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Evaluation and Grading at The Urban School Frequently Asked Questions 2011-12

What's different about Urban's evaluation policy this year?

Over the past couple of years, the school undertook a thorough and inclusive review of our grading and evaluation policy to ensure that it was still serving the larger, more diverse group of students and families we now serve. Additionally, we were motivated to see how we might make our assessment practices more effective and meaningful for students. Urban's revised policy includes the following new practices beginning in the 2011-12 school year:

1. Align interim and course reports to include a common set of performance indicators and learning standards (see samples of revised rubrics below).
2. Indicate overall achievement on the Interim Report rubric.
3. Share final course grades with students and parents/guardians on course reports.
4. Expand use of rubrics to assess major papers, reports, projects, labs and problem sets.
5. Implement a new advisor/student conference at the beginning of winter and spring terms to provide students with a forum for comprehensive discussions of learning goals and to better understand themselves as learners.

What do Urban's current grading and evaluation practices look like?

Students and parents receive reports every six weeks, at the midpoint and at the end of each course. The **Interim Report** (see samples of revised rubrics below) includes a statement of course expectations; an interim rubric which lists key habits, skills and proficiencies for that subject; a summary indication of overall achievement in the course to date; and a short bulleted list comments by the teacher, emphasizing goals for improvement. In addition, students have a face-to-face conference with each teacher to review their report, discuss progress to date and set goals for the second half of the course.

The final **Course Report** (see samples of revised rubrics below) consists of a statement of course expectations, a rubric similar to that on the Interim Report, a written evaluation summarizing the student's work and achievement in the class, a final course grade and a student self evaluation.

While Urban students do not receive letter grades on individual assignments during the term, they receive ample feedback in the form of written comments, numerical scoring on tests, and standards-based rubrics to give them a more complete picture of their work and achievement and to identify specific areas for ongoing improvement.

What are the chief strengths of Urban's current approach to evaluation?

Our most important goals for evaluation at Urban have remained consistent for 45 years: to coach students toward high academic achievement through meaningful and effective feedback, and to put learning rather than ranking at the forefront of our program.

There are several reasons why we believe Urban's revised assessment system is an improvement for

both students and families:

- 1) The core elements of our approach – helping students gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and areas for growth through specific, differentiated feedback about their learning – remain the foundation of our practices. Specific features include written reports at the mid-point and end of the term; a face-to-face meeting with teachers in each class at the midpoint of the class; and a one-on-one conference with advisors at the beginning of the winter and spring terms to review strategies for a student’s overall growth at Urban (see advisor question below).
- 2) Providing students with a snapshot of their overall achievement at two points in the term – on the interim rubric and with a grade at the end of term – helps them to frame and make sense of the more specific assessment information they receive on the rubrics and reports.
- 3) Our practices ensure that the broadest range of Urban students receive clearer information about their learning across the term, as well as a better understanding of their overall achievement.

Do students receive grades on individual assignments throughout the term?

No. While Urban students do not receive letter grades on individual assignments during the term, they receive ample feedback in the form of written comments, numerical scoring on tests, and standards-based rubrics to give them a more complete picture of their work and achievement, and to identify areas for ongoing improvement.

Will students be able to ask about their grades at any time during the term?

We anticipate that students will ask “how am I doing,” and for this reason we have specified two formal points in the term – at the interim (6-week point) and at the end – when teachers will share information with students about their overall achievement. The new interim rubric includes an indication of overall achievement to date (though not in the form of a letter grade; see samples below), and gives the student and teacher a chance to discuss performance to date and opportunities for improvement in the second half of the class.

Does the overall indicator of achievement at the interim relate to a grade?

The summary of overall achievement to date is not in the form a letter grade, which Urban does not formally record at the midpoint in the term. Rather, this indication maintains the language and style of the Interim rubric and represents a synthesis of the differently weighted rubric categories. It is meant to give students a clearer understanding of their overall performance after only five weeks in the term, and to help them frame and make sense of the more detailed assessment information they receive from the rubric. Along with the bulleted list of goals, the rubric helps to define the steps students can take to improve their learning in the course over the remaining six weeks.

For purposes of clarity, “At Standard” on the rubric is equivalent to B range grades for overall achievement.

What role does my student’s advisor play in helping him/her understand their standing overall standing?

To further strengthen communication about student learning, we are introducing a redesigned advisor/student conference at the beginning of the winter and spring terms. During this conference, the student and advisor will review and interpret course reports and generate goals for future learning. This new conference enables the student and advisor to anchor a discussion of grades in the full context of the course report rubrics and written evaluations. Our goal will be to teach students how to use all of the information on their course reports to better understand themselves as learners, enabling them to become more informed agents of their own growth and development.