

# Educational Leadership

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## Homework: A Few Practice Arrows

**Used correctly, homework tells teachers where students are now and how to better direct them toward their learning goals.**

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Formative assessment has become one of the most powerful items in my teacher toolbox. By using the information I gain through formative assessments, I can adjust activities and lessons to maximize student learning and minimize unnecessary repetition. I can find out what to reteach and how to differentiate to best meet student needs.

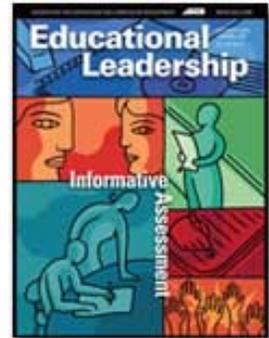
Formative assessments also provide an avenue for the middle school students in my Spanish classes to get feedback and ideas on how to improve. Formative assessments enable students to work with what they are learning—to play with it, try it on, and show what they can do without being judged or graded.

### What Is Formative Assessment?

Assessments tend to fall into one of two categories: formative and summative. The use of these terms has become muddled, with many teachers using them almost interchangeably. Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004) refer to the two types of assessment as assessment *for* learning (formative) and assessment *of* learning (summative). Assessment *for* learning happens while students are still in the learning process. These assessments help teachers diagnose student needs, provide feedback, and show students how to improve. In contrast, assessment *of* learning happens after the learning process has ended. These assessments, which include unit exams, projects, and standardized tests, give us a snapshot of what a student has learned at a given point in time. The focus is on assigning a grade to indicate student achievement.

### Homework as Rehearsal

One of the most valuable formative assessments a teacher can use is homework. To help students and parents understand my expectations for homework, I equate it with practice in a sports or music setting. Top-level athletes need to practice regularly to be successful. Athletes are not given their final evaluation on the practice field, but at the important game or race. Students need homework as practice so that they can perform well on their summative



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assessments.

When homework is used as a formative assessment, students have multiple opportunities to practice, get feedback from the teacher, and improve. Homework becomes a safe place to try out new skills without penalty, just as athletes and musicians try out their skills on the practice field or in rehearsals. Effective homework is the rehearsal before the final event.

Because the role of homework has changed in my classroom, so has the way I evaluate it. I no longer count homework when computing student grades. I still collect and comment on students' homework (although not all of it), and I still report to parents whether or not their child is completing homework assignments, but I set the weight of homework to zero.

Surprisingly, the number of students actually completing and turning in assignments has increased since I stopped counting homework for points and started using it solely for practice.

Eliminating the homework grade has also caused students' overall grades to more accurately reflect their performance. In classes where total points are used to determine final grades, homework points often outweigh points for other assessments. If students complete homework assignments and accumulate lots of points, their grade can be distorted toward the high end, even if they *cannot* perform successfully on assessments. Likewise, if students do not complete homework assignments, their grade can be distorted toward the low end, even if they *can* perform successfully on assessments. The power of the homework zero can far outweigh what students demonstrate on other assessments and cause them to give up on learning (O'Connor, 2002).

## **Grading Practices**

In addition to changing the role of homework in the grades I give, I have changed my entire grading practice. I have switched from assessment categories—homework, class participation, projects, tests, quizzes, and so on—to a standards-based reporting format. I report my grades based on the major skills that I want students to know and be able to do: understand written and spoken Spanish, write and speak comprehensibly, and accurately use the vocabulary and grammar structures we've learned. I grade student projects, performance assessments, and summative assessments according to these standards, and I no longer put a total percentage grade on assessments. Instead, I put a grade for each standard being assessed so that one test or project often has several different grades, each indicating progress toward a different standard.

For example, on a recent project, students received five grades, one for each of the following: ability to communicate ideas, accuracy of grammar structures, correct word choice, inclusion of all required information, and visual appeal.

I also include a "process" portion for grades (only 10 percent) that includes points for such activities as completing rough drafts, following directions, working with others on projects, and so on. Because I keep this process portion of the grade to a low percentage, student grades are still based primarily on achievement of the standards I have set for them and not on behaviors such as participation and homework completion. Teachers in any subject area can identify the main skills that they expect students to know and be able to do and set up their

grading accordingly.

## **Clearer Communication**

Since I started using standards-based grades, I have found that the feedback I give to both students and parents is more meaningful and focused. For example, a quiz or test grade of 85 percent does not indicate what portions of the quiz the student scored well in and what areas the student needs to improve. The score itself is meaningless. By recording grades according to standards, I can see which students need to work on listening or reading comprehension, forming verbs, spelling vocabulary words, or making themselves understood when writing or speaking.

These grades also give students information that helps them move closer to the standards. Just by reporting their grades in a standards-based format, I am able to provide parents with more detailed information about their child's progress. Grades that directly report achievement toward a standard measured by specific criteria are meaningful to all stakeholders—students, teachers, and parents.

## **The Case for Formative Assessment**

If we want students to show us what they know and can do as part of a summative assessment, we must provide them with plenty of opportunities to show us what they know along the way. Formative assessment fulfills this role. We can't expect students to hit a target without having them shoot some practice arrows. Formative assessments are the arrows that students shoot along the way in the learning process. Some miss the target completely, others get close, and others score a bull's-eye. By looking at what students do as they shoot their practice arrows, we can keep them motivated to practice, offer encouragement and correction, and help all students hit the mark.

## **References**

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