

Questions and Answers for Teachers and Principals Concerning Students Who Are Operating Below Grade Level in Middle and High School

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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 a PMP, he cannot receive higher than a D on class work and on the report card?

No, that's not true. The reason a student begins the year with a PMP is because of poor performance last year. This year the student may respond to a different teacher or more effective, individualized teaching strategies by working harder and performing at higher achievement levels. 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 higher achievement levels.

Every Okaloosa student, regardless of whether he has a PMP, should receive the grade he earns, A to F, based solely on his performance toward achieving the content and requirements for the course that he is taking.

2. Is it true that a Level 1 student cannot receive higher than a D on class work and on the report card?

No, a student is graded solely on his progress toward proficiency of the Sunshine State Standards (Grade Level Expectation Benchmarks) in each course. There will be many courses in which a Level 1 student can reach proficiency. The teacher will carefully monitor this student's progress, however, as Level 1 is indicative of an academic deficit.

3. Suppose a middle school student failed his math course last year and is now a 7th grader taking 6th grade and 7th grade math. Must a student be given a D or F in the 6th grade math course because it is below his current grade level?

If a 7th grade student is retaking 6th grade math, his grade is determined by the progress towards the SSSs and essential content for the course in sixth grade math. His grade is determined by the grade-level expectations of the course as described by the Florida Course Description, in this case, 6th grade math expectations. Therefore, the student may receive the grade earned, A-F. However, a code of U (below grade level) should be placed in the GLP column of the report card.

4. What about students in remedial courses and those taking immersion classes? Do they have to make a D or F in these courses because they are functioning below grade level?

The students in Intensive Language Arts 1000000, 1000400, Intensive Reading 1000010, 1000410, and Intensive Basic Skills 1000020, 1000420, should be taking these courses as electives and not for their required language arts or math course. According to the Florida Course Description, the student successfully completes the course when the student:

Demonstrates competency in the Sunshine State Standards benchmarks for language arts, reading or math (depending on the course) that have been identified through screening and individual diagnosis of each student's need for remedial instruction and specified in his/her Progress Monitoring Plan (PMP).

The instructional approaches used in this course should be designed to provide effective remedial strategies to meet the needs of each student. Teachers should use results of individual diagnostic assessments to determine appropriate Sunshine State Standards benchmarks for use with each student. State recommended or district Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) may also be used in this process. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that identified benchmarks are consistent with the needs of individual students.

Students should be given opportunities to develop and apply skills through guided, shared, and independent practice and test-taking in reading, writing, science and/or mathematics.

Therefore, students in these intensive courses may certainly earn As, Bs, and Cs. However, if the student is being instructed in below grade level material, a U should also be marked in the GLP column of the report card. Remedial courses only count as an elective in meeting the Florida graduation requirements for a high school diploma.

A word of caution: A number of parents contacted district office administrators this year because their child received As or Bs in these courses and then were retained and/or did not pass FCAT. They expressed anger and confusion. Schools must evaluate instruction, assessment and grading policies with this set of students and establish a system of frequent, honest communication with parents.

5. What about students in immersion classes and other alternative programs taking their required math and language arts courses for graduation? Are they graded on their individual diagnosis and improvement or the grade level expectations for the course?

Students in middle and high school grades are measured solely by their academic progress towards proficiency in the Sunshine State Standards and the Florida Course Descriptions. If a student is not achieving these expectations, he must not receive grades indicating success. The Pupil Progression Plan defines a C as “lowest acceptable progress to average progress”. The State requires that we report honestly and accurately to parents each child’s progress towards achieving proficiency at grade level, as defined by the Sunshine State Standards (Grade Level Expectations/Benchmarks). It follows that a student performing below course expectations would not earn a grade representing “average,” “above average,” or “outstanding performance.”

The Florida Course Descriptions provide essential content and requirements for individual courses in grades 6-12. The Sunshine State Standards are incorporated in the essential content and course requirements. Every Florida Course Description can be found at <http://www.firn.edu/doe/curriculum/crscodes/basic612/readfirs.htm>.

6. When a student in an academic course earns a D or F should a U also be marked in the GLP column?

Yes, a student that earns a D or F in any academic course, for any reason, is not working at grade level or meeting course expectations in that course, and therefore, a U should be marked in the GLP column on the report card.

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

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 (middle school, only). Most teachers also use weekly notes, email, newsletter, 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 school work.

Parents have rightly asked why their students logically could be in danger of not graduating because of FCAT scores when report card grades showed Cs. Report card grades are based solely on proficiency in meeting grade level expectations, as defined by the Sunshine State Standards in our course descriptions. FCAT is a test that measures proficiency against the same standards. Teachers experience frustration and embarrassment trying to explain to parents why their students received Bs and Cs on their report cards but were not recommended for promotion because they were performing and testing below grade level. Our middle grade students may be retained based on FCAT testing results.

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.

8. Will below-grade-level students stop working or have their self-esteem negatively affected if they receive a D or F 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.

As noted above, students and parents are most appreciative of the comments teachers make on the report card and on papers taken home. Students' self-confidence and self-esteem are effectively and honestly promoted when teachers explain the progress a child has made, even if he's not up to grade level yet, by showing examples of previous work compared to current work. This builds realistic hope.

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.

9. Do my ESE students have to receive a D or F?

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 Statute 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 to course expectations in order to earn a C or better. Accommodations for instruction and assessment, as defined in the IEP, should always be honored. If an ESE student is seeking a special diploma, then he may be taught using special standards and may be graded on those standards.

10. Can't the IEP call for a different grading scale for ESE students?

No. The IEP should include all accommodations appropriate to the student's classroom learning and testing. However, using a different grading scale for an ESE student on a regular diploma track is not an appropriate IEP strategy. In fact, it's discrimination. As noted above, an ESE student on a special diploma track should be instructed and graded according to those standards. However, parents must not only be informed but must understand the implications of a special diploma vs. a regular diploma.

11. What if a teacher hasn't read the Pupil Progression Plan and is unaware of the state laws and the district policy regarding below-grade-level performance? What if that teacher has been sending home report cards with an S in the GLP column to parents of students being instructed in below grade level material (in particular, reading)? What should that teacher do now?

This year's Pupil Progression Plan defining the grading policy was passed by the School Board and copies were sent to every principal. In addition, it has been posted on the district website since that time. It is the responsibility of every administrator and teacher to read and implement the policies in the Pupil Progression Plan.

In this situation, the teacher should immediately contact the parents, schedule a conference and provide accurate information regarding the student's grade level performance. Most teachers have already met with parents in PMP and IEP meetings; these meetings provide the appropriate setting to discuss materials and strategies being used in the instructional program and results of program assessment which convey specific designation of academic performance.

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.