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Teacher Comments on Report Cards

by Amy Brualdi

ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation

Introduction

Several times a year, teachers must complete a report card for each student in order to inform parents about the academic performance and social growth of their child. Schools have a variety of ways to document the progress of students. In a majority of schools, teachers usually assign a number or letter grade to the subject or skill areas. In several schools, mostly elementary schools, teachers write a descriptive narrative of each child's cognitive and social growth. Other schools have teachers indicate whether a student has acquired different skills by completing a checklist.

Despite the fact that schools have different policies concerning the report card's content and format, most teachers are required to include written comments about the student's progress. Considering the amount of students in each classroom, the long span of time needed to complete each report card, and the presence of grade/check marks on the report cards, some may think that comments are nonessential and take up too much of a teacher's time. The purpose of this digest is to explain why teacher comments on report cards are important, offer suggestions on how to construct effective comments, point out words or phrases to be cautious of using, and indicate sources of information for report card comments.

Why are comments important?

Grades are designed to define the student's progress and provide information about the skills that he/she has or has not acquired. Nevertheless, grades are often not detailed enough to give parents or the student him/herself a thorough understanding of what the he/she has actually learned or accomplished (Wiggins, 1994; Hall, 1990). For example, if a child receives a B in spelling, a report card comment can inform the parent that the child is generally a good speller; however, she consistently forgets to add an es to plural nouns ending with the letters, s and x. Thus, teacher comments often convey whatever information has not been completely explained by the grade.

Well written comments can give parents and children guidance on how to make improvements specific academic or social areas. For example, the teacher who wrote the previous report card comment on spelling may also wish to include that practicing how to write the different plural nouns at home or playing different spelling games may help the child to enhance her spelling skills.

The process of writing comments can also be helpful to teachers. Writing comments gives teachers opportunities to be reflective about the academic and social progress of their students. This time of reflection may result in teachers gaining a deeper understanding of each student's strengths and needs.

What types of wording should teachers include in their comments?

The use of specific comments encourages positive communication between teachers, parents, and students. Written in a positive and informative manner, comments can address a variety of issues while maintaining the while still maintaining the dignity of the child. This is especially important if a child has had difficulty with a particular subject area or controlling his/her behavior over an extended period of time.

Shafer (1997) compiled a list of "effective" comments from a variety of teachers. The following lists of words and phrases are just a sampling from her publication "Writing Effective Report Card Comments" (p. 42-43).

Words that promote positive view of the student

- thorough
- caring
- shows commitment
- improved tremendously
- has a good grasp of

Words and Phrases to use to convey that a child needs help

- could profit by
- requires

- finds it difficult at times to
- needs reinforcement in
- has trouble with

Words and phrases that teachers should be cautious of using

When teachers write comments on report cards, they need to be cognizant of the fact that each child has a different rate of social and academic development. Therefore, comments should not portray a child's ability as fixed and permanent (Shafer, 1997). Such comments do not offer any reason to believe that the child will be successful if he/she attempts to improve.

Also, teachers must be sensitive to the fact that their students will read their comments. If negative comments are made, teachers must be aware that those comments may be counterproductive. In addition to the previously mentioned positive comments, Shafer (1997) compiled a list of words and phrases that should be avoided or used with caution (p. 45).

Words to Avoid or Use with Caution

- unable
- can't
- won't
- always
- never

Information sources to which teachers should look when writing report card comments

Teachers should have a plethora of sources from which they can derive information on each child to support the comments that are made on each report card. Teachers need these in order to provide specific information on the different strengths and weaknesses of each child. The most commonly used sources of information are examples of student work and test results. In addition to these traditional sources, teachers also use student portfolios as well as formal and informal student observations.

Arter, Spandel, and Culham (1995) define the student portfolio as "a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of student achievement and growth" (p. 1). A student's portfolio is usually comprised of work that is either the student's best or most exemplary of his/her ability. A portfolio may also contain papers which show the evolution of a particular writing assignment or project. In addition to aiding teachers in keeping track of a student's progress, the portfolio allows the student to chart his/her own academic growth. Because of this, a student should not have many surprises on his report card and will understand how he earned his grades and why different teacher comments were written.

Another rich source of information is the student observation. Student observations often provide important information that is sometimes difficult to derive from the written work of students. These observations allow teachers to make comments on students' daily academic and social behaviors. These should be written about the students' behaviors in a variety of settings: independent work, cooperative learning groups, and playground or nonacademic interaction (Grace, 1992). Grace (1992) suggests that teachers have the following observations for each child: anecdotal records, checklist or inventory, rating scales, questions and requests, and results from screening tests.

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