Learning from the Past, Preparing for the Future

Over the course of the past three years, Loudoun County Public Schools has been implementing a standards-aligned assessment, grading and reporting system—CLARITY. During that time many lessons have been learned and adjustments made. In preparation for the opening of the parent portal next school year, this issue of STRIDE shares insights and lessons learned.

Included are tips from teachers at Potomac Falls High School, data from a parent survey at the pilot schools using the portal, results from a recent elementary teacher survey on the function of CLARITY for the K-5 report card and an overview of the work of the district-wide Assessment and Grading Committee which includes upcoming professional development opportunities.

Several offices have supported this initiative—Curriculum and Instruction, Elementary, Middle and High School, Instructional Services and Career and Technical Education.

Parents Praise Access to CLARITY

Parents of students in the schools that piloted the Parent Portal last year were surveyed about the usefulness of the application and its impact on student progress.

More than 200 parents from Farmwell Station Middle School, River Bend Middle School, Smart's Mill Middle School, Broad Run High School, Potomac Falls High School, and Tuscarora High School responded to the online questionnaire in June 2011.

The parents were enthusiastic about the ability to access the teachers’ records of attendance, assignments, and grades. Specifically:

- 92% agreed that CLARITY was easy to navigate.
- 80% found the upcoming assignments list of overdue, missing, and future assignments useful.
- 96% said that CLARITY provided valuable information on their child’s progress.
- 89% noted that the parent portal improved communication between the school and parents.

The following comment is representative of the feedback that parents offered about the role of the parent portal in keeping students on track with assignments:

“I felt more informed about what was happening with my child’s school work during the semester and how he was progressing. Before using CLARITY, I wasn’t certain of his progress until interim grades/report cards were sent out which always seemed to me to be too late in the process. Overall, I think CLARITY is a great tool for teachers and parents!”

The positive response is a tribute to the hard work and efforts of teachers at the pilot schools. Kudos!

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K-12 Assessment and Grading Common Expectations

VISION:

LCPS IS COMMITTED TO QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND GRADING PRACTICES WHEREBY ALL TEACHERS CAN DESIGN ASSESSMENTS THAT ALIGN WITH STANDARDS AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING.

The lists below are practices that are to be developed over time by all LCPS teachers.

QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND GRADING PRACTICES

Assessment of student learning is an essential component of the teaching and learning process.

1. Quality assessment involves timely feedback embedded in the learning experience.
2. A variety of formative assessments is included in each lesson in order to adjust instruction and move students to learning targets/standards.
3. Summative assessments are linked to standards within content areas.
4. Quality assessment ensures that students are involved in and parents are informed of the process.
5. Common assessment and grading practices requires collaborative effort among teachers.
6. Grades reflect student mastery, multiple efforts, and student growth within a grade level or subject area.
7. Learning progressions are available for use as scaffolds for learning and instruction.

CLARITY

Using the CLARITY parent portal, teachers communicate to students and parents how assignments, assessments, and grades are tied to intended learning targets. Best practice suggests:

1. All teachers regularly update their grade book(s), including:
   a. Posting assignments and assessments as assigned.
   b. Providing useful course/assignment descriptions.
   c. Recording grades every ten instructional days.
   d. Linking no more than 2-3 standards to a single assessment.

2. All teachers will communicate assessment/grading practices and provide an overview of curriculum content within the course narrative.

3. Local teaching staff aligns grading practices within school parameters regarding weighting, retesting, types of assignments and assessments etc.

4. School-wide assessment and grading expectations are posted on the CLARITY parent portal page of each school.
Upcoming Assessment and Grading PD

This Spring teams of teachers worked with Eric Stewart, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Barb Gruber, Technology Specialist, and John O’Connor, Staff Development Supervisor, to develop professional development modules in support of the quality assessment and grading initiative.

The topics for the modules were chosen based on survey results from the division Assessment and Grading Committee. The modules have been organized into a framework of 4 areas:

1. K-12 Common Assessment and Grading Practices;
2. From Standards to Quality Assessment;
3. Learning Targets, Rubrics, Scoring and Grading; and
4. Communicating Performance and the Parent Portal

The modules use practical strategies for assessing learning, creating quality assessments and grading performance and using CLARITY.

*School-based teams will work collaboratively to create a 2012-2013 PD plan for their staff.

### AUGUST 2012—At a Glance

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<th>Monday</th>
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<td>New Hires K-12 Farmwell Station MS</td>
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<td>15 Returning Teachers Report to School</td>
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<td>County-wide PD Day ES—School Based</td>
<td>County-wide PD Day ES—CLARITY</td>
<td>County-wide PD Day ES—DOI Content</td>
<td>Planning Day</td>
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<td>First Day of School</td>
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<td>24 Planning Day</td>
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| Module 1: LCPS Common K-12 Expectations, Types of Assessments and How CLARITY Works |
| Module 2: Using Standards to Create Learning Targets |
| Module 3: How to Create a Learning Progression from a Learning Target |
| Module 4: Transforming Learning Targets into Quality Assessments |
| Module 5: From Learning Targets to Rubric to Scoring Student Performance |
| Module 6: Communicating Student Learning and Performance through Quality Feedback |
| Module 7: Preparing for the CLARITY Parent Portal: What does my grade book communicate? |
| Module 8: CLARITY: Setting Up My Grade Book |
| Module 9: Navigating Curriculum within CLARITY |
| Module 10: Using CLARITY Reports |
Parent Portal: The Teacher’s Perspective

STRIDE staff recently spoke with department chairs from Potomac Falls about their experiences with the CLARITY Parent Portal as a second-year pilot school. Jon Ackerman (Social Science, no relation to Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Sharon Ackerman), Karen Curran (Math), Conrad Varblow (Science), Jason White (English), and Assistant Principal Kirk Dolson described the expectations placed on teachers and the benefits they have seen for parent communication and student achievement.

How has the parent portal changed communication between teachers, students, and parents?

Mr. Ackerman and Ms. Curran told us that their email correspondence decreased after the parent portal was implemented because parents had an easy way to monitor their student’s grades directly instead of requesting the information from the teacher.

The option has relieved the teacher of some of the burden of continually notifying parents when a student’s grades are decreasing, which can be time-consuming for teachers who are responsible for 90-150 students.

As Mr. Varblow noted, “Some parents would religiously ask for an update on grades and assignments every Friday. Since the parent portal, that doesn’t happen anymore – they can look it up on their own. There are concerned parents who for whatever reason needed to monitor their student a lot and the teacher doesn’t have to be in the loop.”

At the same time, communication from parents is more informed. Mr. White said that he has found that parents are asking for specific information about an assignment and opportunities for grades that they see within CLARITY. IEP discussions are also more substantive since parents have access to grades before they arrive for the meeting.

Parents aren’t the only users logging into the portal. The teachers noted that students themselves have taken an active interest in keeping track of their grades with access to the grade book. “They’re coming into class saying, ‘Ok, I’ve got an 84, I need to bring that up to an 85,’ or ‘CLARITY said that I was missing an assignment - is it because you didn’t grade it yet or is it just not in,’ said Ms. Curran. “They seem to be asking more questions about why their grade is what it is,” she added. Mr. White agreed, telling us that the students check for updates on their smartphones.

“[Students] seem to be asking more questions about why their grade is what it is.”

Karen Curran
Math Department Chair

Do you find the tools in CLARITY to be useful in communicating with parents?

Assistant principal Kirk Dolson explained that the Potomac Falls administration set the expectations that teachers would update their grade books every two weeks. That requirement is self-regulating, Mr. Varblow told us. “If you take the whole two weeks, students and parents will start asking what the grades are and where they are. It pushes you to keep your grades fresh.”

Although that timeframe can be a challenge for writing assignments, Mr. Ackerman and Mr. White appreciated the benefit to having a grade book that is open to parents and students. Mr. Ackerman noted that, “It might feel that it’s an inconvenience to have someone looking over your shoulder at your grade book, but the great thing is that someone is looking over your shoulder at your grade book. I’ve made mistakes putting in student’s scores. And now instead of not finding that mistake until mid terms or the end of the quarter because the student or parent was never privy to the entire grade book, now I’m getting that within 24 hours and can easily make the grade accurate again.”

Potomac Falls does not have specific requirements for how the tools in CLARITY are to be used, giving the teachers the flexibility to experiment within their class situation and communication needs. Mr. White said that he likes to use the narrative feature to provide the rubric for assignments so that parents can see exactly how grades are determined. Ms. Curran keeps track of discipline issues, such as tardy excuses, in the comments section.

The comments section can also be used to report improvements in student attitudes and achievements. Mr. White provided this example: “I had a student who was struggling in my class. After one vocabulary quiz, she came up to me and said, ‘I can’t wait for you to grade this. I know I nailed it.’ I put that quote in CLARITY and then of course the grade bore that out. But it was really nice for me to express something positive that the grade [by itself] would not have communicated, which was her confidence and growing skill in my class.”

(Continued on page 5)
Ms. Curran added that she likes the ability to enter formative assessments even though they don’t count toward the grade so the parent can see trends. That way, “the parents know a test is coming up, yet the student has failed every exit ticket so far, so they’d better be studying for the test,” she said.

Mr. Ackerman told us that his students will sometimes request that he not enter formative assessment grades because their parents will question them about it. “That speaks to how interested many of the parents and students are with that degree of communication. Even if it doesn’t affect their grade, parents still want to know how their student is doing.”

How has the opening of the parent portal changed your assessment and grading practices?

The department chairs indicated that CLARITY has provided them with an opportunity to distinguish between formative and summative assessment in a way that helps students and teachers understand the rationale and process of assessment and grading.

Mr. White said that “CLARITY and the parent portal has allowed me to 0 weight grades and experiment with things like not grading homework. My students are constantly asking me ‘are you assessing this or are you grading this?’ They see the difference as one being solely communication and one having an impact on their grade.”

Karen Curran highlighted the emphasis on mastery: “The grade is more reflective of student mastery of the content. All of our conversations on assessment and grading force us to focus on why an assignment is given – does it really count towards the grade. There is so much more going in the grade book, with [the inclusion of] formative assessment. Students are rising to the results of formative assessments and the grades are better this year than in previous years.”

According to Mr. White, the availability of non-weighting for homework created an environment where the grades reflected mastery of the content rather than the behavior of turning work in on time. Mr. Varblow agreed. “The grades they receive that count more reflect what the student has learned and much less what the student has done or hasn’t done. If the student doesn’t succeed in the class, many times it may have been because they didn’t do certain things. With that out of the picture, you can safely say the student hasn’t mastered this material. And you can note what material they haven’t mastered.”

Despite the practice of not grading homework, the teachers report that more students are doing homework than in previous years. The trend is attributed to parental monitoring of assignments in CLARITY and the pressure they place on their children to complete their work.

Mr. Ackerman described the relationship between grading/assessment and CLARITY this way: “CLARITY has not driven the discussion about grading and assessment as much as the discussion about how we can use CLARITY. It was not this scary program that was going to keep us up nights responding to parent emails. CLARITY was the tool that cut back on the number of parent emails that we got and became the way that we can make our conversations about grading and assessment more visible [than when they] only saw the midterm and quarterly reports. Neither of those communicate as effectively as CLARITY does.”

Thank you to the Potomac Falls Administration and department chairs for their contributions to this article:

Janice Koslowski, Principal
Kirk Dolson, Assistant Principal
Jon Ackerman, Social Science & Global Studies Chair
Karen Curran, Math Chair
Conrad Varblow, Science Chair
Jason White, English Chair
What Do Parents See in the Parent Portal?

To see an overview of the Parent Portal, please view Using the Loudoun County Public Schools CLARITY Parent Portal

Kindergarten Report Card Revisions

In March, kindergarten teachers were asked to complete a brief online survey to obtain their perspectives on the kindergarten report card and changes that would make it more relevant for their students.

The 80 teachers who responded to the survey expressed support for:

1. eliminating the requirement to mark topic statements during the first quarter, but continuing to summarize the first quarter conference in the comments section;
2. removing the “Word Recognition Key” (sight specific words) from the report card;
3. eliminating the topic statement “Reads sight words;”
4. replacing current quarterly benchmarks with single, annual targets for each topic statement;
5. eliminating the “Interim Progress Report” from the manual;
6. reducing the list of “Characteristics that affect learning” and changing the key to S for Satisfactory and N for Needs Improvement; and
7. eliminating the requirement that four pieces of evidence be collected in order for a topic statement to be marked with a progress indicator.

The following changes were made to the report card at the suggestion of a task force of kindergarten teachers who reviewed the survey results:

Language Arts

- Prints in manuscript legibly.
- Uses effective oral communications in a variety of settings.
- Demonstrates phonemic awareness (rhyming, blending sounds, and word/sentence segmenting.)

Math

- Counts orally (1s, 5s, 10s).
- Identifies, describes, traces and locates geometric figures.
- Identifies parts of a set and/or region that represent fractions (halves, fourths).
- Split “Models adding and subtracting” into “Models adding whole numbers” and “Models subtracting whole numbers.”
Survey Results Lead to CLARITY Improvements

Several changes have been made to the CLARITY application based on feedback offered by administrators, teachers and parents through the LEA Teacher Survey (May 2011), the LCPS Teacher Survey (May 2011), the LCPS Parent Survey (May 2011), and the Assessment and Grading Committee and School Principals Survey (January 2012). Below are the major concerns and suggestions expressed in the surveys and the resolution that has been completed, in process, or not possible for technical reasons. The CLARITY team will continue to solicit the opinion of CLARITY users to ensure that the application meets the needs of students, parents, and school staff.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerns/Suggestion</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for additional training</td>
<td>Division wide committee is meeting to identify professional development needs and create training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time recording report card grades and assignments</td>
<td>Limiting assessments/grades posted in CLARITY to only those required Updating elementary report card manual and training materials to eliminate the expectation to have multiple grades for each standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived readiness for Parent Portal, Consistency in practice</td>
<td>Developed common expectations for assessment and grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of SOL with report card topic statements</td>
<td>Teacher teams reviewed and remapped SOLs to report card for 2012-2013 Standards and curriculum pacing guides revised for 2012-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce the number of topic statements</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>View of entire report card without running a report (Elementary Only)</td>
<td>Not possible within the application, which is designed to aggregate assessments and grades into a report card by rendering a report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slowness of application and overall report response time</td>
<td>Added 2 additional report servers &amp; decreased timeout setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access for all teachers</td>
<td>Created a “read-only” role in application for 2012-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need additional resources</td>
<td>Piloting additional resources to the curriculum side of CLARITY, video and quick guides for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many grade scales for elementary students</td>
<td>Reduced the number of scales (Summer 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add spell check to comment section</td>
<td>Vendor added feature (Summer 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent ability to change password</td>
<td>Turned on feature so parents can change their passwords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timely updating of portal information</td>
<td>Developing school based expectations for updating based on best assessment and grading practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More communication on opening and closing</td>
<td>Posting on website and use of ConnectEd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School level support inconsistent</td>
<td>Designed portal support training for school staff</td>
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- **Completed**
- **In process**
- **Not possible for technical reasons**
CLARITY Implementation Do’s and Don’ts from PFHS

Planning for CLARITY

- Don’t use CLARITY to drive the discussion about grading and assessment in the school. Use grading and assessment best practices to determine how to use the tools in CLARITY.

- Within a department or school, come to a consensus about the proportion of assessments that are formative and summative so it is consistent from teacher to teacher.

- When weighting categories, think carefully about the number of points to assign because the calculation cannot be changed during the year.

- Include formative assessment results as well as summative in CLARITY even though they do not count toward the grade so parents can see progress.

- Link assessments to standards and if an assessment cannot be associated with a standard, evaluate whether it is necessary.

- Review best practices on an annual basis to highlight lessons learned about things that worked and didn’t work.

- Don’t be afraid that parents and students will catch your mistakes in entering grades or weights. Consider their questions and corrections as opportunities to improve the accuracy of your grade book.

Using CLARITY Tools

- Make titles easy to understand. Don’t use acronyms in titles or comments.

- Clearly identify in the title which assessments are formative and which are summative.

- Be aware that the parent portal does not display the category color-coding from the teacher grade book.

- Use the comments section to note multiple attempts for assessments (retakes).

- Use the narrative section to describe the assignment.

- Put the rubric for an assignment in the narrative field to show how the grade was determined.

- Use the comments section to highlight changes in student attitudes or behaviors.

- Update the student narrative throughout the year to provide an overall view of the student.

- Test how your class page will display to parents by requesting that a TRT or administrator log into the Student Explorer, which is the parent view.

Communicating about CLARITY

- Demonstrate CLARITY to parents at Back to School night and explain the format of your class page.

- Don’t assume that all students have access to CLARITY. In some situations, the parent has not signed the document for the student’s record or shared the password with the student.

- Share how you use the different tools in CLARITY with your colleagues.

Helpful CLARITY Reports

CLARITY contains a variety of reports for administrators and teachers to summarize trends in student achievement.

Below are some of the reports that users have found to be the most useful:

Student Missing Assignments

Consolidated student missing assignments report displaying due date, category and points possible for all of a student’s classes.

Student Failing Report

Displays a list of students who fall below a numeric threshold or displays a list of students who have a specific letter grade.

Class Grade Graph (Quarter)

Displays a bar graph showing the distribution of student grades within each class for the chosen marking period.
Have you ever wondered if central office staff looks at student perceptions to drive improvement in its instructional programs? This is a salient question because in a recent report on high-performing school districts by Hanover Research (2012), the researchers found that “few of the profiled districts incorporate student perceptions of academic programs into their program evaluations.”

To answer the question for LCPS, we must hark back to the results of the May 2010 Staff Survey for School Improvement, which revealed the following indicator with the lowest average score district-wide: “Students are engaged in planning that impacts the school program,” an indicator in the domain of Students and Parents as Decision Makers.

To provide students more input in the school planning decision-making process, the Research Office collaborated with staff from Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to redesign and pilot a model student climate survey at three elementary schools during the 2010-11 school year.

The instrument in its final form comprised eight categories: Student Relations, Rules and Expectations, School Safety, Teacher-Student Relations, Behavior Problems, Punitive Techniques, Positive Techniques, and Opportunities for Social-Emotional Learning.

In February 2012, approximately 12,095 students from 37 schools, 31 of which are currently implementing PBIS, completed the PBIS Student Climate Survey. The chart below summarizes the average scores in each subscale on a scale of 1-4, with 4 as the highest rating. Descriptions of the subscales are included in the Student Climate Survey Results Profile for the division.

The data were compiled and shared with the participating schools at cluster meetings conducted throughout the month of April 2012. Participating administrators and teachers critically analyzed the data using the LCPS Data Action Cycle from Skovision, followed by the PBIS “3-Circles” Problem-Solving Worksheet to develop action plans for the 2012-13 school year.

References:


Loudoun County Public Schools (2012). Student climate survey results profile.
Elementary Teacher Survey: Linking Assignments/Assessments in CLARITY

In response to concerns expressed by some elementary school teachers about the requirement to associate specific standards with each topic statement in CLARITY, the Department of Instruction conducted a survey to determine teacher preferences for linking assignment and assessments. Teachers were asked to select one of two options:

Option 1 was to link assignments/assessments directly to the topic statement that teachers feel is most appropriate, bypassing the requirement to specific SOLs. If this option were implemented, any previous linking to SOLs that teachers have created will no longer be available in archived assignments next year.

Option 2 was to continue the current procedures of linking assignments/assessments directly to SOLs for the elementary report card in CLARITY.

More than 800 teachers responded to the online survey, 91 percent of whom indicated that they give grades using the CLARITY grade book. Seventy-one percent of the survey participants selected the first option to link assignments/assessments directly to report card topic statements. Twenty-nine percent of teachers preferred to link assignments/assessments to standards as currently practiced.

Based on these results, as well as the recommendations entered in the comment section, CLARITY will be reconfigured so that elementary general classroom teachers will link assignments and assessments to report card topic statements.

Elementary art, music, and physical education teachers are completing a similar survey regarding the linking of assignments and assessments for their classes.

Highlighted Resources


Loudoun County Public Schools (2012). Student climate survey results profile.