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Teachers can't give zeroes, students can't skip homework

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The return to school means many things: earlier wake-up times, the smell of freshly-sharpened pencils, a chance to see friends after a long summer of swimming and sunshine. One thing will not reappear for some students at Liberal High School this year: the dreaded zero.

A pilot program in some classes at LHS has done away with grades of zero. The premise? Failure is not an option, nor are missing assignments.

"The no-zero policy is not about chasing grades or chasing points," said LHS principal Keith Adams. "It's about 'how do I improve my learning.' The bottom line is, we want kids to learn."

The "No Zero" program came under scrutiny at Monday's USD 480 school board meeting, as board member Tammy Sutherland Abbott asked administration to clarify how it works.

"I've had a couple different parents approach me about something to do with the grading system, and I'd really like to understand it," she said, noting that she'd heard "kids are going to be able to retake tests and turn in late homework."

Her concern was that student performance not slide backward.

“I don’t want us to be dumbing down our students just to get our scores up,” she said. “I know what it took for my son to survive at his college, and if we’re pushing the kids to attend college, we can’t be padding grades.”

“We’re actually doing the opposite,” said LHS principal Keith Adams. “We want the grades to have more meaning.”

Deputy superintendent Renae Hickert explained that the no-zero program was still in the piloting stages. During the 2012-13 school year, six teachers at LHS tested the new method. This year, more than half will adopt the no-zero policy in their classrooms.

“It’s not a finished product,” Hickert said. “We’re well on our way. Board policy says once a pilot has been tested, we need to bring the data to you. Maybe it’s time for that.”

Sutherland-Abbott said it was her “pet peeve” to hear about such issues from parents in the district and not have information at hand to respond.

“I guess I’m kind of startled that the board didn’t know about this,” she said. “It’s not something we should have voted on, but I would like to know about it.”

Board member Steve Helm said he, too, would prefer to know more, rather than less, as such programs develop — especially if the district is changing the grading system.

“Our grading system has not been touched,” said Adams.

Adams said the no-zero program focuses on helping students achieve mastery of the material

rather than assigning zeroes for missed assignments and moving on. When teachers assign homework, students no longer have the option of skipping the work, or shrugging off lost or forgotten papers. Instead, the assignment is considered incomplete, and students are expected to finish the material for a reduced-score grade. Tests with scores lower than 70 percent will no longer be accepted, either. Students who earn low scores on tests will be required to retake the assessment as many times as needed until they can demonstrate proficiency. In order to retake, students also must have completed all the practice/homework assignments.

Adams said the system is intended to develop persistence and genuine learning. Researchers in education have noted that allowing students to get zeroes undermines their “stick-to-it-ness” and gives them the impression that they don’t have to keep trying.

“In life, if you fail your driving test, what do you do?” Adams said. “You retake it. Until you succeed.”

The corollary is also true, he noted.

“If you go to the bank and take out a loan, and you don’t pay it back, do they give up and say, ‘well, that failed,’” he said, “or do they keep at it until you succeed in paying back the money?”

The six teachers who tested the no-zero approach last year “loved it,” Adams said. “They said, ‘We should all be doing this.’”

Schools across the nation have begun to embrace the no-zeroes way of teaching. In Kansas, the Manhattan school district implemented no tolerance of zeroes several years ago. Grand Island, Neb., changed its policies to eliminate the zero. The entire state of New Hampshire has also adopted the plan.

In the end, researchers say, it’s better for students when a score of zero is no longer an option.

“A zero tells the kids that the assignment wasn’t that important anyway — they can get a zero and no one can or will do anything about it,” noted education researcher Douglas Reeves of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. “Defenders of the zero claim that students need to have consequences for flouting the teacher’s authority and failing to turn in work on time. They’re right, but the appropriate consequence is not a zero; it’s completing the work — before, during or after school, during study periods, or in other settings.”

To help parents, students and educators stay on the same page, Liberal High School plans to host parent information sessions for each grade level.

“We met with parents of freshmen last Thursday, we’ll meet with the senior parents Monday, and we’re going to schedule the other classes,” said Adams. In the meantime, “we’re sending information home to parents, and if there’s any misunderstanding, I’m happy for people to come to the school and we’ll sit down and go over it with them.”

Board members expressed support for the effort. By understanding the no-zero method, said Matt Friederich, “we can be cheerleaders for the district and support it better.”

“We cannot go backwards,” said Sutherland-Abbott.

No worries, responded Adams: “We’re going forward.”

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