

**How Is My Child Doing in School?**  
**Ten research-based ways to find out**  
*by Ronald Dietel*

Published in the March 2001 Issue of the National PTA's Our Children Magazine.

Although hot educational topics come and go, parents will always need to know the answer to the question: How is my child doing in school? The following tips for finding out how well your child is doing in school are based largely on information from federally funded education research. This article focuses on elementary school children, but many of the suggestions apply to students of all ages.

**1. Know what is expected**

Over the past 10 years, states have developed specific academic standards for every grade and most subjects, driven in many cases by revised federal laws and guidelines (Improving America's School Act, 1994). Tests to measure those standards are now in place in most states. Teachers are placing increasing emphasis on the standards and especially the tests. Not only has curriculum become more uniform but also parents have almost immediate access to their state standards via the Internet or at their school. My daughter's 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade teacher for example, sends home the 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade California math standards and requires us to practice with her on those standards as part of her weekly homework. Not only are we aware of what my daughter should know in mathematics, but also we feel part of a team working with her teacher to help her succeed.

**2. Know how well your child is reading**

Numerous studies have demonstrated that children who struggle with reading at an early age will have difficulty not only in reading but virtually all other subjects. Commonsense also tells us that a child who is behind on reading is likely to have difficulty in writing, social studies, and even math and science. It's crucial, therefore, that parents not only help their children learn to read at an early age but also have methods for evaluating their progress.

Research collected by the National Academy of Education provides some signposts of potential reading problems, including difficulty with letter identification, recall of stories and sentences, and phonological awareness. Parents should also review their state's academic standards for what children should be able to do at each grade. By the end of kindergarten, for example, California language arts standards say that children should be able to recognize and name all uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet. The Virginia language arts standards state that kindergarten students should be able to talk about characters, setting, and events in a book that has been read to them.

Remember that children develop at different rates, especially at younger ages. Realize also that many of the state standards were set high to challenge students and educators. Children will not reach all the standards at the same time, but they should make consistent progress.

### **3. Understand test scores**

Driven by federal legislation and desires for higher student performance, more emphasis has been placed on nationally norm-referenced test results than ever before. Yet, parents first need to know that norm-referenced tests, or any test for that matter, are not nearly as accurate as many believe. Research has shown that a student may have only a 30–50 percent chance of scoring within five points on the same test if taken a second time. Consequently, a score change of even as many as 10 points or more may be completely attributable to the test, not the student.

Nevertheless test scores will continue to be a vital indicator of student achievement and school quality. The key points to look for are areas of consistent weakness or persistent declines. If weaknesses are significant, parents need to ask what they and the teacher can do together to help improve those skills.

Equally important is a method for monitoring and evaluating improvement. Waiting a full year for a new set of test scores may cause the student to fall even further behind. Some ideas for monitoring progress are having the student take the same test again in a few months or take a different test to confirm the first results. If progress is still not made, a different instructional strategy should be considered.

Better decisions about a child's achievement are made when based on multiple pieces of information including grades, assignments, parent input, and teacher feedback.

#### **4. Solicit teacher feedback**

Research at the University of Colorado has shown that many parents value teacher feedback on student performance more so than information from norm-referenced tests. Formal teacher feedback is usually presented during parent-teacher conferences but also may occur at specific meetings during the course of the school year. Here are a few suggestions on ways to use a parent-teacher conference to evaluate your child's progress:

- Have interaction with your child's teacher well ahead of time. A teacher conference should be an update on your child's progress because you and the teacher have talked frequently and built up a trusted relationship.
- Get input from your child before the meeting and, if the school and teacher permit, include him the conference.
- If the student is not included in the conference, talk to your child beforehand
- Write down specific questions you have for your child's teacher and send them to the teacher ahead of time. You will have focused your own thoughts and provided the teacher a better chance to answer your questions. Also, you will have conveyed to the teacher the value you place on this meeting.
- Ask about your child's attitude toward school. Children with positive attitudes toward school usually perform better and have stronger social skills.

Before you leave the meeting, have a follow-up plan to address any weaknesses or problems. Then make sure that you, the teacher, and your child follow up on the commitments made. Finally, stay in touch with the teacher and call another meeting as necessary to reevaluate your child's progress.

In terms of informal ways to find out how well your child is doing, e-mail has become an effective supplement to the telephone, especially because messages can be transmitted at any time. E-mail is usually fine for short questions but longer discussions are usually done best in person or on the phone. Spending time at school gives you better access to teachers and staff. If you can help as a classroom volunteer, you establish yourself not only as a willing partner in your own child's education but that of

the entire class. It also gives you the added benefit of observing your child's performance compared to other children. Don't turn volunteer work into a conference about your child, however; they are two very distinct roles.

### **5. Familiarize yourself with your child's homework**

Parents tend to think that our children are getting too much or not enough homework. In our discussions with other parents we may even use homework as a gauge of how our kids compare to others. "Wow, Lenore did 10 book reports in second grade?" But the number of book reports assigned or the age level which kids are doing them is a far weaker gauge of student skills than the quality of the book report completed.

So what does high quality homework look like?

- Does homework cover the educational standards for this grade? Is it linked to classroom assignments and textbooks in both content and difficulty? Do you think other children can do this?
- Does the homework supplement material presented in class? The introduction of completely new material as homework may result in lower performance than material covered in class.

When students struggle on homework, it may be that the student truly lacks understanding or because the material was not adequately covered in school. Or the homework may exceed the standards for appropriate time to complete. Parents will have their best success by staying very patient and clarifying specific problems with their child's teacher.

### **6. Use a report card to identify overall progress**

Driven by a perceived need to provide parents with more comprehensive information about their child's strengths and weaknesses, many schools and districts have adopted alternative report cards. Although usually more prevalent at elementary schools, they may be found in middle and high schools, although high schools generally maintain the traditional A-F format due to college entrance requirements. Another major factor driving new report card formats has been the desire to align report cards with state and district standards.

Newer formats, however, may provide so much information that they confuse parents. Terms such as *emerging*, *progressing*, or *exceeds the standard* may be unclear compared to

an A, B, or C. Another problem is that alternative report cards seem to be revised every few years.

On the positive side it appears that once parents become accustomed to new report cards, they feel they have an improved understanding of their child's progress. Parents also report that they have a better knowledge of what their children are learning in school.

If your school is using an alternative report card, here are some suggestions for incorporating them into an overall picture of your child's performance:

- Study the report cards thoroughly. If you don't understand the ratings, talk to your child's teacher. Don't wait until the next parent-teacher conference.
- Discuss the report card with your child. Ask how she would rate herself on at least some of the scales, and compare those marks to the teacher's ratings.
- If there are areas that need to be improved, ask for a commitment from your child. Work through assignments or projects to improve that specific skill and monitor your child's progress.
- Regardless of the format, compare the ratings or grades to other information including test scores, assignments, and your own observations of your child's performance. Strengths or weakness are more valid when they are consistent across multiple measurements.

### **7. Stay attuned to social skills**

Early indications of potential social development problems include children not readily accepted into peer groups, excessive play in isolation, or difficulty in controlling verbal and physical displays of frustration or anger. For preschool children, there is oftentimes no systematic evaluation outside of parent and day-care provider observation and discussion. Evaluation at young ages is also difficult because children are less emotionally stable. Nevertheless, it is important even at young ages to have some measure of social development because of links to future schooling success.

Observations of a child's interaction with other children may point to potential long-term problems, especially if confirmed by formal rating scales completed by teachers. If necessary, pediatricians can recommend formal evaluation by skilled professionals.

### **8. Evaluate technology skills**

While many states and districts have developed technology standards for students, children have very different opportunities to develop technology fluency both at school and home. Also, although most parents and educators agree that technology skills for their children are important, few evaluation methods exist to measure student progress. Given these challenges, how might parents evaluate their child's technology skills?

- Review the school's technology capabilities. Do children have access to modern, working computers and the Internet? The latter is important for finding content. A common standard is one high-speed computer with CD-ROM and Internet access per 4–5 students. Does the school have a technology expert to maintain and enhance technology systems and applications? Does software support learning goals?
- Ask how skilled teachers are in technology use? Do teachers know how to integrate technology into instruction and learning? Researchers have found instances where even the best equipped classrooms or technology resource rooms do not have technology fluent teachers. A visit to the classroom or school computer lab, for even a few hours, may help answer these questions.

Presuming that the preceding components are satisfactory and that the child regularly uses a home computer, here are some ideas for evaluating your child's technology skills:

- How well does the child handle basic computer operations, such as opening and using software? Can he transition between different programs and solve basic computer problems when they arise?
- Can she use software as a tool to assist in her classroom work, including typing, writing, and eventually preparing formal presentations, graphics, desktop publishing, and even website development?
- How efficient is he in acquiring information needed to support classroom learning? Does he effectively use search terms and bookmarks, is content of high quality, and how well does he use the content to support his paper, presentation, or project?

### **9. Listen to your child**

Even at early ages, children develop the ability for self-evaluation, well aware that that they have different strengths and weaknesses, both physically and academically.

Research suggests that children often self-report academic difficulties or school-related

problems earlier than most parents do. It's important that parents listen closely to their children and provide opportunities to relay feelings about their school successes and disappointments.

Because children are often reluctant to talk about how their day goes at school, parents need to be alert for small clues. If a child has a negative feeling about a particular subject or activity, there is likely something specific that is troubling. Some children may feel more comfortable discussing close personal issues on a one-on-one basis with a parent, say at bedtime, than in a more open discussion at dinner. Classroom assignments and work on special projects or presentations may provide other information about possible problems related to self-esteem or performance.

#### **10. Put it all together**

Put performance-related information into a single folder at home and create a new folder each year or each semester. The folder should contain the state academic standards for that grade level in math and language arts, report cards, major student assignments, a scoring rubric if it is used for multiple assignments, and test score results. Ambitious parents might even keep a small journal about their child's performance. All of this will be helpful for parent-teacher conferences and at other times during the year to review progress. Consider this folder a portfolio of progress.

*Ronald Dietel, Ed.D., is director of communications at National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST), University of California at Los Angeles.*