tools are used to help students better understand their learning, such as rubrics that describe the many assessed areas of a given assignment, peer evaluation, self- evaluation, surveys, traditional tests and quizzes. Quizzes and “end of the unit” testing can be part of a formative process, but they are part of the learning picture, not the whole picture.

Middle school is a time of incredible self-discovery. We believe that the formative process of evaluation of students dovetails well with this time of learning and growing. You can read more about formative assessment at the National Middle School Association Web site: <http://www.nmsa.org/>