



ACTIVITY 3.8

Using School/District Policies to Support Quality Assessment

PURPOSE

This activity requests that your team review a series of school/district policies, which all have a connection in some way to assessment. Some are more complete than others; some are more current and better written than others. All are examples of policies at the district level, although school-level administrators can also make use of this activity simply by shifting the emphasis to school-level policies contained in a faculty handbook. By reviewing the policies with an eye toward how they could be rewritten or improved to be more supportive of quality assessment, your team practices building the framework to help support quality assessment.

One of the objectives of this activity and in working with policy in general is to see policies as a systemic whole, where the elements (in this case the policies themselves) hang together, all working toward a common purpose. Not approaching the policy manual in that way risks having policies in opposition to each other: An attendance policy may contradict a grading policy, or a promotion/retention policy may conflict with a policy on student assessment that is grounded in a specific set of belief statements.

Last, the district-level policies in this activity are just that; some context is missing without the implementation procedures that usually accompany policies and provide the specifics of how the policy is to be applied. However, the underlying concepts and ideas are apparent in each example. The intention of the activity is not to perfect each policy but, rather, to get some practice in reviewing policies with quality assessment as the filter.

TIME

90 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

Optional: policies from your school or district

SUGGESTED ROOM SETUP

Tables and chairs

DIRECTIONS

Before starting this activity, it will be helpful for your team to list a set of criteria to use when reviewing these policies (and any other policies you may choose to use from your local school or district). What is the group looking to achieve in assessment through school or district policies? What would constitute a strong policy? For example, your

team might generate policy review criteria in the form of questions. The list that follows is a start, but other considerations may be important to your team.

Does this policy

- support the vision of assessment in the school or district?
- have a direct impact on student learning?
- have an impact on or connection to other policies that need to be considered?
- encourage the use of multiple measures of student learning, creating judgments made about students with combinations of data sources?
- require clear, meaningful, and frequent communication about learning?
- link standards, instruction, and assessment?
- require any specialized professional development?

Figure 3.5 shows the same set of criteria in the graphic organizer that may be useful. Recognize that each of these criteria or those your team may generate might not be relevant or apply to each policy under review. After finalizing your list of criteria, read the first policy in this activity. Then pause and consider the following three questions with your team. Do this with the remainder of the sample policies in this activity. Use the criteria developed by your team to help answer the questions for each policy review.

1. What are the strong points of the policy the way it is currently written?
2. What are the weak areas of the policy?
3. What language could be omitted, and what language might be added to make it more supportive of sound assessment?

Policy 2101—Student Retention/Promotion

As the ability to read proficiently is the basic foundation for success in school, as it is indeed throughout life, it is the goal of the primary school, the first three (3) grades, to teach each child to read independently with understanding by the time he or she finishes the third grade. It is within this period when retention of a youngster in a grade can be most valuable. Teachers, taking into account factors such as achievement, mental age, chronological age, emotional wellness, and social and physical maturity may find it advisable in the case of some students to retain a child once or twice during this period. By following this policy, the district will find some children completing the first three grades in 4 years and some in 5 as well as the majority who will finish in the regular 3-year period.

With the preceding as a basic policy, retention after the third grade should only be a problem in those cases where a student is not achieving and meeting the grade standards of which he or she is capable. In cases where it is contemplated holding a student in the same grade for an extra year, the teacher should notify the parents as early in the year as possible but not later than the end of the third quarter.

No student shall be retained for more than 2 years in the same grade.

Since it is the responsibility of the school to adjust the work in each grade to the child's individual needs and ability to provide an equal educational opportunity for all children, no arbitrary policy of promotion is suggested. Promotion should be made for grade to grade, based on a consideration of the best interest of the student concerned.

Figure 3.5 Policy Review Organizer

Name and Number of Policy _____ _____		
Does this policy . . .	Yes/No	Comments
1. Support the vision of assessment in the school or district?		
2. Have a direct impact on student learning?		
3. Have an impact on or connection to other policies that need to be considered?		
4. Encourage the use of multiple measures of student learning, creating judgments made about students with combinations of data sources?		
5. Require clear, meaningful, and frequent communication about learning?		
6. Link standards, instruction, and assessment?		
7. Require any specialized professional development?		
Any other questions?		

The following factors shall be taken into consideration: achievement, mental age, chronological age, emotional wellness, and social and physical maturity. The curriculum should be so broad on each grade level that the needs of bright students are met, as well as the needs of average and slow students. Therefore, when accepting pupils who are new to district schools, the principal should make the best placement possible on the basis of the information he or she can obtain.

Policy 2102—Lesson Plans

To ensure proper planning and continuity of instruction, the board requires that each teacher prepare lesson plans for daily instruction. To facilitate more effective instruction, lesson plans must be prepared in advance of the actual class presentation. The format for the lesson plan will be specified by the building principal and shall be reviewed on a regular basis. The plan book must be readily available when a substitute teacher is needed.

Policy 2103—Class Rank

The board acknowledges the usefulness of a system of computing grade point averages and class ranking for secondary school graduates to inform students, parents, and others of their relative academic placement among their peers.

The board authorizes a system of class ranking, by grade point average, for student in Grades 9 through 12. Class rank shall be computed by the final grade except that nonnumerical marks/grades shall be excluded from the calculation of the grade point average.

A student's grade point average shall be reported on his or her term grade report. Such calculations may also be used for recognizing individual students for their achievement.

Policy 2104—Homework

The board believes that homework is a constructive tool in the teaching/learning process when geared to the age, health, abilities, and needs of students. Purposeful assignments not only enhance student achievement but also develop self-discipline and associated good working habits. As an extension of the classroom, homework must be planned and organized, must be viewed as purposeful to the students, and must be evaluated and returned to the student in a timely manner.

The purposes of homework assignments, the basis for evaluating the work performed and the guidelines and/or rules should be made clear to the student at the time of the assignment.

The school principal shall establish guidelines that clarify the nature and use of homework assignments to improve school achievement.

Makeup work, due to illness, is not to be considered as homework. Students shall be given the opportunity to make up assignments missed during excused absences.

Policy 2106—Grading and Progress Reports

The board believes that the cooperation of school and home is a vital ingredient in the growth and education of the student and recognizes the responsibility to keep parents informed of student personal development/work habits, as well as academic progress in school.

The issuance of grades and progress reports on a regular basis serves as the basis for continuous evaluation of the student's performance and determining changes that should be made to effect improvement. These reports shall be designed to provide information that will be helpful to the student, teacher, counselor, and parent. For Grades 9 through 12, the district shall comply with the marking/grading system incorporated into the statewide standardized high school transcript. The superintendent may consider alternative grading/progress reports. A student's grade point shall be reported for each term, individually and cumulatively.

The board directs the superintendent to establish a system of reporting student progress and shall require all staff members to comply with such a system as a part of their teaching responsibility.

If classroom participation is used as the basis of mastery of an objective, a student's grades may be adversely affected by an absence, provided that on the day of the excused absence, there was a graded participation activity. If the teacher does not so advise students in writing, the teacher may not use attendance and participation in the grading process. Teachers shall consider circumstances pertaining to the student's inability to attend school. No student grade shall be reduced or credit denied for disciplinary reasons only rather than for academic reasons, unless due process of law is provided. Individual students, who feel that an unjust application of attendance or tardiness factors has been made, may follow the appeal process for resolving the differences. Academic appeals have no further step for appeal.

Policy 2107—Instruction

Effective Communication About Student Achievement

_____ School District is a standards-driven district with the goal of communicating effectively about student achievement. It is the intent of the district to provide timely, understandable, and meaningful information about student progress towards clearly articulated achievement standards to students, parents, educational professionals and third parties with interest. Grading and reporting practices represent one of a variety of ways to communicate student progress toward standards and may serve the following purpose(s):

- Communication of the achievement status of students to parents/guardians in ways that describe progress toward district standards and provide an accurate focus on learning
- Information students can use for self-evaluation and improvement
- Data for the selection, identification, or grouping of students for certain educational paths or programs
- Information for evaluation of the effectiveness of instructional programs

Grading and reporting provide important information about student progress, but there is no single best way of communicating about student achievement. The district will use a variety of ways to deliver information about student achievement to intended users. All information users are important and are entitled to timely and accurate achievement data: Some may require greater detail about achievement than can be provided by grades and test scores to make informed decisions. The following illustrate different types of communication about student achievement:

- Checklists of standards
- Narrative descriptions
- Portfolios of various kinds
- Report card grades
- Student conferences

All practices related to communication about student achievement should be carried out according to the best current understanding and application of the research. The district will provide staff members ongoing professional development needed to gain that understanding.

Grading and Reporting

The district's policy and procedures on communication about student achievement, specifically grading and reporting practices, are based on the principles that

- individual achievement of clearly stated learning targets should be the only basis for grades, providing an accurate reflection of what each student knows and can do; the effectiveness of the communication is determined by the accuracy of the information about student achievement.
- other characteristics (effort, behavior, attendance, attitude, etc.) should not be included in grades but should be reported separately.
- different users and decision makers of achievement data need information in different forms at different times to make their decisions.
- grading and reporting should always be done in reference to specified achievement targets, comparing students' performance against a standard rather than against other students in the class (on a curve).
- grades should be calculated to ensure that the grade each student receives is a fair reflection of what he or she knows and can do, emphasizing the most recent summative assessment information.
- consideration shall be given to the use of appropriate grade calculation procedures to ensure that assigned grades reflect the intended importance of each learning goal.
- grades have some value as incentives but no value as punishments.

During the first week of classes, teachers shall provide students and parents with a written syllabus of learning expectations and grading criteria in clear, easily understandable language, indicating how summative assessment throughout the grading period will be calculated into course grades. Teachers shall discuss classroom assessment practices with students, in an age appropriate manner, at the beginning of instruction.

The superintendent shall develop written procedures that support the district policy on Communicating Effectively about Student Achievement.