In order to support students’ need for practice and feedback, students should have opportunities to practice what they are learning in ways that give them a chance to make mistakes without hurting their final grade.

Examples from the Field

In Waukesha, Wisconsin schools, a district of approximately 12,000 students, standards-based grading is guided at the district level and applies across the PK-12 continuum. District guidelines include the directive that “students must have multiple practice and assessment opportunities to demonstrate what they know and are able to do, so teachers can make accurate judgments.” Further, their guidance states, “Students benefit from risk-free practice opportunities, … these activities should not be ‘counted’ towards students’ course grades.” Such guidance has enabled the schools to create consistent student experiences across all grades and all subjects.

Casco Bay High School (CBHS), in Portland, Maine, is an Expeditionary Learning School where educational practices are guided by core educational principles. The school’s Family Grading Guide provides this relevant excerpt:

Principle: Learning cannot be averaged: students need time to practice and learn from mistakes.

Practice: We determine trimester grades based on trends and take more recent performance into account.

This guidance enables CBHS teachers to give students clear feedback based on shared outcomes so that the students can acquire proficiency even after failure.

In Michigan*, a highly effective district with a robust International Baccalaureate program in middle and high school grades has worked to craft a district-wide approach to providing opportunities for practice. Their published guide to district best practices asserts, “Students will be well-informed (i.e. feedback, knowing the standard, self-assessing their learning, etc.) prior to receiving a summative grade.” Teachers are expected to assign “meaningful formative assessments (at-home or in-class practice that is not factored in the course grade) with timely feedback as practice for mastery of skill without penalty.”

In all of these systems, there is a commitment to separating preparation and practice from performing or demonstrating for a grade. Students and teachers alike are able to identify what they are practicing for and what passing or exemplary work will look like.

What We’ve Learned

Students have to be able to practice and not pay a penalty if there are imperfections in their practice work. Teachers must create ways for this to happen. Formative assessment informs learners about their progress without punishing them for partial knowledge. Formative assessment also informs the teacher about how each student is doing, how the class is doing as a whole, and whether any adjustment of instruction or re-teaching is needed. Getting feedback and practice routines right can reduce the need for multiple rounds of retakes and redos by ensuring that students are well prepared for summative assessments on their first attempt.

*We are still waiting for final permissions to use this district’s name in the guide.
Although it is important to provide students with chances to practice without being penalized for errors, it is also important to track whether students are doing their practice either in the form of homework or classwork. This record of practice and effort may inform the work habits grade.

When peer-to-peer feedback and self-assessment become routine classroom norms, this shifts the responsibility for learning closer to the students.

**Quotes from the Literature**

“Feedback in an assessment for learning context occurs while there is still time to take action. It functions as a global positioning system, offering descriptive information about the work, product, or performance relative to the intended learning goals. It avoids marks or comments that judge the level of achievement or imply that the learning journey is over.” Chappuis and Chappuis, The Best Value in Formative Assessment, ASCD 2007.

“Learning and performing aren’t the same… When everything we ask a student to do comes with a judgment (grade, score, or mark), it diminishes a student’s capability to operate outside their comfort zone — instead, it breeds fear and anxiety.” What We’ve Gotten Wrong About the Fail Forward Movement, Adam Dyche, The Medium blog September 2018

“[T]eachers take time to guide students through practice activities. As they guide, teachers help make sure students attend to the proper issues and understand the rationale for their actions.....the teacher was not satisfied to hear students offer the correct answer. She wanted to hear students explain why each step made sense.” Johnson, J., Uline, C., and Perez, L. (2013). Teaching Practices from America’s Best Urban Schools: A Guide for School and Classroom Leaders (1st ed.) (p. 77). New York, NY: Routledge.

“Do not grade every piece of writing a student creates. In fact, research shows that the very act of placing a grade on a student’s work ends the learning.” Cheryl Mizerny, 6th Grade English teacher, Bloomfield, MI; author of The Accidental English Teacher blog.

**Resources from the Great Schools Partnership**

- Elements of Effective Instruction, ([The Learning Environment; Feedback and Practice](#))
- Elements of Effective Instruction ([Varied Content, Materials and Methods resources page](#))