

Current Events

At West Potomac High School, Taking F Off The Grade Books

Washington Post

Go Back

Print

Washington Post

At West Potomac High School, taking F off the grade books

By Donna St. George

Sunday, November 14, 2010

Depending on whom you ask, West Potomac High School's latest change to student grading is either another sign of a coddled generation or a necessary step to help struggling kids.

The dreaded F has been all but banished from the grade books.

The report cards that arrived home late last week showed few failing grades but instead marks of "I" for incomplete, indicating that students still owe their teachers essential work. They will get Fs only if they fail to complete assignments and learn the content in the months to come.

The change in educational philosophy is intended to encourage students to continue working toward mastery of material rather than accepting a failing grade and moving on. Schools throughout the Washington area and the nation have made other moves to improve grading methods, especially as they affect low-performing students, though few have gone so far as West Potomac High, in the Alexandria section of Fairfax County.

"It's a huge paradigm shift," said principal Clifford Hardison, who recalls that when year-end grades were tallied last June at West Potomac, he counted nearly 2,000 Fs, with a large group of teens racking up more than one failed course.

The new strategy has critics - both within West Potomac and beyond - who fear that reducing the possibility of outright failure gives teachers less leverage while also giving students unrealistic expectations about the adult world they soon will enter. Some worry that the reordering of deadlines and test opportunities will also affect the transcripts of the college-bound, giving some students an advantage.

Mary Mathewson, an English teacher, says a number of her colleagues are "livid" about the grading change, which "takes away one of the very few tools we have to get kids to learn." The possibility of failing is a motivator, she says, and now "kids are under the impression they can do it whenever they want to, and it's not that big of a deal."

In the first quarter, half of Mathewson's grades for two 10th-grade English classes were incompletes. "I don't believe it's an extra chance," she said. "It's an out. The root problem is motivation. The root problem is not that we're not teaching them."

In Alexandria, T.C. Williams High School recently adopted a policy allowing incompletes to be given as placeholders, but with fixed time limits for completing the work; Fs are still given. Montgomery County recalibrated its failing marks several years ago to score Fs as no lower than 50 percent when calculating grade averages, rather the far more damaging zero. In Prince William County, schools have made it easier to retake tests and awarded fewer outright zeroes.

"Once they demonstrate mastery, you give them credit for what they know," said Mickey Mulgrew, Prince William's associate superintendent for high schools. The growing belief, he said, is: "Who cares if you learned it on Monday or Tuesday, as long as you learned it?"

In Fairfax County, Peter Noonan, assistant superintendent for instructional services, says the high-performing system is not scrapping the A-to-F grading scale, but a small group of entrepreneurial principals are trying new approaches, using standards-based ideas about the importance of learning content.

"If we really want students to know and do the work, why would we give them an F and move on?" Noonan said. ". . . I think the students who are struggling should not be penalized for not learning at the same rate as their peers."

Now, the thinking at West Potomac goes, learning will trump grading. The emphasis is on what students know. Teachers, working as a team, will be on duty more afternoons and Saturdays. They will be mentors, too. If students fail to finish work to clear up incompletes, they may have to attend a last-chance summer session.

For students who have mastered the material, the new policy has benefits too. Missing a quiz or a assignment may simply result in an "NM," for no mark. If the teacher believes a student already understands the content, he or she may not have to complete the missing work.

But such changes can be a tough sell, and many parents and educators worry about inflating grades, undermining teachers and sending students the wrong message.

"I think giving Fs has a purpose, and that is to demonstrate we have standards [students] have to meet, and if they don't meet them, they don't pass," said Michael J. Petrilli, executive vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an educational policy think tank. "Kids need to know that if they don't turn in an assignment or they blow a test, there are going to be consequences . . . We're trying to prepare young people for the world of adults."

But Rick Wormeli, a grading expert who has conducted training on the new approaches in Prince William, Loudoun, Calvert and Anne Arundel counties, argues that grades of incomplete ultimately create more accountability and underscore the value of what is being taught. "It's far more demanding on kids," he says. For them,

"now it's, 'Oh crud, I have to learn it.' "

All of this is a work in progress at West Potomac, a school of 2,200 students that brings together the children of lawyers and lobbyists with the sons and daughters of new immigrants and financially strapped families living near the poverty line.

Few parents and teachers knew about the change as the school year started, but a letter went home in October. The Parent-Teacher-Student Association is studying the change, and an opposition group has formed, calling itself Real World, Real Grades.

Many parents ask about fairness: What about the conscientious student who keeps up with class, studies until 2 a.m. and pulls an A on a math test? Should a peer who skipped class and flubbed the test twice or three times get an equal grade? With the new policy, the ultimate grade on a student transcript could be the same, even though the two students took very different paths.

"I think there is a fairness issue involved for the kids who do play by the rules," parent Carol Farquhar Bolger said. "The question becomes: What is a grade from West Potomac going to mean now? What does an A mean now?"

Student Harmain Rafi, 16, said she views it from a similar angle, failing to see how it "balances out" not to hold students to the same deadlines and test opportunities. "It more or less says all the hard work I'm doing isn't going to be worth anything," she says.

Ken O'Connor, the grading expert whose work inspired the changes in Fairfax, says West Potomac's is uncommon at the high school level, but that critics should remember that some people pass their driver's license test the first time, while others need four or five tries. "The important thing is not when you demonstrate the competency, but whether," he said.

West Potomac principal Hardison said first-quarter grades included about 600 marks of incomplete. He hopes the policy will help top students as well, making them go back and fill in learning gaps. "Obviously we're trying to help kids who were not successful in the past, but really we're trying to help all kids," he said.

Parent Kate Van Dyck, who has two children attending West Potomac, wanted to know: When will teachers find the extra time to work with students who have incompletes? What about students who game the system? How can learning continue sequentially if makeup assignments remain undone?

"There has to be some recognition that students do learn at different rates . . . but these strategies, while they may be well-intentioned, are knee-jerk reactions for our student records not to reflect zeroes or Fs," she says. "An 'I' is kind of a limbo."

Current Events

At West Potomac High School, Taking F Off The Grade Books

For Discussion

◀ Go Back

🖨️ PRINT

1. Define: inflation, coddled, banished, tallied, leverage, livid, entrepreneurial, trump, mentors
2. "The change in educational philosophy is intended to encourage students..." What is an educational philosophy? Is this decision a change in educational philosophy?
3. "It's a huge paradigm shift." What is a paradigm shift? If this change is a paradigm shift, what was the old paradigm and what is the new one?
4. Does principal Hardison believe that paradigm shifts are generally good things? Should he?
5. Do you find that the possibility of failing is a motivator? How would you and your classmates approach schoolwork differently if F's were changed to incompletes?
6. "If we really want students to know and do the work, why would we give them an F and move on?" What is the answer to his question?
7. Besides incomplete grades, are there any ways of teaching kids who have gotten an F in something?
8. What is the purpose of an education?
9. What is the purpose of grades? How do they help students? Who else makes use of them?
10. Could students learn without grades? Could students learn well if they primarily pursued grades?
11. Is it fair that some students have a better ability to learn than others? Is it fair that grades reflect this?
12. Is it fair to the top students if there are fewer consequences for doing poorly?

[Link to article source](#)