

## Retests in the Math Classroom

### What are the current retesting practices?

There are a variety of retesting policies used at Oak Bay and across BC. Here is a list of the common retesting protocols:

- No retests.
- No retest but students can eliminate their lowest test score.
- Students can retest but their score will cap at a certain percentage.
- Students can retest but their score will be the average of the two tests.
- Students can retest but their score will be the second test no matter what.
- Students can retest one test per term.
- Students can retest every test once.
- Students can retest every test infinitely.

### What is the case against retesting in the classroom?

There are many teachers who do not give students the chance to retest. Their reasons are varied. Here is a list of the common reasons not to use retesting in mathematics:

- Students need to learn to set goals and work toward deadlines. Retesting will create students that do not take the first test seriously. Retesting will reduce student motivation.
- Teachers give pretests so that retests are not needed.
- Retesting causes more work for the teacher
  - Teacher has to make up meaningful retest
  - Teacher has to mark retest
  - Students often do the same or worse on the retest
- Retesting causes mark inflation. Students end up having marks that are higher than what they deserve

### Who has influenced my thinking around retesting?

My stance on retests have been influenced by the work of two men; Rick DuFour and Rick Stiggins. Both men see student achievement as the primary aim of education. Their questions about teaching practice have shaped my beliefs about the value of retesting.

Rick DuFour's big question is, "What do educators do when students are not learning?" In general the majority of a student's math mark is calculated based on their results on between 6-10 tests per year. Both teacher and student alike decide whether a student is learning or not based on the results of the tests. Needless to say there is a lot riding on the tests. Rick's question has led to my own question, "What will I do when students are not achieving on my tests?"

Rick Stiggins has two ideas that stand out to me. The first is that summative assessment should celebrate the student's best results. When a student's mark is based primarily on one test, how likely is it that every student will perform to the best of their ability on that day? Further, illness, extra-curriculars and work often prevent students from being prepared in the first place. When students are held to a grade that does not reflect their understanding or potential understanding, they start believing that they are their under achieving grade.

Stiggin's asks another question. "How do your current assessment practices motivate student learning?" To those who do not give retests, they argue that low achieving students need to see the error of their way and work really hard to get out of the hole they have dug. There is a problem with this thinking. Poor grades discourage students and do not motivate students. All that they do is confirm what the student already believes about them selves, I am a bad math student.

## My Stand

Summative marks that go home on report cards should be a celebration of a student's best work. Those marks have significant weight. For seniors, these marks have the power to decide university entrance, scholarship dollars and graduation. Further, in all grades, these marks tend to be labels that students wear like a badge or a hazing pin. A student with 90% believes he is great at math. Conversely, a student who has 54% in math believes he is bad a math. There is far too much riding on a math test to assume that a student will perform at their best every time.

There are many reasons why a student may not achieve to the best of their ability on any given day. Here is a list:

- They have been ill.
- People learn at different rates.
- They are working 3 shifts a week.
- Extra curricular events.
- They have issues of a personal nature.
- They had an off day and wrote a poor test.
- They have been lazy and unmotivated.

In any case, by giving all of these students a chance to retest gives them the opportunity to see them selves as something better than they are right now. They have the chance to rectify the situation quickly. These students can use the original assessment as a formative assessment or a pretest. Students are more motivated to fix a situation than to not make the same mistake next time. Students are more motivated to maintain good grades than they are to try to repair low grades. Retests allow the student to be in charge of their own achievement. At the end of the year their mark is reflects their determination to learn from their mistakes and ultimately learn the material.

Here are a few important tips for using retesting in your school or department.

- The retest must be different than the original test.
- Retest creation should be a shared task between department members.
- The retest must be more than different numbers. The retest must ask different questions that require the student to review not only the original test but the entire unit again.
- The retest must **replace** the original mark regardless of whether the mark is high or lower. Students should have the opportunity to decide whether they want the teacher to mark the test or not.
- Both the original test and the retest should require to reflect on their learning.