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grading system meeting invites parents but does not allow input

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

Parents who don't like the new grading system at Liberal High School may speak up and request more rigor for their children. To do so, however, will require one-on-one communications with individual teachers, and careful follow-up.

That was the take-away message for those who attended the back-to-school meeting for parents of sophomores and juniors at LHS Tuesday night.

Though the meeting, planned by the counselor's office, was originally intended to outline graduation requirements and give advice about preparing for college, neither topic sparked much interest.

Instead, a group of about 50 parents scattered across the auditorium at LHS checked their cell phones and waited for the expected Q&A session about the grading policy.

For more than two weeks, the “Framework for Grading” program has sparked controversy in the community, at school board meetings, and on social media.

However, a Q&A session for the entire group at parents’ night never happened. Principal Keith Adams and the teachers who appeared at the USD 480 school board meeting Monday night did not attend the parents’ meeting. One teacher, assistant principal Shiloh Vincent told the group of parents, was with his wife, who was giving birth.

Those who wanted to ask questions about the LHS “Framework for Grading” program had to wait more than an hour, until the program wrapped up. Immediately following, Vincent and fellow assistant principals Ashley Kappelman and Rafe Begley and instructional coach Jenifer Jones remained on hand to talk with parents.

Parent Andrew Wehling spoke with Begley and Jones and shared his concerns about competency-based grading.

“What we’ve heard, filtering home through our kids and their friends, is ‘now we don’t have to do homework, because it’s not going to be graded,’” said Wehling.

Begley replied that homework is still necessary, even if it doesn’t seem that way to students.

“If they fail the test, they have go back and show that they are able to do the formative (homework) before they retake the test,” Begley said.

“In the old system, I did all the homework because I wanted a good grade, and I learned it right away,” Wehling said. “Doesn’t this slow the class down?”

Students who need to retest must do the work before or after school, Begley said. The process

and the details are up to the teachers, added Jones.

“Some teachers require students to get a score of 3 or higher on the (previously skipped) homework — you have to prove you know it before you take the test again,” she said. Others go even further, at the prompting of parents who demand a higher standard.

“When I was teaching with this last year, I had a parent say, ‘I want my student to do every part of the homework,’ and I said, ‘all right,’” Jones said. “I told the student, ‘Your parents want you to do the homework, so you’re doing it.’ There’s still autonomy there, where parents can communicate to the teacher.”

For parents like Michele Stoddard, whose daughter ranked fifth in her class last year, getting Alyssa to do the homework isn’t the problem.

“My daughter wants the daily homework, and she’s always depended on it to help bring her average up,” Stoddard said. “She’s not a great test-taker. With this new system, most of her teachers aren’t counting anything but tests, and that makes it hard.”

Stoddard said her daughter had experienced increased migraine headaches because of her anxiety about the new grading method.

“The doctor says it’s the stress,” Stoddard said.

Jones said the test retaking mechanism should allay some of Stoddard’s concerns.

“That’s the nice part about the retake,” she said. “If you are a terrible test-taker, you can get a second chance. You can talk with your teacher, and maybe it’s not about the skills, maybe you know the material. But you need to learn how to take a test. We can work on that.”

Though Jones has moved from a teaching position to that of instructional coach, she applies what she learned in the classroom to the issue of grading.

“Last year, I had one student take a test three times for one skill, and that was the most I ever had to do,” she said. “If you get a student having to come in and take the test seven, eight times, there’s something else going on. That’s another conversation.”

What about kids who just want to do the minimum, Wehling asked: “Some students will do the least amount they can get away with. I’m looking for the loopholes that could be exploited by the nonmotivated kids.”

“Kids are going to look for loopholes,” Begley said, looking back on his days as a science teacher. “But I think that having to do the homework over again will discourage that.”

Begley said the grading system offers students a two-week window to rework the formative assignments, learn the material and retest.

“If they aren’t doing that, then they are referred to their principal, and we start to look at detention options,” he said. “We have Saturday school, we have Later, our after-school tutoring program, and we have the ability to get the kids back on track.”

Direct communication between parents and teachers also helps, said Jones. Last year, after a student had taken a test twice, and still failed, his mother called: “Just make my son do all the homework,” she told me, and I said, ‘Fine.’ Then I told the student, ‘Skipping the formatives, not doing homework, is no longer an option for you.’”

While parents and teachers continue to refine the details of what Jones described as “a work in progress,” some teachers have opted to stick with the traditional grading model.

“My daughter’s college algebra teacher doesn’t do the new system, and Alyssa really

appreciates that. I feel she's getting more out of that class," Stoddard said. "I applaud those tenured teachers who are not going with the new system. They're the old-school ones who are there for the kids, not the paycheck. Those are the grades my daughter brags the most on, the one's she's excited about. Those are the teachers who, I want to shake their hands and say, 'Thank you.'"

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