

January: A Time for Reflection & Preparation  
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The new calendar year also means the mid-year mark for your child in elementary school. The next few months should be regarded as the most progressive, regarding academic growth and development.

At least a month has passed since your child's parent-teacher conference. At that time, goals and standards were discussed. If concerns were mentioned regarding minimal academic achievement, a planning and placement team meeting (PPT) would have been scheduled. During the time after this parent-teacher conference, your child's school papers and/or notices from the teacher should be reflecting the goals and standards discussed. If necessary, the PPT you attended would provide information on additional assessments or observations conducted, and activities to be practiced at home; in addition to the classroom support services being offered.

During the early elementary years, a child's academic growth seems to spiral swiftly upward this time of year. The creation of a solid foundation for learning can be attributed to this growth. Also, the teacher has formed clear objectives for each student. By this time, a collection of pre and post assessments allows lessons to reflect the needs and learning styles of the students. In addition, productive parent-teacher communication allows all involved to help obtain the learning objectives for the child.

As a parent, it is important to maintain communication with your child's teacher this time of year. Home observations, in conjunction with classroom observations, can determine whether the child is making sufficient gains and accomplishing the required grade level standards. The grade level requirements/ standards/ criteria/ curriculum should have been discussed at the last parent-teacher conference, or on curriculum night. In addition, the protocol to receive support services should have been reviewed. When parents and teachers work together, the mishap of a child 'falling through the cracks' can be eliminated.

Always remember, it is important to know your child's goals, and how they correlate to the grade level standards. Although your child may be accomplishing all his/her set goals, the standards for the grade level may not have been mastered. If this occurs with your child in a regular educational setting, it is of importance to discuss your concerns with the teacher. All children learn at different rates, hence the reason to have individual goals. However, as a parent, you must remember the goal of the public school system is to have a child meet mastery on certain standards by a certain grade level.

When a child has mastered grade level requirements, parental involvement is of importance to insure continual academic growth. If mastery occurs at mid-year, the teacher must continue the spiral effect of learning. A parent should never hear the following: 'You don't need to schedule a conference-your child is doing fine'; 'Your child has completed all the lessons in the textbook or curriculum for this grade level, so I'll provide some extra worksheets to keep him busy'; 'I only have to teach what's in the text'; 'The curriculum doesn't teach that at this time of year'. As mentioned previously, all children learn at different rates. It is the expert teacher who conducts lessons and assessments based on each student's needs for growth and continual development. The curriculum and standards serve as guidelines, but the child determines the pace.

Not sure where your school ranks on mastering student's individual goals and learning styles? Allington & Cunningham discuss two types of school cultures: control and commitment. 'Control strategies call for an elaborate system of rules, regulations, and mandates designed to standardize the instruction offered in schools and thereby improve student achievement. Some mandates point to the use of particular instructional materials, other mandates focus on the amount of time to be spent teaching different subjects, and others on the skills to be mastered at each grade level. Many policies foster a competitive atmosphere by publicly rank-ordering schools on achievement and rewarding some schools (Blue Ribbon schools, for example) and penalizing others (a state's deficient schools or 'F' school listing).' (2002) The evidence collected on schools with a control environment (McNeil, 2000 & Murphy, 1998) concluded '...control strategies can work to change teacher behavior, but the most common changes identified seemed not to be changes that actually benefited students or enhanced higher-order learning.' The key word is higher-order learning, which results from a focus on individual learning styles, using data for instructional improvement, and providing accountability with autonomy to classroom teachers. This model would be found in a school that emphasizes commitment. 'Commitment strategies call for reducing bureaucratization while fostering professional independence and decision-making. The goal is to increase educator involvement in the instructional process. ...teachers take more professional responsibility for educating children when they have ownership of the instructional plan and decision-making occurs on the shop floor. ...they enhance teacher collegiality and collaboration, which can have a positive impact on the instructional process and student learning.' (Allington & Cunningham, 2002)

In conclusion, every parent must remember our public school teachers are under much pressure to have every child pass a test by a certain date or reach a certain academic school percentage by the end of the year. As long as politicians approve monetary incentives to schools with high-test scores and Blue Ribbon Banners are displayed on schools, it will be increasingly difficult for expert teachers to remain focused and satisfied with each student's individual growth.