

## Montgomery Grading System Gets Mixed Marks

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Surveys Show New Policy's Emphasis on 'Reteach/Reassess' Confuses Teachers and Students

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More than three years after the Montgomery County public school system unveiled a method for grading students that was designed to eliminate grade inflation and ensure consistency across the county, officials are still trying to fine-tune their standards.

A survey of 410 teachers at 10 middle and high schools released by the school system last month found overwhelming support for the grading and reporting policy but showed that some teachers are struggling with how to make parts of it work. A companion survey of 1,585 high school students at four campuses found that they, too, are often confused about how grades are calculated under the new system.

The surveys found that students and teachers have had difficulty understanding the "reteach/reassess" component of the policy, which allows students to retake certain tests and exams. Teachers said they are not always certain when to give students the chance to redo an assignment or retake a test. Students said not all teachers let them redo assignments.

Most striking in the student surveys was the proportion of students who said their grades fell as a result of the policy: more than 40 percent. Forty-six percent did not think the grades on their report cards reflected the quality of their work.

Betsy Brown, the school system's director of curriculum and instruction, said that she was not sure why students felt that way but that staff would be working to better understand student perceptions.

Brown remained optimistic that whatever issues remain would be resolved.

"Right now, we're where we need to be," she said. "People are more familiar with the expectations and understand the expectations, and we're not hearing a lot of the anxiety in the secondary schools."

In March 2003, the Board of Education approved a new policy for grading students. The move came amid concerns about grade inflation and inconsistencies in how students were evaluated. Standards varied so much across the system that work receiving an A at one school might get a D at another campus.

Educators also found that grades reflected more than academic achievement. In some instances, students were able to boost their marks with extra credit earned by covering their textbooks or contributing canned goods to the holiday food drive.

Superintendent Jerry D. Weast pushed for a system that would maintain high standards, be consistent and ensure that the grades students receive measure academic achievement only.

But in a community where high achievement is not only valued but also expected, the system's first attempt to alter its policy caused widespread concern among parents, particularly those of high school students.

Many parents feared that the new system -- which would no longer count student effort or extra credit -- might hurt their child's prospects of getting into a top-notch university.

"It was horrendous," said Camille Szymczak, whose son and daughter were freshmen at Quince Orchard High School when the policy was unveiled. But these days, Szymczak said she is feeling much more comfortable with the system.

Brown said part of the concern may have come from a natural aversion to change, but another part was very personal.

"All of us have been graded at one point in our lives, and we have strong beliefs and strong memories of what makes sense, what feels fair," Brown said. "When we implemented a change, it bumped up against [people's] beliefs and traditions."

So in early 2004, school board members revamped their timetable. Instead of starting the new system all at once, school board members decided to roll out the changes over five years.

Some adjustments have been made along the way.

At the high school level, an initial attempt to use numbers rather than letters for grades was scrapped. Now a little more than midway through the process, Brown said, educators think most of the larger issues have been resolved. The concerns now are less philosophical and more operational, she said.

Other issues remain. About 70 percent of teachers surveyed said they are concerned that students are not always trying their best.

Said one middle school teacher: "Reteach/reassess has created a lazy atmosphere among students. They purposely do not prepare on time because they know there is a retake."

Some students say the chance to redo an assignment does not make them less inclined to work, just less pressured.

"It makes me less nervous to know I have a second chance," said Kyle Tangonan, a sophomore at Watkins Mill High School.

Rumana Ahmed, a senior at Watkins Mill, said that she is not sure recent changes to the policy have affected her grades but that the changes have been positive overall.

"It's a lot better," Ahmed said. The grading policy "pushes students to work harder."

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