Thoughts about reports

What do schools need to consider in relation to Stage 6 reporting?

Department of Education and Training (DET) policy concerning reporting was made clear in *Assessment and Reporting in NSW Government Schools* (Memorandum to Principals, 6 August 1996). The memorandum states that "reports clearly convey what the student knows and can do and how that compares with the standard expected by the syllabus," and "that parents are kept informed of the progress and educational needs of their children by means of appropriate written reports. This … should be maintained at least twice per year."

With the shift towards a standards-referenced framework, it has become imperative to report student achievement against specific course outcomes. As a result, this has become a central feature of many reporting models. Reports are becoming more descriptive and meaningful in what they actually indicate about a student's performance.

Many school communities still require marks as a central feature of their report structure. Marks often provide the sort of comparative information expected by the reading audience. What is important to remember is that, if marks are provided, they should be derived from valid and reliable assessment events that are focused on subject outcomes. In other words, marks should have meaning.

As a teacher and parent I share the belief held by many school communities that reports need to provide information about how well a student has achieved course outcomes and about personal achievements (as in a personal profile).

How do we describe student performance in Stage 6?

The Office of the Board of Studies has stated from the start that applying the performance bands to students' achievement at any time other than after the HSC exam may not be appropriate. We need to remember that the HSC performance bands provide summative statements of typical performance. They are used to describe performance at the end of Stage 6, after subject experts and markers have looked at a large, representative sample of exam scripts and made professional judgements about the students' performances.

As part of the process of developing the draft performance bands, the Board has analysed many student scripts over time in an effort to capture and describe the full range of students' examination achievement across the state.

This would be very difficult (if not impossible) to do at a school level at any time and certainly not in the Preliminary year. I believe that there is little to gain by attempting to mimic the HSC performance bands. It would be better to describe student performance in terms of achievement of course outcomes.

What process should a school work through to develop meaningful reports?

Schools need to develop a common language in describing student achievement, so that students and parents get similar messages across the school. Schools should also ensure that parents and students are appropriately involved and consulted in the formation and review of reporting.

Schools need to work with their parents and communities to negotiate the types of information that are most meaningful to them. It's important that the information on reports actually represents student achievement in Preliminary and HSC courses.

What would you suggest that schools would need to think about when designing their reports?

Schools need to think about their approach to reporting in two key ways – within a whole-school context and at the individual faculty level. Some key questions could include:

1. The whole-school context
   - Is there a consistent approach to the collection of evidence?
   - Is the information presented in a consistent way across the school?
   - Have we involved parents and the community in the development of assessment and reporting processes?
   - Is the information provided meaningful?
   - Does the information indicate achievement of course outcomes (standard expected by the syllabus)?

2. The faculty context
  • Have we identified the important elements to report upon at a given time?
  • Does the faculty assessment program collect relevant evidence?
  • Is it valid and reliable?
  • Does it indicate what students know, understand and can do and how that compares with the standard expected by the syllabus?

What are the issues schools should address in choosing a performance scale for reporting on outcomes?

It is important that schools develop a consistent and appropriate means of reporting how well students have performed against syllabus outcomes. It is critical that the method used be a valid one that will accurately reflect student performance against the outcomes, and one that communicates this achievement clearly and unambiguously to parents and students.

The wording used on a scale is important. In contrast to terms such as "poor", "average" or "outstanding", which convey judgements about performance in a way that implies a comparison with others, phrases like "beginning", "developing", "consolidating", "achieved" and "working beyond" provide a more appropriate picture of where the student is in relation to the outcome concerned. Report templates should provide a key that explains clearly to parents and students what these words mean.

It is important that reports be clear and unambiguous. The practice of placing a tick on an open continuum can be misleading for readers, since unintended meanings can be relayed by the placement of a tick closer to one word than another. Boxes to check, or a table with relevant words or phrases to insert, offer a clearer, more accurate option. They provide a more explicit or meaningful account of an individual student's performance.

How should teachers make decisions about student performance when using a scale?

The challenge for any school will be how to apply the scale consistently within and across faculty areas. Teachers need to develop a common understanding of the terms used and they must also agree on the manner in which these are applied when describing student performance. This is another reason why words or phrases should be selected carefully to provide a meaningful description of the standard of achievement of syllabus outcomes.

Strategies to ensure consistency of teacher judgement can involve faculties in collecting student work samples on which to base discussion about where the "cut-offs" might be. This evidence will help teachers to describe student performance. Meaningful reporting will be derived from sound assessment practice.

Peter Lorking has had significant involvement with the implementation of the new HSC and has been providing advice to many school districts about assessment and reporting issues affecting schools from K-12. If you need further information, he can be contacted on (phone) 9886 7683, or (fax) 9886 7449, or (e-mail) peter.lorking@det.nsw.edu.au

Share your reporting templates

Here is an example of a reporting template developed by Penrith High School in 2000 for Software Design and Development. For more information about reporting at Penrith High School see *HSC Enhancing learning*, Issue 7, December 2000, pages 2 & 3.

YEAR 11 SEMESTER TWO REPORT 2000
SOFTWARE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Software Design and Development develops in students the creativity, knowledge, values and communication skills required to develop computer software. The subject uses a systematic approach in the design and development of computer software.

Students will develop skills in: problem solving, creative thinking, communication, management and an understanding of software development. Students will also look at social and ethical issues relating to software development.

Exam mark	Exam rank	Course rank
76/100	6/22	6/22

Focus outcomes			
Describes and uses appropriate data types.	Excellent	Uses and develops documentation to communicate software solutions to others.	High
Explains the effects of historical development on current practices.	High	Communicates with appropriate personnel throughout the software development process.	Excellent
Identifies the issues relating to the use of software solutions.	High	Designs and constructs software solutions with appropriate interfaces.	High
Investigates a structured approach in the design and implementation of a software solution.	High	N/A	

Personal profile			
Is well organised and prepared for all tasks and activities.	Always	Shows initiative and motivation as an independent learner.	Always
Produces quality work.	Always	Demonstrates a commitment to personal excellence.	Always
Displays diligence in the completion of tasks and activities.	Always	Shows consideration and respect for others.	Usually

Comment
Student A has worked steadily in the second half of the year and achieved a commendable result. If this effort continues she will achieve an excellent HSC result.

The Technology Unit is keen to collect and share samples of reporting formats developed for technology subjects. If you have developed any reporting formats that you would like to discuss or share, please contact Lyndall Foster: phone (02) 9886 7623 or fax (02) 9886 7654 or e-mail lyndall.foster@det.nsw.edu.au