By Ellen Vorenkamp, Ed.D.

As required by **Executive Order (EO) 2020-35** (www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90705-524032--,00.html), schools across Michigan are developing and implementing their district-level Continuity of Learning and COVID-19 Response Plans, in which they outlined their intentions as to how they will continue the learning of all students. Within these plans, school districts had to describe how they were going to "manage and monitor student learning and plan what's next for learning including the potential need for summer and supplemental learning."

District plans include activities such as:

- **Checking student learning:** Use a variety of strategies to monitor, assess, and provide feedback to students about their learning.
- **Making instructional adjustments:** Use results of the formative assessment process to guide educators' reflections on effectiveness of instruction and to determine next steps for student learning.
- **Engaging families:** Communicate with families about assessment results in order to inform next steps and the potential for supplemental summer learning. Provide language translations, as necessary.

All of these will potentially include some form of grading on student achievement.

However, it is recommended by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Michigan Assessment Consortium (MAC) for schools to engage in a different type of grading system than schools have typically adhered to. For example, MDE in their *Learning at a Distance Guidance* document (April 2020) asked schools and districts to consider:

> To the extent it is feasible and practical, teachers should provide timely feedback to students based on the work they are completing at home. Teachers are encouraged to be flexible and creative in the ways they provide feedback. Additionally, although grading policies are the purview of the local districts, we strongly urge districts to consider adopting a credit/no-credit policy. This will help to incentivize students to engage in ongoing learning while at the same time recognizing the unusual and challenging situation students face. Districts must recognize that having grading policies without a fully formed plan for absolute equity runs the risk of creating disparities in the education of students, thereby disadvantaging more students than will be advantaged.

The MAC, a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement of student learning and achievement through a system of coherent curriculum, balanced assessment and effective instruction, in their *IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS for Student Assessment and Reporting/Grading Policies and Guidelines in District Continuity of Learning Plans* (April 2020), likewise called for a different type of reporting of student achievement, particularly for elementary and middle school students, recommending:

- No grades; *feedback and narrative reports only* (emphasis added) regarding competency/mastery of standards/learning targets. This will serve to communicate important information to students, families, and next year's teachers while maintaining a focus on learning.

What are narrative reports?

So, what are narrative reports? One answer is that they are written descriptions of current learner performance that provide useful information to support the educational growth of each learner, since they document achievement on agreed upon essential standards.

The written description in a narrative report should address the current strengths and areas for improvement in educational achievement, as well as the impending next steps of learning for each student. By providing written descriptions, teachers can describe in a more meaningful manner the nuances of student learning and achievement than can be conveyed by single-subject grades reported on a traditional report card.

There has been some research on the effectiveness of narrative reports, which are sometimes called "narrative evaluations," especially at the university level (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Fisher, 1985; Hanson, Rosenber, & Lane, 2013; and, Wong, 1992). The research shows that the benefits of narrative reports far outweigh the negatives and even further outweigh the use of a single symbol to communicate to parents/guardians, teachers, and students how well students know or have achieved in a particular subject during the course of a school year.

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What are the benefits of narrative reports?

Some benefits of narrative achievement reports include:

- Students and parents get better, more precise information on student achievement across many standards within a content area.
- Future teachers have a more detailed picture of a student's performance.
- Learning is emphasized, rather than the accumulation of points to achieve a grade.
- Students are described as individuals using words rather than through the use of abstract numbers or letters.
- The relationship between the teacher and the student may be improved.

When thinking about these benefits, the one that should entice educators most during our current situation, and ideally beyond, is the second. If teachers can provide a well-developed, effective narrative report for every student, this will be a huge benefit for the teachers who will teach those students next year. Future teachers will have a much better idea of how to individualize instruction for students, thereby ensuring that teachers will be able to pick up where instruction left off this school year, and thus, more likely meet the needs of every student.

In addition, narrative reports can go beyond the communication of achievement and can give students, parents/guardians, and future teachers descriptive information concerning a students' learning tactics (how they engage in the content and the strategies they use) as well as information regarding their self-regulation skills such as self-monitoring, goal setting, reflective thinking, decision making, planning, plan enactment, self-evaluation, and management of emotions arising as a result of behavior change.

If teachers can provide a well-developed, effective narrative report for every student, this will be a huge benefit for the teachers who will teach those students next year. They will have a much better idea of how to individualize instruction for students, thereby ensuring that the needs of every student are more likely to continue to be met.

What should be included in narrative reports?

In order to develop useful narrative reports, several elements need to be included:

1. **A clear description of the essential standards** students need to know, understand and do, and show proficiency on during any given marking period.
2. **Use of systemic and well-proven instructional processes**, agreed upon by all who will be teaching the students, and then shared with all involved parties, i.e., students and parents/guardians.
3. **Consistent expectations of "how good is good enough" for students to be proficient.** Teachers need to collaboratively determine the basic level of proficiency and, ideally, develop **models of proficient performance** with clear indicators and definitions at each level of proficiency for reference, thus helping to ensure the consistent application of these levels across teachers and students.
4. **Specific remarks related to the essential standards being assessed**. Teachers should use quality assessments to collect evidence from observations, conversations and products to write their comments regarding student achievement.
5. **Leading with the positive.** It is best to begin with positive comments and then work into areas where additional growth is necessary. Teachers can also mention observations they have in relation to process and self-regulation skills that students are demonstrating that may be beneficial to the student's learning and/or need to improve. Teachers may also include ideas/strategies for parents/guardians to engage in with their children and any resources that may be helpful for parents/guardians.

What are the drawbacks to narrative reports?

As with all things, there are some drawbacks to narrative reports—the main one being the time it will take teachers to write them. Here are a few helpful hints:

- Begin with the students with the greatest needs.
- Report only on the essential learnings/standards taught during the current marking period.
- Work in teacher teams and perhaps write reports for shared students collaboratively.
- Have more advanced students complete a self-reflection with their own thoughts on their achievement and provide these to parents/guardians with corroborating comments from teachers.
- Provide examples of related student work to support your observations. Digital portfolios shared throughout the year may reduce the amount of narrative that teachers need to write.

- Develop a school-wide narrative report template for teacher use. Examples of templates that educators can use to provide narrative descriptions of student achievement are shown in the attachments.

While this is an unprecedented time for our schools, for educators, and certainly for students and their families, we all can take a number of important steps to ensure that student learning continues and perhaps is even enhanced. The use of narrative reports is an ideal tool to keep parents/guardians apprised of the learning and achievement of their children. It is an important step in ensuring continuity of learning, not only now and in the coming months, but also during "normal" times. Good practice is good practice and narrative reports are an excellent way to communicate student achievement and understanding in a meaningful manner, regardless of current circumstances.

References

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Student Name: ___Jane Brock___ **Subject Area:** ___Reading___

Grade Level Expectation	Benchmark	Focus Area within Benchmark
Narrative Literature Text	Summarize narrative text	By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, by retelling the stories and making connections to characteristic of narrative text.

Description of Instructional Activities	Observations of Student Learning & Performance
Comprehension Activities: Read and Respond Stop and Ask Monitor and Mend Question Cards Plenty of Predictions Inquisitive Inquiry Strategic Strategies	**Strengths** Provides an objective summary of the text. Predicts a logical outcome based on information in a reading selection. Identifies and summarizes the major events in a narrative. Determines the main idea of a text. Determines how details support the main idea. Recognizes elements of a plot. **Areas for Improvement** Identify causal relationships in a text. Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil). Summarize information from multiple sources to address a specific topic.
Teacher Comments concerning process and self-regulation attributes:	Jane is able to identify strategies she utilizes, such as context clues and decoding, as she reads. She sets realistic goals for herself based on feedback and puts in the effort to achieve those goals. She is attentive during instruction and asks questions when she needs clarification.
Suggestions and Resources for Parents:	Continue to read with Jane, asking her probing questions to ensure comprehension. Encourage her to ask clarifying questions and problem solve when she comes up against any unknown words. Read various stories and think together how their themes or topics may have been related or different.

Student Name_____ **Subject Area**_____

Grade Level Expectation	Benchmark	Focus Area within Benchmark

Description of Instructional Activities	Observations of Student Learning & Performance
	Strengths **Areas for Improvement**

Teacher Comments concerning process and self-regulation attributes:	
Suggestions and Resources for Parents:	

Student Name: _____ **Subject Area**:_____

Priority Standards	Lesson Focus	Teacher Feedback
Reading		**Narrative Feedback**
		Strengths: Areas for Improvement:
Writing		**Narrative Feedback**
		Strengths: Areas for Improvement:
Math		**Narrative Feedback**
		Strengths: Areas for Improvement:
Science		**Narrative Feedback**
		Strengths: Areas for Improvement:
Social Studies		**Narrative Feedback**
		Strengths: Areas for Improvement:
Comments concerning process and self-regulation attributes:		
Suggestions and Resources for Parents:		