

Grading at JCMS FAQ's

Question: I hear my student talking about "Cycle Assessments." What are those?

Answer: A "Cycle Assessment" is basically what most people know as a "Unit Test." We have developed a process for all classes where teachers teach their content and skills for a few weeks and then all of the teachers in that subject use the same test to measure student learning. We call them cycles because the learning process of teaching --> assessing --> reteaching. The cycle assessments are just a common unit test with the results being used to evaluate student learning, identify areas to reteach and for a common ground for our teachers to have collaborative conversation on improving their craft.

Question: How many assignments go into the "Assessment" portion of a student's grade? Hopefully it is more than one.

Answer: That is totally up to the individual teacher, but all teachers are encouraged to have enough assessments to be able to accurately represent a student's master of the subject knowledge. In almost all cases, this does mean more than 1, 2 or even 3 assessments.

Question: My student is not a very good test taker? Will they be hurt by this way of looking at grading?

Answer: Teachers at JCMS understand that most middle school students are very hot and cold when it comes to test taking. Social issues such as drama with friends, boyfriend/girlfriend problems, home issues, etc. all can change how a student does on a test from day to day. This is why many teachers use other forms of assessments rather than always giving a test. Projects, performances, interviews, written responses (papers), portfolios are all other ways that students can be assessed without taking a written test. Tests are still used though but many teachers have started to allow students to retake a test in some form or fashion after they have demonstrated the willingness to better learn the material. This way, students most accurately show what they actually know.

Question: What types of assessments are in a student's grade?

Answer: Many teachers do give tests in the traditional way along with cycle assessments, but most teachers also try to vary how students can demonstrate their learning. Projects, written responses, interviews, demonstrations, performance-based tasks, etc. are all great ways for students to show their understanding and are used by teachers at JCMS.

Question: If so much of a student's grade is based on their assessments, is that really sending the message that effort is important? What if they just start not doing their homework?

Answer: We do believe that the effort a given student puts into their learning is crucial to their success. All students are not on the same time frame with their learning though. Some students pick up a concept or skill quickly while others, it may take longer. Because of this, we want to encourage students to invest in their own learning for the sake of learning, not just to earn points for a good grade. Most times, students need to do the practice and experience the classwork and homework given to do well on the later assessments. That in turn is the end result. If we give out points and put grades on the effort, that then becomes what is important to students, not the learning. By making this change in how we grade, we want to send the message to students that their own effort in learning is crucial because it makes them better in the end. Will some students slack on doing assignments because there is little weight on the assignment? Sure. This is a learned behavior that they have developed through their educational career so far and it will take time for them to unlearn the desire to earn points for everything they do. This is something that we will help them with as they progress through JCMS.

Question: Is the whole corporation looking at how students are graded or is it just at JCMS?

Answer: Right now, this conversation was started at JCMS just within our own building. That does not mean other schools are not having the same conversations, but it is not district wide. The high school does have a very similar philosophy in a number of the departments though. The high school math department has been weighing assessment grades heavily for years now as an example.