

Too early to tell if Dallas ISD's new standards are curbing dropouts

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By KENT FISCHER / The Dallas Morning News

Dallas school officials were widely lampooned last fall after creating new grading standards that critics said eliminated deadlines, minimized homework and gave students automatic retests on flunked exams.

Some had predicted that teachers would be powerless to hold their students accountable and would be forced to pass students who put out little effort. But the percentage of flunkers remained fairly stable, suggesting that teachers are giving nearly as many F's as they did last year.

Student course failures were down less than 3 percentage points compared with last year. Meanwhile, the number of F's handed out on district semester final exams dropped less than 1 percentage point, according to data provided by the district.

Superintendent Michael Hinojosa said the numbers show that the new grading rules helped more kids pass.

"We had fewer students fail classes, and we had fewer students fail multiple classes," he said. "My big worry was grade inflation. That didn't happen."

But a prominent local educator said the data is too preliminary to draw any conclusions about the effectiveness of the new rules.

"Making a decision right now based on this data is impossible," said David Chard, dean of the College of Education at Southern Methodist University. "It's just too early."

Like other big city school districts, Dallas is wrestling with a high school dropout rate that pushes 50 percent. Recent research suggests a correlation between the dropout rate and the large number of courses that students fail in their first year of high school.

So last summer, the district convened a committee to recommend changes to its grading policies that might help curb those ninth-grade failures.

The result: eliminating homework deadlines, minimizing homework grades, requiring retests and outlawing grades of zero unless parents are first notified.

Enrollment reports this year do not yet reveal any clues as to whether the district's dropout rate has improved under the new rules.

Criticism

When the policy change hit the news, teachers were incredulous, and the district seemed unprepared to handle the backlash. Then national media – notably CNN and *The Wall Street Journal* – picked up the story, and DISD faced withering criticism from all over the country.

Six months later, thousands of teachers continue to express dissatisfaction with the change. In the fall, DISD asked 2,800 educators for their opinions on the new rules. Nearly 40 percent answered they were "not at all" satisfied with the change, compared with 11 percent who reported being satisfied "to a great extent." About 45 percent of the educators said they were "somewhat satisfied" with the rules; the rest offered no opinion.

Despite the mixed reviews, several teachers reported they've found ways to use the rules to their advantage. For example, the policy requires teachers to allow students to make up tests they have flunked.

Many teachers found this rule particularly troublesome because they feared students would not take exams seriously if they knew they could always take a makeup test.

To combat that, one teacher said his makeup exams are much more difficult than the initial test. It only takes one makeup test for a kid to realize that won't be an easy route to a better grade, said Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Magnet Center history teacher David Lee, one of the first teachers to criticize the new policies.

"Our retests are killers," said Lee, a member of the district committee that designed the rules who resigned out of frustration before the group finished its work. "So as far as I can tell, the [school] administration is giving us the freedom to do what we need to do."

Nevertheless, Lee said he's seeing more kids this year take a nonchalant attitude toward assignments because they know the penalties for doing so are reduced under the new rules.

"The kids know how to work the system," Lee said. "If they can find a little shortcut and still pull a B, they'll take it."

Despite the superintendent's declaration that grade inflation is not happening, Glendon Plumton, 18, a senior at Townview, worries that the new rules skew grades too high.

"I have noticed people passing classes when they failed all the tests," he said in an e-mail. "One kid I know got a 47 and a 65 on the two tests ... but because he had turned in all of the homework, his average in that class was an 85. While he likes the high grade, even he admitted that it wasn't exactly an accurate reflection of his understanding."

Glendon also worried that the publicity surrounding the new rules will cause some people to "devalue" his DISD diploma.

"One example of this already happening was at a competition I went to in Rockwall," he wrote. "One of the Rockwall students was guiding me to a room for testing and asked me where I went to school."

When he learned I was from DISD, he said 'You don't have to do anything to pass your classes there anymore, right?' "

Many teachers, though, say the rules have had little impact in their classrooms because they've always helped struggling students pass, so long as they were willing to do the extra work.

"I don't flout the rules, but you have to have a relationship with your kids so they know you care whether they pass or fail," said Bryan Adams High social studies teacher Margie Luck. "It's not about giving them busy work, but I do give them opportunities to make up work. I've always done that."

Refusing new rules

Some district teachers, though, refuse to play by the new rules. They say they simply can't accept what they believe is a mandate to lower their classroom standards.

"I don't use the district's grading policy," said a district science teacher, who asked not to be named. "It's just not ethical. It's almost like fraud. Why do we give grades? If a 70 isn't a 70, then what does it mean?"

Grade inflation, the teacher said, is why he spends too much time reviewing algebra in his high school physics class. Too many of his students have been passed along without having mastered required skills.

"I spend a lot of time teaching stuff other than physics," he said.

Chard, the SMU dean, said school systems around the country are discussing the same question: What does a grade mean, and who decides? The school system in Pittsburgh recently adopted, despite public outcry, policies similar to those implemented in DISD.

"We have no common metrics," he said. "The validity of grades has always been in question. [DISD] is attempting to bring some consistency and uniformity to the system."

But are the new rules working?

"We're going to need to see three or four years [of data] before determining whether this was successful," he said, adding that even then it may be impossible to separate out the impact of the new grading rules from other curricular changes.

"We can make some assumptions, but really you have to look at the totality of the changes," he said.