

Pilot Project Policy

The use of pilot projects is encouraged by the board before any new instructional technique is implemented on a district-wide basis.

For the purpose of this policy, pilot project means any research or experimentation program or project designed to explore or develop new, unproven teaching methods or techniques. All instructional materials, including teachers' manuals, films, tapes or other supplementary instructional material which will be used in connection with a pilot project shall be available for inspection by parents or guardians of the students engaged in the program or project.

Pilot Project Evaluation: Before any pilot project proposal is submitted to the board for approval, an evaluation format shall be developed and included with the pilot project.

— Approved Sept. 9, 2002

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Liberal parent Mellissa Brenneman attended the USD No. 480 school board meeting on Sept. 9 to listen, as Liberal High School principal Keith Adams and three teachers spoke about the merits of competency-based grading.

Monday, she came back to talk — and ask questions about the district's controversial new grading system.

In her five-minute presentation to the board, Brenneman voiced concerns that competency-based grading contained serious flaws. However, she said her primary purpose was to inform them that a television news report aired on KWCH-TV Eyewitness News included a claim that the grading system change was board-approved.



“I was so shocked and disappointed that (reporter Janeth Vasquez) wasn't reporting the facts correctly,” Brenneman stated. When she contacted the television newsroom, the station removed the story from its website.

Superintendent of schools Paul Larkin says that while he and public information director Jason McAfee appeared in an interview with the television station, neither of them said competency-based grading was board approved.

“I never did see the report,” said Larkin, but after Brenneman's presentation Monday night, “I called the reporter, Janeth Vasquez.” According to Larkin, Vasquez apologized for the story being incorrect and explained that “she isn't the person who wrote the introduction claiming the board approved.”

Kim Wilhelm, assistant news director for KWCH-TV, also looked into the matter and said, "We discovered we did make an error. When our reporter called to get information about the new grading system, the public information officer (McAfee) was the only authorized person to give an on-camera interview. He stated numerous times the grading system was approved and our reporter mistakenly took that to mean it had been approved by the administration and school board."

"We never claimed there was board approval," Larkin said.

McAfee, too, was clear on that point. In his response to Brenneman's request for open records, McAfee added a handwritten note: "No record of competency based grading practice in BOE minutes or agenda since Aug. 2012."

Wilhelm said KWCH-TV will take steps to clear up the confusion.

"We take pride in getting the facts correct and apologize for this error," she stated. "We will make a correction in the newscast in which the story aired. We regret any issues arising from this situation."

Apart from the issue of a television report, several questions Brenneman posed to the board remained:

- Who authorized implementation of competency grading at Liberal High School?
- What about board policies that have been broken?
- Why does it matter to me?

- Where will the board of education go from here?

In her presentation, Brenneman provided several possible answers.

“When I asked, ‘Whose idea was it to mandate first-year teachers at LHS to use Competency Grading?’ (Mr. Adams)’ response was, ‘It was mine,’” Brenneman said.

Yet in “requiring” new teachers to use the grading system, Brenneman said, “It was no longer a pilot program.”

In the packet she passed out to board members, Brenneman included copies of district policies that detailed the district’s grading system, its grading scale, pilot projects, evaluation of instructional programs, administrative rules, policy implementation and information about rules of order and school board member ethics.

“I am presenting to you evidence in my handout that many board policies have been broken,” said Brenneman. “The superintendent and others in the district’s administration must recognize the authority of the board of education, and you, the board, must uphold the policies.”

Brenneman said she’s concerned about more than whether elected officials and the employees they oversee have followed protocol. She is also uncertain the competency-based grading system is a good thing.

“I believe in experience,” she said, noting that only one of the LHS department heads has embraced the new system. “Why are so many longtime teachers against this? You need to find out. Our community is great because of the teachers that have spent years helping our students. They deserve to be heard and their reasons of concern must be given merit.”

In a separate interview, Larkin reiterated that while “the grading system has been implemented at LHS, it has not gotten board approval.”

The board’s decision about whether or not to adopt a new grading system will most likely occur after at least one work session to closely examine the “Framework for Grading” and its pros and cons.

At the Monday board meeting, USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott requested the workshop be scheduled soon, and that it be open to the public.

“I’ve had numerous people in the community coming forward wanting to have an open discussion,” she said. “I would like it to be very publicized, so that anyone with questions, or any teachers would feel comfortable to be able to come and speak, with no repercussions — because I’ve had some that are seriously uncomfortable with speaking out.”

Brenneman told the board Monday that she hoped each one had been doing their homework to prepare for such a session.

“I see that not only the policies that address grading and pilot programs must be enforced,” she said, “but also I want to remind you of your responsibility to take control and take action to rein in the administration.”

A public workshop to discuss competence-based grading is tentatively scheduled for 6 p.m. Oct. 9, Larkin said.

“We’ve had board meetings and workshops every week for the past six weeks, and the board wants to start the conversation about grading,” he said. “It’s a high priority. We want to find a date that’s good for the public so it can be well-attended.”