

## All sides argue they only want students to learn

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USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott: “I’m afraid it’s going to make kids lazy and teach them to procrastinate.”

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Some hate it. Some love it. But the reason people on both sides of the debate have such strong opinions about the new grading method at Liberal High School is exactly the same: they want

students to learn.

“There’s no trick to it, no hidden agenda,” said LHS science teacher Lindsey Diepenbrock, who is in favor of the new system. “If people would be willing to listen to the research, they would find the beauty in it and see how it’s going to benefit our students. Nothing is changing in our curriculum at all. Nothing changes in how we teach, or what we teach.”

If anything, added LHS English department head Eli Svaty, “the new grading system has more authenticity. It accurately reflects what students know.”



Critics of the program, however, voice concerns that de-emphasizing homework scores and allowing test retakes, two key elements of the “competency-based” approach, will hinder college readiness. During a visit to Emporia State University, several district teachers heard professors there complain that students who had been educated [in a different school district] with competency-based standards were not ready for college level work.

“I’m afraid it’s going to make kids lazy, and teach them to procrastinate,” said USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott. “The homework aspect is killing me. Homework teaches responsibility. It teaches the art of timeliness. In the real world, you can’t pick and choose what you want to do in your job. I think we’re doing the opposite of preparing them for college.”

The new “Framework for Grading” method came to light at the last USD 480 school board meeting, when Sutherland-Abbott reported that people in the community had been asking questions.

“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.”

That's true, said LHS principal Keith Adams, but it's not reason for alarm.

"We have not lowered the bar, altered the grading scale, curriculum, or instruction," he said. "Competency-based grading is simply bringing more focus on student learning."

Rather than focusing on how much homework had been turned in, and how many points it earned, the new policy asks the question, "how much has the student learned?" It also seeks to separate non-academic factors, such as behavior and compliance, from academic performance.

A more traditional grading model often resulted in non-academic elements being "smashed" into the final grade. In practical terms, that meant a disrespectful student who turned in the best essay in an English class might find his grade slipping because of his behavior. Conversely, a lower-performing but docile student might be allowed to turn in "extra credit" assignments that amounted to busywork, or even provide classroom supplies in return for points.

"It's easy to punish difficult students with low grades, or to inflate failing grades with extra credit," said Svaty. "A student might have scored 50 percent on a test, and the parents were asked to bring in markers or Kleenex or whatever, and that student could end up with an 80 or 90 in the class. It didn't mean the student actually knew 80 or 90 percent of the content; that student jumped through the right hoops to get the grade." This particular problem, Svaty noted, "is across the board. It didn't just happen at the high school."

Sutherland-Abbott said she was horrified to hear about such practices. Why not just discipline the teachers?

Adams said the new grading policy goes much further.

"Until now, there's been no uniform grading policy, so that's what we're trying to clean up," he said. "Quite frankly, with 75 teachers and no grading policy, each of them could do anything or nothing. We're trying to make sure grades are consistent and meaningful across the board."

In the process, administrators and teachers took a fresh look at how learning happens, and how it is best measured.

“People automatically assume that goes on all the time,” said deputy superintendent Renae Hickert. “But, if you look at a grade card, do you really know how the teacher arrived at that grade? This takes a big step forward in everyone being on the same page. The students are truly being measured on what they know.”

“We had to dissect the purpose of homework,” said Svaty. “Homework is practice. Instead of calling it homework, we’re calling it a formative assessment. The students are still scored on all of these. They still have an opportunity to see how they’re doing. But they’re not going to be penalized. It’s not going to hurt them in the grade book. Instead, they get an understanding that, ‘Hey, I didn’t score well, I don’t really understand this, I need to do more.’”

Sutherland-Abbott says not all teachers are so optimistic.

“I’ve already had teachers call me, some that are using it and some that have not used it, and even other people in the administration — but they are all petrified to speak out against the program for fear of retaliation,” she said. Many of the teachers have talked about the laziness they think will prevail.

“If students have something better to do, like hang out with their friends or play X-Box [video games] they won’t study,” said Sutherland-Abbott. “Why study for a test if you can take it over? Why do your homework if it doesn’t count for your grade?”

Hickert said she hoped the formative model would eventually result in even the most cavalier students taking a more responsible approach.

“I’m thinking that students who don’t take it seriously will learn early: ‘OK, I blew through my formatives, I didn’t take the summative seriously enough, I’m going to have to go back and do

everything over.’ The teachers will be supporting the idea that we’ve got to get it right, learn what we need to learn, go on to the next thing. In the end, students are going to realize it’s best to do it right the first time.”

Hickert isn’t naive about the shirkers: “There’ll be some who detract from that,” she said. “In a high school of 1,200 you’re going to have that. But for a lot of the rest, I think we’ll see self-reflection, a growing awareness that from now on, ‘I’m going to work hard and do it right the first time.’”

Svaty said he’s observed that very thing.

“The learning curve happens early on, because some students might think they don’t have to do the formatives, they’ll just wing it, but then they realize when they don’t get that 70 percent minimum, they’re going to have to go back and show their work,” he said. “There’s this idea out there that it’s not going to prepare students for college. But on the contrary, it’s shifting more of the responsibility to them.”

Sutherland-Abbott worries that a constant stream of test retakers and homework do-overs will in fact burden teachers with too much responsibility.

“If you have 25 students in a classroom, bless that teacher, because she’s going to be teaching 25 different things,” she said. “How’s a teacher going to do that? If you have children that are causing teachers to have to stay after hours, how are you going to work that out, with our union teachers? It will end up costing the district, that’s something I worry about.”

But Diepenbrock said the new method has actually simplified her life.

“Their grade up till now is a direct correlation of what they know in my class,” she said. “It works as a recording method for me. I can see where each student needs to do more work to increase their knowledge, see what they have grasped — I can really see where my student is at every point during the semester.”

Like Diepenbrock's students, the LHS Framework for Grading is still in development stages, said Adams, noting that 64 percent of the classrooms currently use the new grading approach.

"It's been tweaked and it will continue to be revised," he said. "At first, teachers were concerned about the implementation, the retakes, the assessments — and what we found was that it was more manageable than we anticipated. The teachers themselves were sold on it. They all said, 'We're not going back. We're going forward.'"

Sutherland-Abbott isn't so sure. The first red flag for her, she said, was the lack of information provided to the board in the earliest stages.

"It wasn't even discussed, and I'm guessing the administration didn't know about it," she said.

Hickert said the new approach met district policy requirements.

"Our policy reads that pilot projects are encouraged by the board, before new techniques are implemented on the district," she said. "You could make the argument that LHS is in fact the pilot project." As required by the same policy, she pointed out, the Framework for Grading, like any project or program designed to explore new methods or techniques, is available for parents to inspect.

Sutherland-Abbott is betting that parents would prefer a more traditional approach, with old-fashioned homework assignments, firm due dates, and no second chances on tests. In fact, she said, education would be much better if it returned the basics, where kids relied less on technology and new theories, and more on teachers, chalkboards and books.

"It's the fundamentals that make a good education," she said.

Adams said he knows change can be scary.

“Some people are going to misunderstand, at least initially,” he said. “But if you look back over history, you see this model isn’t unique. People in the past had apprenticeships, where they were working under a master craftsman, and they’d do what they had learned, get feedback, and then redo it until they’d mastered the work.

“The bottom line,” Adams said, “is learning for all students. Our mission statement is, ‘We challenge all,’ and that challenge is for the kid who needs that little extra help, those who need a little extra push. Sometimes a kid might need to redo some things to learn the material. We’re not in this to ensure there’s a winner and loser, we’re in this to make sure we do what’s best for the kids.”

## Making the Grade

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Under the new LHS Grading Framework, the way teachers in some classes evaluate students’

work has changed to what is called “competence-based grading.” How this affects various classroom elements:

“Homework” is now referred to as “Formative Assessments.” These are practice exercises assigned to students, and graded on a scale from zero to four. A student’s score reflects what he or she clearly understands and has mastered, and what needs more work. The grades are recorded, but they are used only for instructional purposes and do not play a part in the student’s final grade.

“Tests” are now referred to as “Summative Assessments.” All students are expected to score at least a 70 percent. If they do not meet the minimum score, the teacher will review the formative scores, and the student will have to rework those assignments in preparation for a second try. The retest, however, will not be identical to the original, nor will it be the same questions reshuffled. Retests must be completed in 10 days, and may be repeated multiple times until competence is reached.

Not all teachers have adopted the new policy. Parents with questions should review the syllabus packets provided by each classroom teacher, or contact the school to learn more.

## **Student Professionalism**

- Excerpted from the LHS policy

“Framework for Grading”



Qualities such as attitude, work ethic, participation, collaboration, and character are not only necessary for a successful educational experience, but are required life-long skills.

Our grading practices are guided by the belief that academic grades (those that measure learning, academic performance, and competency) must be separate from “behavioral” grades. The assessment and grading guidelines detailed here require that all character, citizenship, behavior, participation, and attendance factors be removed when calculating academic grades. Non-academic factors are applied, instead, to a student’s score on the Student Professionalism Rubric.

Student professionalism will be reported for each course each 9 weeks (through progress reports and a final grade at the end of each course). Student professionalism does not have any influence in a student’s academic grade; it is reported as a separate grade for each course.

Additionally, students must maintain an average professionalism score of 3 or 4 as one criterion to remain in good standing.