

Calif. schools are changing how students are graded

It's not as easy as A, B, C, and some parents object

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When a public school system in the San Francisco Bay Area explored replacing traditional grading practices with a form of “standards-based grading system” meant to eliminate bias, it sparked

widespread opposition from parents. They signed petitions and showed up in force at school board meetings to rail against the changes.

The proposal, which the Dublin Unified School District began testing last year, was pitched as a way to shift emphasis from winning points on tests and homework to student mastery of material — and to improve equity by better supporting students who might take a bit longer to learn.

It put opponents of the plan in the somewhat awkward position of vocally fighting something named “Equity Grading.” But one after another, parents at a July school board meeting did just that.

Some complained that the change to the grading system made their students guinea pigs in what they saw as an unproven approach. Several others objected to a system where students can get a high mark even if they skipped the

homework — as long as they can prove they understood the material.

As parents wrote in their petition: “Do not take away the reward for rigor, hard work, and participation in the classroom!”

Interest in revamping grades got a boost in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many schools and teachers were more forgiving on

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deadlines and more open to experimenting with formal systems to better meet the challenges students were facing in their family lives.

After getting a “taste” of such reform, many thought it made sense to do it on a more permanent basis, said Matt Townsley, an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Northern Iowa.

While Townsley said there isn’t national data on how many schools have made the switch to standards-based grading, the approach is more prevalent in some pockets of the country – particularly New Hampshire, Maine and Wisconsin, with more recent adoptions in schools in Connecticut, New Mexico, Oregon and Wyoming.

Instead of giving a letter grade based on a percentage of points achieved, standards-based systems start with a list of proficiencies to achieve and then assign students a number from 1 (below standards) to 4 (exceeded standards) for each one.

Even amid some opposition, many teachers and students in Dublin, California, embraced the grading changes. Katherine Hermens, who teaches biology at Dublin High School, spoke at the same school board meeting, saying that before the COVID-19 pandemic, she would have rejected Equity Grading.

“What I understand is that the pandemic fundamentally changed me,” she told the school board, noting that she saw more clearly during remote teaching the struggles many students experienced in their home lives.

“The old practices we cling to were born in a different era, under different circumstances,” Hermens said. “It is time to emphasize learning over effort. Prioritizing learning is exactly what Equity Grading is. It recognizes the individual journey of every student. It acknowledges that we all learn differently at our own pace and in various ways.”

Pros and cons of standards-based grading

Cody Whitehouse was teaching social studies at Wilson College Prep high school in Phoenix when the school system rolled out a standards-based grading system last year.



Some teachers in the Dublin Unified School District in California experimented with a new kind of grading system last school year. “Equity Grading” shifted emphasis from winning points on tests and homework to student mastery of material. PROVIDED BY THE DUBLIN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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At first, Whitehouse liked the sound of the plan, especially the part that emphasized students would get multiple chances to show what they know. “I agree that a student should have more than one chance,” he said. “We all have busy crazy lives, so things happen.”

Once the system was in place, the teacher said, he quickly soured on it.

A key part of the new approach is that homework scores are not counted in the final grade for a class. Instead, as with an athlete training for a big game, practice is seen as what it takes to get ready for the final match, and what happens on game day is what matters – game day being tests that measure whether students have mastered the required material.

For students, though, the takeaway

was that homework no longer mattered at all, said Whitehouse.

“If you don’t grade it, the students won’t do it,” he said. “Every teacher has had students say, ‘Is this being graded?’ If not, they’re not going to do it, or they’re not going to do it as well.”

That means students missed out on a positive side effect of a stressful homework assignment.

“Completing homework and meeting deadlines are important life skills that should be fostered at school,” said Whitehouse, who has since left the school system, in part over frustration with the policy, and now teaches overseas.

Some students haven’t reacted to new grading systems the way Whitehouse’s did, however.

Aakrisht Mehra, a junior at Dublin High School, in the California district where parents protested the new grading system, said that he didn’t see high-achieving kids suddenly slacking off on homework. After all, those students still wanted to do well on tests to get into top colleges. (Aakrisht himself said he has a 4.5 grade point average.)

But he said he is “sympathetic” to the concern that suddenly changing the grading system might lower a student’s GPA right as the young person is applying to selective colleges. “I am all too familiar with the competitive nature of

high school,” he said.

In a district poll of students, the vast majority favored the new system.

Facing headwinds

Chris Funk, the superintendent of Dublin Unified who led the charge for the new grading system in his district, said his main motivation was to address the inequities that he sees in the current system.

While African American students make up 3% of the district’s students, he said, 55% of them got a D or an F last school year. One reason, he said, is that students who get a low mark or neglect to turn in an assignment early in a term were often statistically doomed to fail in the old system.

“In my 34 years in schools – most in secondary schools – I’ve seen students who have an F at the first grading period lose hope that they can pull themselves out and pass that class,” he said.

Students who get a zero on an assignment know that they will have to get a perfect score nine times to eliminate that zero, Funk said. “Even for our best students, that’s not reasonable.”

The new grading system sets a floor of 50% on every test or assignment, so that getting one F isn’t such an unshakable anchor.

Parents who oppose the system, though, say that it lowers standards by giving half the points for doing nothing. But Funk points out that 50% is still failing, so it hardly gives students an incentive to turn in blank pages.

The Dublin Unified school board voted 3-2 to suspend the grading pilot project at the middle and high school level. Individual teachers are still free to choose the new system, Funk said, but as a matter of policy, the status quo will largely remain for now.

Townsley, the Iowa professor, said he has seen similar scenarios play out at other schools. “It’s pretty frequent for there to be pushback, especially at the high school level,” he said.

“Often, it’s not the ideas that are being pushed back upon, it’s the rollout – it’s the implementation,” Townsley said. “Sometimes it’s too quick, and there’s not enough time to explain why we’re doing this.”

This article on school grades was co-published with EdSurge, a nonprofit newsroom that covers education through original journalism and research.