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Get rid of it, or work out the kinks?

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

Some want to scratch it altogether. Others feel it has promise but needs a fresh start to work out the glitches. Many have not made up their minds.

For the past six weeks, the competency-based grading system in use at Liberal High School has triggered intense debate in the community. At a special school board meeting Wednesday night, more than 50 people gathered to share opinions about the “Framework for Grading” program. Because it was a work session, the meeting did not include action on the issue.



USD No. 480 Board President Delvin Kinser began the evening with thanks to the people who attended, and a request that everyone govern their emotions in the interest of having a civil discussion.

Three and half hours — and many paper hand-outs — later, the mood remained guarded, with few solid conclusions.

Board member Nick Hatcher said the messy debate is, in itself, a positive event.

“We had no framework for grading before this, and since we’ve implemented this pilot program — whatever you want to call it — we have put on the forefront all these issues: the inconsistencies, the inaccuracies, the unmeaningful and the unsupportive of learning. At least we are now talking about it,” he said. “We’re talking about a change, talking about something we weren’t before. These things are good in my eyes.”

Like many who spoke, Hatcher acknowledged the competency-based system has significant flaws.

“I don’t think the system is perfected, I will say that,” he said. “But I believe you’ve got a good system. Let’s fix it. Let’s figure out a way to answer these people’s concerns.”

During the public comment portion of the evening, longtime science teacher Melisa Westerman articulated many of those concerns, but added, “I don’t want to throw out the baby with the bathwater, I want to do this correctly.”

Westerman does not currently use the new grading system. Nonetheless, she said, “I feel like I can argue both sides of this issue if I want to, because I have used competency-based grading in chemistry for 15 years. It’s not really that new.”

However, she went on, “I have been appalled at how this has been rammed down the throats of

the staff at LHS, with only inconsequential discussion.”

The new grading system poses real challenges to new teachers, she said, who are already struggling to settle into USD 480 and its set of three programs, AVID, Capturing Kids Hearts and Literacy First. These inexperienced teachers “are bewildered by a system they don’t understand or have time to process,” Westerman said. Students, too, “don’t understand the new grading system.

“I am incredibly saddened that the good things that have happened in the past few years at LHS have been overshadowed by this rushed enforcement of an idea that requires a huge paradigm shift in thinking, she added.”

LHS principal Keith Adams acknowledged that he was “naive” in pushing ahead with the new grading method. In part, he said, that resulted from poor communication at LHS.

“I didn’t hear any negative feedback. It was all positive, positive, positive. Nobody came into my office until late in the spring. Teachers did not express their concerns directly to me,” Adams said.

As a person in leadership, he said, and looking at things in retrospect, “I should have gone to them directly, instead of waiting for them to come to me.”

Even now, he noted, “as a faculty, I think we can resolve our issues and move forward. There’s no animosity.” He gestured to teachers who’d come to speak during the public comments. “Those are my master teachers over there.”

Board members Steve Helm, Crystal Clemens and Matt Friederich also focused on the importance of communication as a means to find a way through the situation.

“It comes down to communication and consistency,” Helm said. He said he was especially

concerned about how parents and students in the district feel. When he goes to McDonald's and sees kids who appear to be high-school age, he said, he often asks, "How do you like the new grading system?"

"I've not had one tell me they like it," he said.

Science teacher Lindsey Diepenbrock, who participated in the panel presentation about competency-based grading, said that might be evidence the new system is improving on the old one.

"A lot of it is that they don't like it that they really have to learn it," she said. "Before, students could get by with just having a D, and they were OK with it. It was heartbreaking to me. For us to hold the standard that they have to learn this — kids probably aren't going to like it. They're going to have to do some work."

Parent Shannon Davis saw exactly the opposite.

"Kids are already lazy enough," she said, noting that technological changes and cultural patterns have raised a generation of students who do far less than ever before. By allowing students to rework formative "homework" assignments and retake tests, Davis said, the system might cultivate poor work habits.

Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott also expressed concern on this front, describing competency-based teaching as one with lower expectations.

"I'm worried about the laziness factor," she said.

Yet Adams said the competency-based system would ultimately move students to a more self-motivated way of learning.

“The research that’s coming out focuses on grit and resilience,” he said. “For the student, it takes me knowing that it’s going to have to be me pulling myself up by my own bootstraps. They begin to understand that it’s on them.”

To make that happen, Adams said, educators have to communicate this message:

“I am going to hold you accountable. I’m not going to accept that you just didn’t turn it in. I’m not going to accept this zero. I’m not going to accept that you didn’t do your best. Do it again.

“I think that’s the point that competency based grading aims for. They have to become more responsible to build their own learning path,” Adams said.

No matter how inspiring the grading system might be, at least one parent believes the Framework for grading should be discontinued on principle. Mellissa Brenneman addressed the board on Sept. 9 and has since spoken out repeatedly about policy violations. She repeated her point on Wednesday.

Brenneman reminded the board that she believes district policy was broken when the competency-based system was introduced. As a pilot program, it should have been presented to, and approved by the board before implementation, she maintained.

“I will hold you accountable. I do want to see action,” she said.

Though Sutherland-Abbott knew that a work session meant no action, she too said she was a little disappointed by the meeting.

“I thought there should have been more interaction with the parents,” she said. “In talking to some of them afterward, a lot of them left with more questions than they came with.”

While it's great to avoid high emotions, she added, "when you're talking about your own child's future, you want to get answers."

TOMORROW: Part 2 of this series will include further comments from the public, and a look at how the grading system may affect student performance after high school.

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