

## CELEBRATE INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Educators love to celebrate. We cheer our athletic groups, our orchestras, and the debate team. When our children climb rock walls at school picnics, teachers shout, “Hooray!” Unfortunately, we also celebrate grades. Kindergartners receive stars for coloring inside the lines, and third-graders’ perfect spelling tests are lined with smiley faces. When students are old enough for GPAs to be calculated, the ones with report cards littered with A’s and B’s are placed on honor and merit rolls. Some schools conduct elaborate ceremonies for these extra special students, where ribbons and ovations are lavished upon them generously. Meanwhile “bad” students, who were unable to manipulate the system well enough for the “good” grades, watch in envy or disgust. Enough has been written in this book that I don’t have to offer detailed information on the negatives related to celebrating grades. This section is about celebrating the kind of learning that accompanies narrative feedback and the independent learners that evolve in a no-grades classroom.

While teachers in results-only classrooms will never cheer perfect scores or high grades, it is important to emphasize the epic accomplishments of students who learn to appreciate the value of teacher feedback and their own self-evaluations. Not only is it okay to pat students on the back when they review SE2R comments, return to prior learning, and revise something so they can master it, this type of celebration is necessary. As the Coppell East teachers note in Chapter 4, students who have lived in the traditional grades community for so long sometimes struggle with the adjustment to classes built on feedback and self-assessment. Some resist openly, asking for points to be placed on their projects and activities. They are used to working for a mark, and many are accustomed to being praised by educators and parents for “good” grades and extrinsic rewards. When students transition to a feedback assessment model and become proficient self-advocates, this is something truly worth celebrating. So, pat them on the

back. Celebrate your entire class and be sure to remind them of precisely what they have accomplished. At various times throughout the school year, I stood in front of my class and proudly announced to students, “You have become insightful, self-critical learners—the very best kind of learner there is. Let’s cheer for ourselves and for each other.” The response to this celebration is far more rewarding than any ceremony that culminates with a medal being draped around a student’s neck.

### EVALUATE YOUR APPROACH

In an effective Assessment 3.0 system, we encourage students to self-evaluate. The more critical you are on yourself, we tell them, the more successful you will be. Still, no matter how much we harangue our students to self-assess, we often fall short when it comes to evaluating our own work. When you write feedback weekly, assessing your own work is crucial to the success of the no-grades classroom. In Chapter 3, I admitted how I unwittingly allowed subjectivity to make its way into my SE2R. Once I began reading the feedback I had written as if I were the student it was intended for, it became clear that much of it didn’t fit my own SE2R model. This process of reviewing the SE2R I was writing for students helped me produce more effective feedback in the future.

In addition to assessing written feedback, you should also consider how you’re presenting lessons and how you write activity guidelines. As noted earlier, writing clear, detailed activity and project guidelines makes providing meaningful feedback easy. When explaining to students something that was not accomplished, this explanation must clearly match the instructions, or confusion can arise. Recall the teachers from Coppell East. They used a collaborative self-evaluation model to monitor their success, as they transitioned from traditional to results-only classrooms. “The three of us met weekly during content time to touch base,” Kat Julian says.

“Those weekly check-ins were very helpful in keeping us motivated and accountable and just to debrief what was working and what needed to change.” According to Julian, East principal Laura Springer gave the pilot team one day every six weeks for self-evaluation and planning. “We had a whole day to go over our plans, align ROLE structures across grade levels and, most importantly, go over our feedback to learners and to each other. We would discuss how successful or unsuccessful our feedback strategies and documentation were going, as they were evolving over the year. Discussing each other’s feedback styles and our transformations was by far the most beneficial part of the transition.”

Just as students’ skills and activities evolve over the course of a school year, based on meaningful narrative feedback, teachers in a student-centered class, built on Assessment 3.0, evolve as they evaluate their own methods, strategies and the feedback they supply. Using a collaborative approach like the one employed by the Coppell East pilot team is certainly one that all teachers should emulate.

## REFLECTION

Consider how you might create a no-grades culture in your classroom. Ask colleagues and administrators to combine efforts in making a plan for using SE2R feedback at your school. Like the pilot team at Coppell East, rely on this accountability group to help you take a proactive approach to change. As a team, brainstorm ideas for making a smooth transition away from traditional grades. Work together on one step to smooth the transition—like composing a letter to parents about your no-grades classroom and your feedback model.