On Friday we will be distributing the first report cards of this school year. We were surprised to learn that DCPS was changing the format of its report cards on October 20th. Most teachers set up their evaluation system using the report card as a guide. In August we assumed that no changes were occurring so we started the school year using last year’s report card as our structure. Then the bombshell. A new report card! With so much warning! What made the change even more challenging was that the new report cards weren’t ready for teachers to actually see until November 4. On the half-day of school dedicated to actually putting grades into the system, teachers could see the assessed standards. But except for a sample first grade card sent early, the rest of the grades had to wait until November 4 to finally see what the written copy would look like. Grades were all due in last Friday so we can spend this week printing the reports to send home this Friday with your children.

For returning parents, some changes will be very obvious. On the front page there is a box that has the final progress marks for each curriculum area instead of burying the grades among the standards. Reading, writing and speaking/listening skills are now broken apart instead of being one aggregate grade. Work habits and social skills are also front and center on the first page. Attendance is completely done by central office. There is a new section for older students that show their DC-CAS results for up to the previous two years. There is also a tear-off sign and return slip to let us know that you received the report card and let you request a conference with a teacher.

Other parts of the report cards are the same. There are still the lists of standards for each grade level in English language arts, math, science and social studies. The special subject teachers have generated the grades for art, music and physical education. At Lafayette there will be no grades for the world languages section. The major change in this section is that some of the language used to describe the standards has been simplified to make it more accessible to all parents in the District of Columbia.

It has been a challenge to complete these report cards. Most teachers start earlier than the designated half-day. As units are completed grades can be entered. But not this time. The window was very short. We also found that there were a number of technology challenges. We are pretty divided as a staff between the PC and Apple users. Some computers worked fine while others did not. Teachers like to work on report cards at home but some couldn’t get the application to open on their home machines. Special subject teachers found out about their standards language late in the game so their grades went to the homeroom teachers a little behind schedule. It was a race to the deadline.

We used to distribute report cards right before parent teacher conference day. That made explaining questions about grades very simple. This year we just had a conference day in October and the next one won’t be until the end of February. These dates don’t align with the report cards at all. But we know you may have questions and concerns about your child’s report and our teachers may want to get in touch with you. Please let us know if you want to set up a time to meet with a teacher to discuss current progress.

I’m not expecting this first set of reports to be flawless. As of last Friday we were still getting instructions on how to complete certain sections. Having to do all the work at school has made for some long days. It is much easier to complete grades at home and to use a weekend to do it. And since we didn’t actually see the paper copy ahead of time, we may not be one hundred percent accurate in everything we have entered. But this is not the first time a new DCPS report card has come on line. When I first got here we used carbon copy sets that took Superman strength to write on. Then we moved on to another kind when DC adopted new standards. The first computer ones could only be accessed by the individual teacher. Now Mrs. Bright can print them from the office and get replacement ones ready without bothering the teacher. So on Friday, get ready for the new, improved 2013-14 version. Just don’t get too attached to it. I’m expecting more changes before this year is over.