

Questions and Answers for Teachers and Principals Concerning Students Who Are Operating Below Grade Level in the Elementary Grades

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Okaloosa County School District
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Our PPP states, “Academic grades shall be based solely on scholastic proficiency in meeting the Sunshine State Standards, as applied to the course or grade in which the student is enrolled.” On an annual basis, the Department of Quality Assurance provides a technical assistance paper which responds to questions regarding the relationship between report card grades, the Sunshine State Standards, and provisions of both state law and the Pupil Progression Plan. These questions are common among schools; the answers need to be carefully reviewed with staff in order to ensure accurate grading and appropriate reporting of student performance. Feel free to send additional questions to hendricksg@mail.okaloosa.k12.fl.us and we’ll publish responses.

1. Is it true that just because a student is on an Progress Monitoring Plan (PMP), he can not receive higher than a D or N on the report card?

Not necessarily, although generally that will be the case. The following are examples in which a student may be on a PMP but be eligible to receive a grade higher than a D:

- If a student is on a PMP, results from multiple assessment instruments indicate he is unable to demonstrate grade level performance on district/state assessments. In some situations (although few in number), a student may perform at grade level in the classroom, but has test taking issues and performs poorly on standardized assessments. This student may be on a PMP with strategies selected to improve fluency and test taking skills, but classroom instruction and assessment are at grade level. Therefore, the student may receive a grade higher than a D. *Keep in mind, one component of being “on grade level” is the ability to apply knowledge in any given assessment event.*
- A student may be on a PMP in math because of a deficit in one or two, but not all, math subskills. Academic support might be provided using more of a hands-on approach, but within grade level material. When the student receives instruction at grade level and scores 70% or above on a grade level assessment, the student may receive the earned score (i.e., higher than a D).
- A situation may occur, such as the one described in question #2, in which the student responds to a change in teacher or instruction to such an extent that he is able to perform at grade level. Following documentation of successful achievement of performance objectives on a consistent basis (i.e., multiple

measures and/or assessment events), the PMP would then be adjusted to reflect the improvement.

In the majority of cases, particularly in the subject areas of reading and math, a student on a PMP does receive instruction in below grade level material. Grades on the report card are one of the avenues used to communicate that information to parents (refer to question #3).

Questions which arise regarding grade level designation usually occur because a situation is *unique*. It is always best, when uncertain, to discuss the situation with your principal.

2. Must a student begin the year with a below grade level designation if he was on a PMP the previous year.

No. The reason a student begins the year with a PMP is because of poor performance the previous year. This year the student may respond to a different teacher or more effective, individualized teaching strategies by working harder and performing on grade level. In fact, that's what we expect will happen in many cases since the Progress Monitoring Plan, when implemented by the teacher, parent and student, is designed to move the student to grade level.

Every Okaloosa student, regardless of whether he has a PMP, should receive the grade he earns, A to F, based solely on his performance against grade level expectations, not on whether he is on a PMP.

3. Is it true that a student performing below grade level cannot receive higher than a D or N on the report card?

Yes, that is true. The Pupil Progression Plan, which is adopted by the School Board, requires that grades be linked directly to grade level performance on the Sunshine State Standards. In addition to a **D** or **N** grade, a **U** should be marked in the GLP column of the report card. Accurate and honest information must be provided to parents regarding the grade level performance of their child. The PPP is provided to every school and is also posted on the district website.

4. When a student earns a D or F in any academic subject, should the code of U also be marked in the GLP column?

Yes, a student who earns a D or F in any academic subject, for any reason, is not working at grade level in that subject. Therefore, the code of **U** should be marked on the report card.

5. Why must grades reflect the actual progress towards proficiency in the Sunshine State Standards?

Parents have rightly asked why their children logically could be in danger of being retained when report card grades showed Cs or higher. Report card grades are based solely on proficiency in meeting grade level expectations, as defined by the Sunshine State Standards. FCAT is a test which measures proficiency against the same standards. Some teachers have experienced frustration and embarrassment trying to explain to

parents why their children received Bs and Cs on their report card but were not recommended for promotion because they were performing and testing below grade level.

The definition of a C is adequate progress on grade level. A student who receives a D is in danger of failing based on grade level expectations. If a fifth grader is being taught at a second grade level and is performing at a second grade level, it would be misleading to give him the same C earned by the fifth grader who is making adequate progress based on fifth grade expectations. Again, the linkage is between the grade the teacher gives and the grade level expectations related to the Sunshine State Standards.

Parents have every right to expect that the grade their child earns in a subject is indicative of how well he has achieved the objectives for that subject, i.e., the Sunshine State Standards. They also have the right to expect that grades and state testing (FCAT) will show similar results due to the fact that both are assessments of the same content - - the Sunshine State Standards. Our job is to be honest with parents and students about the student's progress in achieving those standards.

The problem of grade inflation has increased and should be addressed with staff at all schools.

6. Do the guidelines regarding “operating below grade level” refer to all subjects reported on the Grades 1-5 Report Card?

Yes, but there's a marked difference between math and reading and other subjects listed on the report card. Math and reading are taught and measured at, above, or below grade level.

The Sunshine State Standards for the subjects of science, social studies, language arts (primarily written communication), handwriting, spelling, music, and art can typically be taught to the lower performing student without using below grade level instructional materials, GLEs, benchmarks, or assessments - the criteria we use in our Pupil Progression Plan to define “performing below grade level.” Therefore, a low performing student would not have the grading limitation of “no higher than a D or N” for these subjects under these circumstances.

A student receiving below grade level instruction and demonstrating below grade level performance in reading and math cannot earn a C in those subjects since a C denotes “adequate progress based on grade level expectations.”

7. Are there any different guidelines for kindergarten?

The Kindergarten Progress Report differs from other report cards in its design. While developmentally appropriate, there is still a requirement to notify parents of the grade level performance of their child. The report has been revised to include this component; a space/box is provided for grade level designation of reading each nine week period. The same codes will be used for this purpose as all other grade levels: **S** for at/above grade level and **U** for below grade level.

8. What about using report card grades to measure a child's responsibility or work

ethic? How can these important qualities be included on the report card?

Grades measure only one thing: academic proficiency in relation to the Sunshine State Standards.

Responsibility, classroom attitudes and work habits, which are important in promoting academic achievement but are not academic subjects themselves, should be addressed by using the “teacher comment codes” available on the report card. Most teachers also use weekly notes, email, newsletters, comments written on work taken home, or personal conferences to send encouraging and supportive messages to students and parents. These subjective communications from teachers are extremely useful in motivating and rewarding students, whether for extraordinary effort despite the odds or a more serious and cooperative attitude toward schoolwork.

9. Will below grade level students stop working or have their self-esteem negatively affected if they receive a D, F, N, or U when they have tried hard and completed their below grade level work; what can teachers do to deal with this?

This is a truly sensitive issue. We want students to be motivated by the results of their work. The grade a teacher gives is a measure of proficiency based on grade level expectations. Simply put, it is dishonest to the student and his parents if an academic grade reflects attitude and effort rather than proficiency. A child and his parents can be deeply and negatively affected at the end of the year when promotion/retention decisions are made if they discover that a B or C in reading or math really wasn't an earned grade and doesn't compare with other measures of performance on the same material. Instead of looking inward for explanations, they often blame the teacher and the school.

As noted above, students and parents are most appreciative of the comments teachers make on the report card and on papers taken home. Student's self-confidence and self-esteem are effectively and honestly promoted when teachers explain the progress a child has made, even if s/he is not yet up to grade level, by showing progressive examples of his work. This builds realistic hope. A teacher can positively motivate the student and parent by illustrating the progress that still needs to be made to get to grade level by showing the child's improved work compared to the work of other students operating on grade level.

Based on extensive interviews with parents and students, it is clear that honesty all during the year is the best policy and that frequent communication with parents, individual attention to the child, and showing progress by displaying work samples across time is better motivation than unearned grades.

10. Do my ESE students have to receive a D, N, F or U?

That depends on the student. If an ESE student is on regular standards and seeking a regular diploma, he must be evaluated like every other student based on whether he is performing at or below grade level. By state law, ESE students must take the FCAT and make the expected annual learning gains in order to progress to the next grade. By state law, ESE students must pass the FCAT to graduate from high school (FL Statue 1003.41).

Many learning disabled or varied exceptionality students are seeking a regular diploma. If so, they must be taught according to the Sunshine State Standards and must perform on grade level in order to earn a C or better. If an ESE student is seeking a special diploma, then he may be taught using special standards and may be graded on those standards.

Parents have consistently spoken out asking that teachers and principals be straightforward with them about the requirements for a standard diploma vs. a special diploma, the testing issues their children will face, and the grade level on which their students are truly operating. Parents deserve to know that being an ESE student does not change the expectation for that student in meeting the basic requirements of the Sunshine State Standards.

- 11. What if a student on an IEP or a PMP performs better, shows improvement, and begins to master or even outperform the below grade level instruction he is receiving? Is s/he trapped for the year with Ds, or can he earn an A, B, or C?**

A student does not need to continue receiving a D or lower, if s/he has demonstrated **mastery** of specific benchmarks. *It is important that a variety of assessments be administered to confirm the improved level of performance.* In this example, the student is clearly making progress and can be advanced to grade level materials and instruction. As such, he can receive the grade earned on proficiency measured by the Sunshine State Standards.

- 12. If a child receives assistance from support personnel (e.g., Title I), must that student receive no higher than a D on the report card?**

Not necessarily. This answer is a bit more complex and depends upon the level of support provided and how the student is assessed.

If the student is identified as performing below grade level, using the assessments included in the Pupil Progression Plan, and both the classroom teacher and support personnel provide instruction and assessment below grade level, then the student may receive no higher than a D on the report card (e.g., the classroom teacher may be using the green level of the McGraw Hill reading series and support personnel may be using the Early/Soar to Success or Read 180 program).

In some cases, support personnel may provide minimal assistance, assistance for a student on a temporary basis or scaffolding as a student advances to a higher level. With this type of assistance, some students may perform at an acceptable level in grade level material and on grade level assessment. As long as a minimum grade of C is **consistently** achieved, without substantive assistance from resource/support personnel, the student may receive the grade earned.

- 13. What if the student who is in McGraw's green level for small group instruction is making As and Bs on most of the grade level assessment done in reading?**

If the student is reading the assessment selection independently, reading the assessment questions independently, and performing at an A or B level on the McGraw grade level reading assessments, then the student may be placed too low and should be moved up to

more challenging material. One interim step might be to provide instruction in the red level book. If this is successful, the student would no longer be considered to be below grade level and would get the grade earned on the assessments. Our objective is to provide instruction that will accelerate the child's move to achievement in grade level or above materials (i.e., red level or blue level).

One note of caution: A student may appear to be proficient at a particular level based on results of the assessment for the reading selection. Yet, those scores may be slightly inflated due to the student's auditory recall following the daily discussion of the selection theme and the immediacy of the assessment to the conclusion of the selection. A student should also be assessed on "cold reads" to accurately identify the application of skills. If the scores of the two assessment events are not comparable, then the student is not yet proficient and not ready to be moved to the next level.

- 14. Since some low performing students also receive instruction in the grade level McGraw anthology, wouldn't they be considered on grade level and be able to receive an A, B, or C?**

No, not until a student is fluent in the "red level" of the McGraw anthology.

While there is skill and concept instruction regarding background knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension, phonics/phonemic awareness and modeled and shared reading provided to the whole class, low performing students would not be able to read the anthology (or the red book) fluently. Therefore, the teacher would place the low performing student in instructional level materials (green book or below) in order to provide appropriate guided reading instruction. A grade no higher than a D or N may be awarded due to below grade level performance.

When the student is able to read the red book fluently and comprehend what is read, he would no longer be considered below grade level and would therefore earn an A, B, or C.

- 15. Is mathematics treated the same as reading in addressing below grade level performance?**

Yes, but please consider what is needed to appropriately instruct the student.

Many times in the study of mathematics, grade level concepts can be successfully taught to low performing students by instructing with concrete models or manipulatives. A good example is "Hands-on Equations" as a method for teaching algebraic thinking. Just because a teacher is using these methods does not mean a student cannot earn an A, B, or C.

However, if based on assessment the teacher finds it necessary to use instructional materials, adopted basal text(s), or GLEs/benchmarks from a lower grade level, then the student is clearly not performing on grade level. In that case, it would be misleading to give the child a grade which, by definition, indicates acceptable progress on grade level. Therefore, in such an instance, parents would have to be made aware of their child's performance in relation to that grade's expected Sunshine State Standards and the student would earn a D or N until performance improves.

- 16. What if a teacher has not read the Pupil Progression Plan and has been sending home daily and weekly papers with As, Bs, Cs and Ss to parents of children clearly below grade level in reading and math? What should that teacher do now?**

The Pupil Progression Plan, which defines the grading policy is approved on an annual basis by the School Board. Copies are sent to every principal to communicate and discuss with staff. The complete document is also posted on the district website. It is the responsibility of every administrator and teacher to read and implement the policies in the Pupil Progress Plan.

In this situation, the teacher should immediately contact the parents and schedule a conference. During the conference, accurate information and grade level expectations should be communicated and a PMP should be developed, in collaboration with the parents. The PMP should identify expected outcomes, strategies and services which will be provided in the classroom setting, and strategies which the parents could use at home to assist their child in achieving grade level proficiency. The teacher should maintain consistent contact with the parent to communicate the progress of their child and make revisions to the PMP, as needed.

Of significance: The Superintendent and the Principal will stand behind the teacher who assesses appropriately, instructs according to the Sunshine State Standards, grades honestly according to the standards, and communicates clearly and often with parents.