

chapter

7

Communicating with Parents about Rubrics

Parents are brought into the process, too. “On back-to-school nights, I ask parents to write. . . . You should see the fear on their faces. . . . They even ask me if I’m going to collect the writing or if I’m going to read it. I tell them, no, it’s just for them. But I do ask them to think about how writing was assessed when they were kids. They remember this sea of red marks—so that’s what a lot of them expect from me. I also ask them if they know what they’re really good at as writers. A lot of them don’t have a clue. Then I pass out copies of the Six-Trait Scoring Guide for Students—and it’s like a whole world opens up. One dad asked me, “Where was this when I was going to school?”

—V. Spandel

Creating Writers: Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction,
Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2005, p. 242

Parents generally want to know three things about their children's education: *what* they will be learning, *how* the teacher will determine if the student has succeeded, and *what support* will be available if the student has difficulty. It is important that parents understand how using rubrics fits into this picture. They may not need to understand all the details about rubrics described in this book—what strong and weak ones look like, how to develop them, and what all the different types are—but there are key topics to share with parents, so that when they see their children working with rubrics, or when they see rubric scores instead of grades on some assignments, they understand what they mean and why you used them.

What Rubrics Are and When You Use Them

Before you launch into an explanation of rubrics, it is helpful to give parents a little assessment context. Briefly define the four assessment methods and give a few examples of learning targets suited to each. Here you can point out the differences between knowledge/fact learning targets and more complex targets—those calling for *use* of that knowledge; e.g., problem solving, performance skills, and the creation of products. Share one or more examples of learning targets that you will be assessing using performance assessment and let parents know that performance assessment is used to measure these targets when no other method will yield accurate results. (See Chappuis & Chappuis, 2002, for a more in-depth explanation of keys to quality assessment for a parent audience.)

Point out that a performance assessment has two parts—the task or assignment (what you ask students to do) and the rubric (a description of the features important in a quality performance or product). You will want to define the terms *rubric*, *criteria*, and *descriptors*, perhaps in the context of a situation in which they are already familiar with features of quality; by

Figure 7.1 Key Topics

The following are key topics to address when speaking with parents:

- What rubrics are and when we use them
- How using rubrics benefits learning
- How rubrics are used in the classroom
- How to interpret rubric scores
- How parents can use rubrics with their children

explaining what they expect in a clean bedroom, for example. Figure 7.2 shows what definitions of these terms can look like in this context.

As another example, you may wish to use the context of dining out at a restaurant. People often tip their server based on the quality of service provided, including features such as promptness of service, cleanliness of the table, and quality of the meal. These are the *criteria* on which the decision will be based. The *descriptors* would define what a server would do in each of the criteria to receive a generous tip, a moderate tip, or a small tip. These and other common experiences introduce parents to the structure of rubrics as well as to their usefulness. Rubrics are not a recent invention; they are simply the basis on which we make certain judgments, written down.

After introducing rubrics in a familiar context, you may wish to explain them in an academic context. You may use the following explanation of an oral presentation rubric as a framework, but you would want to base your discussion on whatever rubric you are actually planning to use:

- Ask parents to think about oral presentations. What contributes to an effective oral presentation? Accurate content? Content that is organized in a way that leads listeners from beginning to end? Few “ums” and “ahs”? Eye contact with

the audience? Terminology that the audience understands? Use of pictures, graphs, or other visual aids to understanding, as needed?

- We look for all these attributes in an effective oral presentation. Such a list is the beginning of a rubric for an oral presentation. The rubric identifies keys to success. It clarifies not only the features that contribute to a great oral presentation, but also what oral presentations at the medium and weak levels look like.
- Distribute the rubric you intend to use. (For an example, see the *Oral Presentation Rubric* in Appendix C and in the *Rubric Sampler* on the CD.) Encourage parents to notice the connections between their own ideas and the features represented on your rubric. Assure them that you will be teaching their offspring to progress through these levels of quality throughout the year.

Figure 7.2 Terms to Define for Parents

Definitions

Rubric: A list of features we consider important in a quality performance, experience, or product

Criteria: The specific features on the list

Descriptors: The words and phrases we use to explain what those features should and shouldn't look like

Example

A **rubric** for a clean bedroom lists what you expect to see. The **criteria** might be *Floor Is in Good Shape*, *Bed Is Made*, and *Clothes Are Put Away*. The **descriptors** for *Floor Is in Good Shape* might be, "Floor is completely picked up, with no trash, toys, food, dishes, bottles, cans, or clothes lying around. Floor is vacuumed, including under furniture."

How Using Rubrics Benefits Learning

Every one of us has been in the position of receiving a grade on a paper, a project, or a presentation and having no idea why we got that grade, what we should do differently next time to make the grade better, or what to continue doing next time to maintain a good grade. You can use this common experience to help parents understand the value both of defining precisely the characteristics of work that contribute to quality and of sharing them with students.

In most parents' own student careers, assessments will have been used primarily to assign grades. Parents should know that assessments can also help students learn at higher levels *before* they are graded. You can differentiate between these two purposes by labeling (1) the use of assessment information to determine grades as assessment *of* learning and (2) the use of assessment information to help students learn as assessment *for* learning.

To help parents understand the importance of assessment *for* learning, you can use an analogy such as this: A basketball coach doesn't just throw kids into a game without practice. During practice, the coach observes how well players perform certain skills and uses that information to help them practice and improve. This is assessment *for* learning; the coach is not using assessment information to give a grade; rather, the coach is using assessment information to help students maximize their performance before the next game.

You can then relate this idea back to the classroom. Invite parents to think about academic expectations such as writing, giving an oral presentation, speaking a foreign language, solving math problems, or planning scientific experiments. Using assessment to support and increase learning, you would teach to the expectations, observe students as they practice, and provide suggestions for improvement for some period of time (assessment *for* learning) before the next graded event (assessment *of* learning). Your goal would be to increase student achievement between the times when status information is reported to parents and others.

You may wish to share the following list of benefits that accrue for students, teachers, and parents when rubrics are used as assessments *for* learning:

- Students learn more quickly what it takes to produce a high-quality performance or product.
- Students develop the ability to self-assess—to identify what they are doing well and what they need to work on.
- Parents can gain insight into their children’s strengths and the next steps in their learning.
- Teachers have better information to guide the next steps in instruction.
- Teachers can give feedback to students that describes exactly what they are doing well and what they need to tackle next.

How Rubrics Are Used in the Classroom

Parents want to know what to expect their children’s learning to look like. You will want to highlight your strategies for teaching the elements of quality represented in your rubric, along with a brief rationale for each. You may wish to adapt the following list of instructional uses (described in Chapter 6) to your own context:

- *Before students are introduced to the rubric, they share what they already know about quality in the skill or product you are focusing on.* Students understand new information more readily if they first reflect on their own ideas before being asked to think about the ideas of others.
- *Students use the rubric to practice judging the quality of anonymous work.* When teachers select samples to represent specific strengths students are to work on and to highlight weaknesses to avoid, students deepen their understanding of what is expected before having to create the performance or product for a grade.

- *Some assignments come home marked with descriptions of strengths and areas for improvement, rather than grades. The wording reflects the concepts in the rubric.* Achievement improves at a greater rate when students have opportunities to practice with feedback and then are given time to act on that feedback before they submit work for a grade.
- *Students use the rubric to judge the quality of their own work: they identify areas where they are doing well and set goals for improvement where needed.* When students self-assess, ownership of their own learning increases and they are better equipped to take steps to improve.
- *Comments and grades on work may focus on one or two features of quality rather than all features represented on the rubric.* When learning how to complete a high-quality performance or product, students benefit from being able to focus on one part at a time rather than trying to learn how to do everything at once.
- *Students have opportunities to track their achievement and share their progress with parents.* Students' motivation to continue learning increases when they become aware of their own growth and track their improvement over time.

How to Interpret Rubric Scores

Most parents receive information about their child's progress from grades on assignments. However, when you are using rubrics to provide students with feedback before assigning a grade, the work may come home with only a set of descriptors of quality, or it may have only a rubric score on it. In these situations, you are using assessment to provide students with information about how to improve, which a grade does not accomplish. The work is still evaluated, but the results are to be acted on by either the teacher or the student, or both.

If you will be marking student work with the number or the word that matches a score point for a rubric, you will want to

explain what the labels mean. (We will call these level labels *scores*.) It is also useful to explain that level labels are shorthand for the description of that level of work. This shorthand makes no sense without the descriptions that flesh out each label. If you can, share anonymous samples to illustrate levels of quality—this makes the meaning of each level designation even clearer.

Parents need to know that such changes in grading practices do not indicate less rigor or lower achievement. Assessment *for* learning practices do not alter the performance standards (how good is good enough)—they are just as rigorous, and they in fact bring about higher achievement—more students will achieve at desired levels. To reinforce this point, share your grading plan and summarize how you will convert rubric scores to grades. This is important and reassuring information, but a little goes a long way, so be sure your explanation is clear and short.

Remember that different rubrics from different content areas or different assessments may use totally different labels for the various score points. Many parents get frustrated by the language associated with the score points on a rubric—*proficient, emerging, exceeds mastery*, and so on. It can sound like jargon, and so we recommend that when talking to parents use straightforward language or use score points as the level labels. If you do use words or phrases, try to establish consistency across subjects and grade levels. It can be very confusing to parents when every rubric they see has different labels.

How Parents Can Use Rubrics with Their Children

When parents and children communicate about the child's achievement, they strengthen and reinforce that learning. What would you like parents to do with the information they receive from rubrics? Following are a few sample suggestions you may make to parents:

- Ask your child to explain what the rubric means in his own words.
- Ask your child to explain what a score on her work means.
- Ask your child what the score means he is good at and what it means he needs to improve.
- Ask your child to identify a part of her work that she thinks is strong or that needs work. Ask her to find the words in the rubric that describe the features of the part she identified.
- Work with your child to make a plan for revising the work based on the description of quality linked to the score he received.

Suggestions for Sharing Information with Parents

Up to this point in the chapter, we've looked at what is important for parents to know about the use of rubrics in the classroom. *When* and *how* you communicate this information is also important to consider.

When

For most parents, the more they know about their children's schools and classrooms, the more supportive they are of the education the students are receiving. In short, the closer parents get to schools the more they like them and approve of their work. This tells us that our communication with parents should not be limited to the traditional one-time open house or to similar events intended to convey lots of general information in a short period of time. Our communication with parents about what their students are experiencing in the classroom should be proactive and ongoing, in partnership with communication efforts from the school and the district.

The opening of the school year immediately sets the stage for introducing rubrics and preparing parents for their role in student assessment. If rubrics are used to evaluate any school,

district, or state tests, give parents the criteria in advance when possible. This helps them understand what their children will be learning and how you will measure success. And if any high-stakes or other decisions are being made about students as a result of these tests, parents need to see how those decisions are made and how they may be justified.

How

The traditional formal and informal ways teachers share information with parents can also be effective for communicating about the use of rubrics. Monthly or weekly newsletters; back-to-school nights and open houses; e-bulletins to parents who have Internet access and e-mail addresses; and the day-to-day discussions you have with parents over the phone, over the backyard fence, and in the aisles of grocery stores all provide opportunities to help parents understand how you are using rubrics in your classroom. We would recommend that you plan how to use these opportunities; perhaps some general information goes out at back-to-school night, followed by district- or schoolwide newsletter articles. In your own communications with parents, you can then share specifics about how you will be using rubrics and which ones you will use.

Also consider the following ways to help parents learn:

- Create a monthly or quarterly newsletter dedicated to performance assessment. (This can be easier to do in partnership with other teachers.) Select one topic each issue and discuss it in some depth. Topics can include a description of what the phrases on the rubric mean, one trait at a time; the different types of rubrics (task specific vs. general, holistic vs. analytic); an explanation of the score point numbers or descriptors (*emerging*, *proficient*, etc.); the difference between marks (grades on individual pieces of work) and report card grades; how you will convert rubric score points to grades; what self-assessment activities your students will engage in and how they benefit learning; and other topics as described in this chapter and throughout this book.

- Give parents sample tasks with anonymous student work scored using your rubric. Then give them other samples to score on their own. After they have had a chance to try it themselves, as an option you may wish to share how you, the district, or the state would score the work.
- If there is a statewide rubric for the state accountability test, schedule a session to help them understand how your rubrics align to it.
- Identify opportunities for parents to give students feedback on a piece of work, using the language of the rubric. (This can even be an occasional homework assignment.)

Students' Role in Communicating with Parents

Finally and most importantly, remember the impact on learning created when students explain what they know. Students can do the following:

- Compare a current piece of their work to the rubric in class, and then that evening show their parents why they came to that judgment.
- While participating in (or leading) a conference with parents, students can review the criteria of the rubric and select goals for future work or performance based on that criteria.
- Share a sample of their work with parents and then reflect on their learning with ideas such as, "If I did this over I would . . . ," or "The best thing I did in this piece of work is . . . ," using the language of the rubric. This too can be homework.
- Show parents a learning log in which they have kept track of their progress. Students can explain their growth by referring to the criteria and the language of the rubric they are using to define *quality*.

Summary

1. Parents want to know what their children will be learning, how you will determine whether they have succeeded, and what support will be available for their children if they struggle. When you share information about rubrics, frame it in the context of these three main concerns.
2. To introduce rubrics to parents, briefly define the four assessment methods and then share the learning targets for which you will be using performance assessment.
3. Define *performance assessment*, *rubric*, *criteria*, and *descriptors* first within the context of everyday experiences and then in an academic context, with the rubric you will be using in your classroom.
4. To show how using rubrics benefits learning, differentiate between assessment *of* and *for* learning, first using experiences parents may have had and then with your classroom applications. Share benefits to students, parents, and teachers when rubrics are used instructionally.
5. Give examples of what instructional uses you will make of rubrics. Highlight strategies you will use to teach the elements of quality represented in your rubric.
6. Make sure parents understand the meaning of whatever symbols or words you will use when marking student work, and show how rubric scores will figure in the final grade. Be concise here.
7. Share suggestions for what parents can do with rubrics and rubric scores with their children to strengthen or reinforce the learning.
8. It is important to plan both when and how you will communicate about rubrics. The more parents know about their children's education, the more supportive they are. An ongoing approach to communication is more effective than a single, one-time event. Everyone benefits when students also participate in this communication—it *is* about them.