

Reporting A to E

No school in any sector has been unaffected by the Australian Government requirement to report student achievement on a common scale of A to E. To ensure greater certainty and comparability in reporting the Australian Government has required all schools to report on an A to E scale. To make sure that this happens, funding agreements between the Commonwealth and states and territories and the non-government school sectors have been tied to this requirement.

In the past, many schools have used their own version of A to E to report on aspects of student work and behaviour and secondary teachers are familiar with A to E grading as used with the School Certificate descriptors. Some schools have even used A to E to report on syllabus outcomes or to give assessment grades to student's work.

If A to E reporting is to have some meaning to parents, there will need to be some consistency in what each of these grades mean both in terms of descriptions of student achievement and what they mean in terms of the actual work of students. It is logical that in NSW such descriptions need to be applied across the school sectors. For an A, B, C, D or E to mean something different in one school sector to another will be confusing for the whole community. It is appropriate that the NSW board of Studies provides both the descriptions of A to E grades and samples of work to explain what they look like.

Reporting A to E will not be simple but it is probably not as complicated as teachers first think. However, teachers have legitimately raised a number of questions that need early clarification. There are issues about how generic these descriptions are and whether there can be consistency of teacher judgement. For secondary teachers they will want to know how these general descriptors are to be used with the subject descriptors in Stage 5. Can both be used throughout the stage?

Given that teachers come to terms with the descriptions of A to E the more pressing question is how teachers will derive assessment data from students' work and apply these grades?

These matters and more will be explored at the TCNSW workshop on 27 May. Register now.

Key messages: A to E reporting meeting 27 May 2006

Carol Taylor, Director, Assessment and Reporting, NSW Board of Studies, spoke and answered questions about the new reporting requirements. Here are some of the key messages:

1. All Australian school systems and sectors have accepted the Australian Government's requirement as part of their funding agreements to report an A to E grade on students' reports.
2. Different states and sectors have different meanings for their A to E grades.
3. In NSW, generic descriptors of student achievement, A to E, are to be used across Years 1-10.
4. These generic descriptors have been defined by the NSW Board of Studies and a separate set of School Certificate descriptors for each subject have been developed for Stage 5.
5. The A to E describe student achievement at a point in time and in relation to the work done in the period on which the report is based.

6. They describe the quality of student work done during the period which is being reported on. They are descriptions of performance.
7. They are NOT descriptions of student progression against the syllabus standard as was the case with working towards/working at/working beyond or some similar scale.
8. The A to E can be used at any time during a stage and describe the quality of student work for the reporting period. They are NOT end of stage descriptors only, but can be used at the end of a stage as well as during the stage.
9. To assist teachers understand the performance standards represented by the A to E descriptions, the Board of Studies is publishing some sample of student work on its website <http://arc.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/> These samples relate to particular tasks and are provided to help teachers develop a common understanding of what A, B, C, D and E work might look like within a subject and within a stage.
10. It will take some time, possibly several years, for teachers to come to a common understanding of these standards and many more work samples will be needed and progressively provided by the Board of Studies.
11. Teachers do NOT grade work samples. That grading is the job of the Board of Studies. Teachers make a holistic A to E judgement about the overall quality of a student's work at the time of reporting and in relation to the period being reported on.
12. Consistency of judgement will come as teachers engage the standards represented by the work samples and work collegially to discuss how students' work, the BOS work samples and the A to E descriptors align.

Some of the questions and discussion that followed focussed on different issues for primary and secondary schools related to assessment and the need to provide cohort information for parents. Many secondary schools indicated that they would include this information on their reports. Some suggestions were:

1. Including the number of students who achieved each of the A to E grades
2. Position in class or year group
3. Quartiles, deciles and other fixed percentage schemes

Primary teachers were less comfortable with these suggestions and preferred to have the information available to give to parents on request.

Some secondary teachers saw the possibility of using existing assessment policies that added assessment components and weighting to provide a rank order. Then teachers could look at the ranking and find the student whose work demonstrated that they were at the cut-off points between an A and a B, etc and allocate grades accordingly. Some teachers had difficulty with standards referencing all the students and wanted incorrectly to allocate fixed percentages to the grades which would negate standards referencing.

The problem of students, mainly in English and mathematics, working out of their stage was discussed. It was recognised that learning in these subjects was sequential and hierarchical. Students who had not achieved the outcomes of the previous stage still needed to be engaged in the content of their current stage while remedial measures were taken. These students would still need an A to E based on the quality of work in the stage at the time of reporting.