

How to Communicate Homework Expectations to Parents and Other Community Stakeholders

When your team works together to design structures and routines for independent practice to improve student learning, you must also communicate your expectations for these new practices to students, families, and other stakeholders supporting the learning process.

Using independent practice as part of a formative assessment and the student self-feedback process may seem like radical ideas to people both inside and outside the school community. Community members may be skeptical or even resist shifting routines away from summative grading routines and toward formative learning routines, as the following story from author Bill Barnes demonstrates.

Personal Story “ BILL BARNES

When I was working to revise the grading policy for the Howard County Public School System, our policy committee reviewed relevant research and read articles summarizing best practice. When we shared our initial recommendations publicly, we met immediate resistance. I fielded emails and phone calls disputing our recommendations.

Community members disputed our recommendations for homework duration, some saying we were not requiring enough and others saying we were requiring too much. Some community members balked at the notion students would be asked to re-engage in the assignment during and after receiving feedback.

One community member wrote, “My son spends enough time doing homework once, it is unfair to expect him to complete it again.” Almost everyone thought the recommendation to not include homework as part of the final grade was a bad idea. The pervasive belief among stakeholders was the homework grade served to incentivize homework completion. These nonresearched-affirmed beliefs emerged because they were engrained in our collective homework culture and, in the final year of our committee’s work, we had to socialize our recommendations with various stakeholders or face the prospect of not improving our routines based on the evidence of research we now know.

TEACHER *Reflection*

Consider the following questions:

- How might you involve parents to support the learning process in meaningful ways?
- What resources might you provide to parents so they can support student learning at home?
- How might you build parent mathematical knowledge so they can support student learning at home?

You should be explicitly sharing your team’s *purpose* for at-home assignments with students and families at the beginning of the school year when you begin communication with them and other stakeholders: *independent practice with formative and corrective feedback*. Homework essentially becomes a *reflect, refine, and act* cycle of learning the student owns, not the teacher. See figure 1.

During this cycle, students:

- **Reflect:** Students reflect on their own work as they try the teacher-assigned mathematics problems.
- **Refine:** Students re-engage in the assignment, trying new strategies and correcting errors.
- **Act:** Students seek additional support to strengthen their own understanding of the content.

Explain your rationale for at-home independent practice in writing, and prepare consistent messages for back-to-school night and family conferences. Consider developing a short video with your rationale to post on the school’s website. Use accessible analogies to explain why student practice outside of class must be part of the formative learning process. Consider rebranding the term *homework* as *independent practice*.

Further, provide families with tools and resources to empower them as active members of the students’ support team. Jenn Deinhart, a K–8 mathematics specialist from Mason Crest Elementary School in Annandale, Virginia, provides resources to families

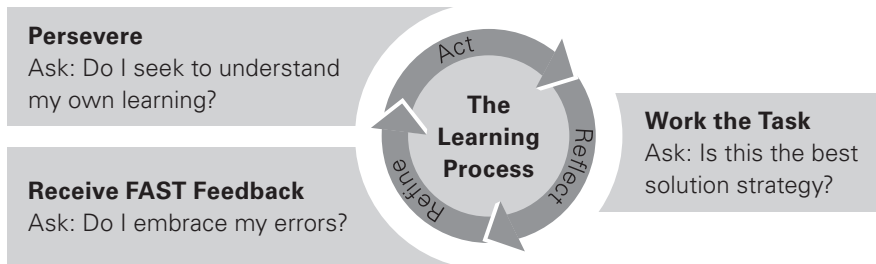


Figure 1: Reflect, refine, and act cycle for formative student learning.

supporting mathematics learning at home. Figure 2 offers an example of such a resource. For additional resources, visit Mason Crest Elementary Math Numeracy Skills (<http://bit.ly/2CbhuVF>) to access parent resources from Mason Crest Elementary School (Mason Crest Elementary School, n.d.).

If you communicate your vision for at-home assignments well, most students and families will see them as an exercise of independent practice. Most families will appreciate that you expect students to complete independent practice and explore new learning through a more formative process. And they will begin to see re-engagement in the independent mathematics practice as a continuous cycle of reflect, refine, and act from in-class practice.

As a team, take time to develop a communication plan for students, families, and other stakeholders. Be aware of the actual conditions for learning

that may or may not be present at home for some students. Consider how you will share your team's common mathematics assignments for at-home independent practice for each unit of study. If you do not communicate effectively about your independent practice expectations for the upcoming unit, families will not know how to support their children's learning.

Before the unit begins, your team should identify all the independent practice assignments for that unit and how you will communicate these assignments to families. You should develop the full set of independent practice assignments prior to the unit, so students know upfront (as the new unit begins) all the independent practice you will assign.

Common sense will require you to adjust some of your assignments as the unit progresses, but sharing the planned set of assignments ahead of the unit communicates to students and families that you have

Mathematics to Do at Home				
Name: _____				
Directions: Select one mathematics problem to do with your child at home. Be sure to keep the answers in his or her mathematics folder.				
One-fourth of the students in the cafeteria had pizza today. How many students might be in the cafeteria and how many ate pizza?	How many numbers can you write with 8 in the ten thousands place?	How many ways (add, subtract, multiply, divide) can you make 100?	My dad is double my age. How old could I be? How old could my dad be?	Write down the numbers you say when you skip count by 4s. Go as high as you can.
There are fifteen brownies. How many does each person get if you share equally with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two people • Three people • Four people • Five people 	You see a sign in a shop window that reads "Everything is $\frac{1}{2}$ off!" What does that mean to you?	One-third of the people in my family are girls. What could a picture of my family look like?	Which is greater, $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$? How do you know?	Start with 634. How many more until you get to 1,000? Describe your strategy.
Which of these fractions are greater than $\frac{1}{2}$? $\frac{4}{9}, \frac{7}{12}, \frac{2}{5}, \frac{3}{6}, \frac{7}{10}$ How do you know?	I bought something and got \$1.60 in change. How much did it cost, and how much money did I give to pay for it?	What fractions can you make by folding paper?	How many designs can you make that are $\frac{3}{4}$ red and $\frac{1}{4}$ yellow?	What numbers can you write that round to 70,000?

Figure 2: Sample resource for families supporting mathematics at home.

a *clear instructional road map* to student success. This also provides students the opportunity to set goals to manage assignments they complete as the unit progresses. For example, if you clearly identify the assignments designated for *spaced* practice, students might elect to complete those assignments at any time prior to the deadline.

Consider using an online tool to communicate independent practice assignments, and be sure to communicate to students and families if the assignments change. After all, you will be using at-home assignments as part of the formative assessment process and, for some students, the assignments could be differentiated from the originally intended set.

For K–2 students, consider directing families to an internet resource, such as LearnZillion (www.learnzillion.com), for videos to help them understand the expected student learning for each unit's standards.

References

Mason Crest Elementary Math Numeracy Skills. (n.d.). Accessed at <https://sites.google.com/view/mcesmath/home?authuser=0> on February 20, 2018.



TEAM RECOMMENDATION

Communicate Your Vision for Independent Practice to Stakeholders

- Develop a communication plan for students, families, school administration, and other stakeholders to share changes to at-home independent practice.
- Emphasize independent practice as a learning tool by sharing all unit assignments at the start of the unit.

Communicating expectations for at-home independent practice is a good first step supporting change in your practice.