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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

In a meeting Monday night that sometimes lapsed into near-shouting, USD 480 school board members dug deeper into the Grading Framework introduced at Liberal High School. At the end of it all, they left with homework instead of answers, deciding by consensus to hold a separate, sit-down work session to better understand the grading system.

However, that conclusion took more than an hour to reach. During that time, the board directed intense questions at LHS principal Keith Adams and three high school teachers who'd come to present information and remained standing in the central meeting area the entire time. Though all four started off with enthusiasm, focusing on the task of getting students to learn, the discussion turned sour as board members hammered the LHS group with questions.

"Let's talk about grading," Adams said as his presentation began. He asked the board to think about the question, "What is the fundamental purpose of grading and grades? You have to clear your mind about what you've known or heard about grading, and ask that question."



Adams briefly outlined the two-year research process that caused him, along with a few LHS teachers, to explore the idea of competency-based grading as a way to focus on making sure

students have learned the material.

“We were intrigued,” Adams said. “We decided to look into it a little deeper, and teachers began asking me, ‘Hey, can I do this in my classroom?’ We decided to try it and see what was possible.”

Eli Svaty, English department chair who has spoken out in favor of the system — and come under fire by the public for doing so — also brought a positive approach to the meeting.

“A lot of misconceptions and even full-on misinformation has been going around the last few weeks, and I’m glad we can finally (meet) with you face-to-face so you can see how amazing this is going to be for the school,” Svaty said. “If we can implement this, we can change the lives of everyone who goes to the high school.”

He was joined by fellow educators Shelley Tiedeman, who teaches AP calculus and geometry, and Lindsey Diepenbrock, who teaches AP biology and honors biology. Teacher Michael Scott, also one of the pilot-program instructors, attended the meeting in the audience.

Though the teachers brought a wide array of evidence, research and resources to explain the grading method, board members seemed to focus on three main complaints:

- Was the pilot program implemented in accordance with district policy, and what would be the process in deciding whether to retain or discard it?
- Did hard numerical data prove the system’s effectiveness?
- Could teachers and students who disliked the program voice their opinions freely?

Board member Tammy Sutherland Abbott read the district's policy regarding new curriculum, and told Adams and the teachers, "if kids can't get zeroes, you have changed policy."

All responded that zeroes are still given, but that they often serve as "placeholders" in the grade book to note that certain practice assignments were not completed. If, at the end of a semester, a student has failed to demonstrate mastery of the material, a zero (or failing grade) is still an option.

"I think there's the perception out there that students say, 'Oh, I got a zero, that's no big deal,' but that isn't the case," said deputy superintendent Renae Hickert. She asked the teachers, "Do you find in the classroom that your students are fairly responsible about getting the work turned in?"

"They learn pretty quickly that if they don't do the work, their test reflects that," said Svaty.

Prior to implementing the program, board member Nick Hatcher asked, "Did you have students who were falling through the cracks?"

"I did for sure," said Tiedeman. When she taught Algebra I in the old system, "I failed 30 to 40 percent of my students."

"And what good was that to the students?" asked Hatcher.

"It wasn't," said Tiedeman. "The thing that I found more often or not, the first exam they might make an F, and then on the second exam, if they got an F, it was almost like (the semester) was done. They couldn't get it back up. I made their homework about 50 percent of the grade, but it still killed it."

Hatcher asked if the new system helped "catch" the students who would have failed before, giving them an opportunity to learn the material.

“I’ve caught almost all of them,” said Tiedeman. “Last semester, I think I failed one.”

“The students that are the overachievers, the ones that don’t do the formatives, that perform well on the summatives,” Hatcher said, “Do you, the teacher, understand that their comprehension is acceptable?”

Yes, said Svaty, adding that the new system provided opportunities for deeper exploration of the material for such students.

“Those students are the ones who used to end up with a C or D before, because they understood the material, but they didn’t do the homework,” Svaty said. “Now, we can give them enhancement work,” instead of busywork.

Diepenbrock, too, said the competency-based system allows her to catch the students who are faltering more quickly, and provide the high achievers with more challenging material.

As science teacher Diepenbrock listed the ways she helps her students practice and learn material, and then tests her students’ knowledge, board member Tammy Sutherland Abbott asked for test score results.

“My grade variance, which looks at what the students got in class, versus what they scored on the AP exam, last year, it ended up at zero. What that means is the two were equal,” said Diepenbrock.

Sutherland-Abbott asked about the final AP test scores, which range from 1 to 5, with 3 being a passing score.

“I had two 1s out of 20 kids,” said Diepenbrock. “The rest were higher. I had 50 percent pass.”

Though 63 percent of Diepenbrock's AP students passed in previous years, the last academic year introduced new nationally-required curriculum, which posed challenges, she noted. In addition, the number of students enrolled in her AP classes doubled.

"She's had higher AP scores in the past two years than any AP science teachers prior," Adams said.

"If this is effective, I would have expected those scores to increase," Sutherland-Abbott said.

"We follow what College Board (which oversees Advanced Placement classes) says, and last fall I had brand-new curriculum, and half my kids passed the exam, which, to me, was a success."

Tiedeman said her AP Calculus class scores went from a zero-percent AP exam pass rate the previous year, to 30 percent last year.

"That was after implementing a lot of these strategies," she said.

AP exams are administered nationwide, one time only, on the same day and time each year. They are cumulative and are used to gauge whether or not high school students have achieved college-level learning that can be translated into college credits. Most colleges require a minimum score of 3 to issue credit, while more selective or elite schools require a score of 4 or even 5 to grant college credit. The AP test scores are separate from a student's LHS grade.

The teachers also worked their way through a list of questions submitted by email. Had parents been allowed to choose whether or not their students would be graded with this new system?

"Obviously, the parents did not (get to choose)," Svaty said, "but historically, parents have never been given the option to choose the style of grading their children's teachers use." Svaty referred to inconsistencies in various teachers' grading methods that have prompted parents to

say they'd prefer their child to be placed in one teacher's classroom over another's.

By creating consistency, "this system makes sure all students have equal opportunities to learn," he said.

Did the parents whose students were enrolled in classes that adopted this grading method know that a pilot program was in place?

"Second semester (last year, when the program began), we sent letters out," Svaty said.

What would happen if the parent did not sign the return letter that came with the second-semester syllabus, asked board member Matt Friederich.

"I didn't have any parents who disagreed," said Tiedeman.

"Let's just role play," Friederich responded. "What if they didn't like it?"

"In those situations, it's up to us as teachers, to decide what to do," said Diepenbrock.

"So, take the parent out, they have no choice?" Friederich said. "I'm just asking."

"They don't have any choice in any other system we've ever had," pointed out Adams. "It's been pretty arbitrary through the years, to be honest with you, and we're trying to be more consistent. We've done what we can to let parents know, so they wouldn't be in the dark."

The parent signatures on syllabus papers, "are nothing more than awareness, not approving or

disapproving,” said board member Nick Hatcher.

Sutherland-Abbott described a broad array of people who disapprove of the policy.

“Anyone in the school system who disagrees is petrified to speak out against you,” she said. “I’ve talked to parents, teachers, administrators, students. I’ve also been told it wasn’t an option for new teachers (to decline to use the Grading Framework). So I don’t agree there was an option.”

Adams acknowledged that all new teachers at LHS were required to adopt the Grading Framework. Tenured, or “senior” teachers had the option to choose.

Sutherland-Abbott said senior teachers who disliked the system were shut down with a “one way conversation.”

When Adams asked where Sutherland-Abbott got her information, she replied, “I won’t rat out anybody.”

“Then I’m not going to respond to those statements,” Adams said.

Students also dislike the system, she added.

“There is no homework, there is no motivation,” she said. “On Twitter, some of the students are trying to get a petition together to bring to you to get this stopped. They say there’s no point in trying to pay attention in class anymore, because they get no help, there’s no participation grade. I’m just telling you from my side, what I’ve heard.”

Sutherland-Abbott said she believes most of the student body “doesn’t like this.”

“Now they feel double the pressure, because they only have the tests to measure. If they mess up one test, that makes anyone in extracurricular activities ineligible until they can retake the test,” she continued.

“That’s not in place anymore,” Svaty said.

Tiedeman said, “We’ve all found our hardships in the process, but we’re trying to address the framework and address issues as we can. Overall, I’ve had good, very positive results.”

For the teachers and Adams, the most compelling pressure is the students’ learning or lack thereof.

“What we have to be able to guarantee is that our students are learning the curriculum. And if they’re not, we’re failing them,” Svaty said. “They’ve been set in this system that has been pitted against them from the beginning, where we say, ‘OK, you have three days to learn this, and then here’s the test.’ If you don’t learn that way, there’s nothing for you. Sorry, you failed; I guess you’ll never learn this skill.

“If you’re one of those students who did learn the skill, there’s nothing for you, either, because you’re ready to move on, you’re ready for something else. You don’t need the homework, you need more challenges coming at you. What competency-based grading does is meet all those students at their own level. We have the opportunity to reach all students.”

“It’s about giving kids opportunities to learn,” Diepenbrock said.

For their part, board members expressed a desire to do the same. Board member Steve Helm told the teachers he asked questions because he wanted to understand, not give them a hard time.

The board will continue to study the issue, said president Delvin Kinser, at a future work session.

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