

Will competency-based grading help LHS — and its graduates — continue on a trajectory of achievement?

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

As the first nine-week period comes to an end, a new grading system at Liberal High School has parents and students — and even some teachers — worried. As stressful as those everyday concerns may be, they increase exponentially when families look ahead to college.

Will the new system help students gain admission to higher education?

Will it prepare them to do college-level work?

A board of education work session open to the public raised those questions and more.

“One of the concerns I have is the ability to prepare our students for life,” said Heather Watt, head of the LHS science department. “If we do not show them what will be expected in college or in the workplace, they have to learn the hard way.”

Watt said she’d researched the results of competency-based grading in other districts nationwide. She wasn’t impressed with what she found.

“Competency-based grading was implemented in Quakertown, Pa., four years ago, and now they have started the process of modifying the system,” Watt said. “Graduates have been returning to their former high school to let them know they were not prepared for college. They did not learn proper study habits.”

Closer to home, at Emporia State University, Watt heard a similar story. Along with students and sponsors who participate in the district’s AVID program — which coaches students in the journey to college — Watt asked professors at Emporia State about competency-based grading, which is used at Emporia High School. What she heard was disheartening.

“One of the professors told us, ‘I can always pick out the Emporia kids. They are always turning in their homework late and expecting test retakes,’” she said.

LHS Spanish teacher Luz Riggs, also an AVID sponsor and 30-year veteran teacher, called the new system “asinine.” By not calculating homework assignments as a significant part of the final grade, she said, “this system is letting students choose their assignments. We are not being good stewards of education.”

Riggs said the cornerstone of good teaching and learning is “teaching and reteaching.”

Competency-based grading does require that students who fail to score a 70 percent on tests go back and complete homework that may have been skipped or completed poorly. Even so, Riggs described the new system as “just taking tests. Are we preparing students for the future?”

Several parents of high-performing high school students also expressed misgivings about unintended consequences of the new system. Cheryl Collins, whose daughter is ranked high in her class, put it this way:

“There is no incentive for the student to do the homework. Academics are very crucial to my daughter — she goes on Powerschool (the district’s online grading record) all the time, and why

does she do that? She wants to know where she stands in every one of those classrooms. Even she is getting to the point in a few classes, where she says, 'You know what? They're not going to grade my homework anyway. I think I need the night off.' And that is not her goal or has ever been her standard."

LHS Principal Keith Adams said his own daughter, who graduated LHS in 2012, initially disliked the competency-based grading, which was introduced during the last semester of her senior year. After a while, however, she grew to like the freedom it offered — to learn without fear of plummeting grades for homework that was, essentially practice. Adams is convinced of the system's merit. He said research shows the competency-based system, though difficult to adopt, ultimately pays off with higher student achievement.

He presented information from the district's educational consultants, affirming the value of the new grading method.

"This is great," wrote Valerie Simmons, the AVID program manager. "It's all about supporting students." Competency-based grading and AVID, which focuses on college preparation, "go hand in glove."

Dr. Powers, the Literacy First consultant who has "been in the district and knows us well," Adams noted, wrote that the LHS Framework for Grading "gets at what students know ... in a way that traditional grading cannot."

Adams also said that Brad Witzel, a doctorate-holding college math professor who consults for the district, affirmed the value of competency-based grading and its growing use in colleges around the nation. All three consultants have played a key role in helping the district bring several failing schools back from the brink of federal control.

"The evidence is growing," Adams said. "There's things we've had to iron out — but there should not be this dichotomy of beliefs" between those who believe the system will help LHS and those who are doubtful. Ultimately, he said, "there's going to be a greater depth of thought and reflection" among students in the district.

Virginia Duncan, head instructional coach at LHS, said the emphasis on grades touches a nerve for many people — including teachers — because grades and gradebooks have traditionally been kept secret. Individual teachers have their own ways of arriving at final grades, which generally combine academic markers, like test scores, with homework assignments and even social behaviors like attitude, punctuality, participation and teamwork.

As people react to the notion of a different grading methodology that seeks to make grading a bit more consistent and less capricious, Duncan suggested that perhaps the question should be, “Why haven’t we done this before?”

“Grades have been kind of a mystery,” she said. “You go to the parent-teacher conference, and you hear, ‘Oh, your child is doing great, she’s doing her homework,’ but you don’t really hear anything about the skill level, the learning, the goals. We’re trying to clear up the mystery of what those grades actually mean.”

In other words, getting straight As isn’t necessarily meaningful if the student has failed to learn and understand the material at more than face value.

After 29 years in the education system, said deputy superintendent Renae Hickert, she is inspired by the opportunities competency-based grading presents.

“This is the first time I’ve seen teachers have the opportunity to focus on higher-level learning activities,” she said. “Rigor is the standard the district wants to achieve, and we can define rigor as creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels.”

With Common Core standards around the corner, Hickert noted, competency-based grading aligns with what students will be expected to know, and how that knowledge is measured.

As an example, Hickert used a social studies topic.

“A lower-level question may be, ‘List the Bill of Rights.’ With the kinds of assessments demanded over the past 10 years, teachers had to be more task-driven, training students to answer questions about who, what, when and where,” Hickert said. “Now we can also focus on, ‘Why?’”

And what would a higher-level question about this topic be?

“How would life be different today, if the Bill of Rights had never existed?” Hickert said. “Through that question, all kinds of discussion opens up. If the students know the Bill of Rights, they know why they are important. That’s what teachers are aiming for today.”

Everyone agrees that learning at a higher level is great, but for students — and parents — who carefully track their class ranking, the new system poses troubling questions.

“My son is number 11 in his class,” said parent Bonnie Garcia, “and I’m proud of him for it. He’s there because of these teachers, not a grading system.” Garcia, expressing frustration with the competency-based grading, passed out a copy of her son’s current AP U.S. Government grade listing from the district’s Powerschool website.

“These are his grades as of today,” she said. “Nothing. There are no assignments recorded. What are his grades going to be? I don’t know. And grades come out next week.”

Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott said she is troubled by the discrepancies in ranking created by competency-based grading.

“The student that makes an A on the test the first time around, and the one that retakes the test until he gets the score he wants — that’s totally skewing the class ranking, and that’s totally unfair,” she said. “I don’t think we discussed it enough.”

Parent Mellissa Brenneman researched Wamego High School, often held up as an example of

competency-based grading that works. She said the system is still under board review at the small Kansas school.

“No one can score less than a grade of C in this system, so they have issues of class ranking, and how that applies to college applications and GPA,” she said.

That worries Sutherland-Abbott.

“Under the old system, we did our kids right,” she said. “We had a student who went to West Point (Sutherland-Abbott’s son, Tyler) and graduated in the top 8 percent. To infer that students weren’t learning (before this new system was introduced) makes me angry.”

As part of Senator Jerry Moran’s selection committee for the U.S. military academies, Sutherland-Abbott got an inside look at how at least one elite system evaluates high school rigor.

“Ultimately, the selection committee weighed the ACT scores. That’s going to be the determining factor,” she said. Within two years, Sutherland-Abbott predicted, “our scores are going to be down. If it takes 10 weeks to learn what kids should have learned in five weeks, the kids won’t know as much when they go to take the ACT, and that’s going to affect their scores, which is scary, it’s real scary.”

Attorney and former school board member Dan Diepenbrock was unfazed.

Seven years ago, he reminded the room of parents, elected officers and school employees, “LHS was one of the five worst schools in the state of Kansas. Not only has that been turned around, but a mere five months ago, a national magazine that is in the business of ranking schools, put us in the top 10 percent of the country.

“That is the result of students working very hard, teachers working very hard — but the common

denominator in that is the principal, and Mr. Adams was in on that at the very beginning, the day we started the task force to turn around LHS.”

It was Adams, Diepenbrock said, “who told us, ‘here’s what we’re going to do,’ and he put that plan together, and it was those three pillars of success — AVID, Capturing Kids Hearts and Literacy First — and it brought a high school that was dead to one of the best in the nation. And now he’s being questioned?”

Diepenbrock said the point of hiring administrators and principals — “people with master’s degrees and doctorates in education — is that they are qualified to do the job. I’m not going to argue about whether competency-based grading is the best, because I’m not qualified to do so,” he said. “It seems frankly silly to me to start second-guessing a decision by the person who brought LHS to the highest heights.”

Myths about Competency-Based Grading
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“You have unlimited opportunities to retake tests.”
According to Principal Keith Adams, test retakes are determined by each teacher and require significant work by the student to demonstrate readiness to try again. Students who score lower than 70 percent are required to retake within two weeks. If not, they are referred to the principal’s office. If students score above 70 percent, they may request a retake at the teacher’s discretion.

“You will get to take the same test, over and over, until your score goes up.”
Teachers are expected to test students over the same material, but in a format that is not identical, nor simply “rehashed.” The retake is not focused on higher scores, Adams said, but on measuring whether the student has successfully learned the material presented in class.

“This isn’t how it works in college, where retakes are not allowed.”
Not so, said Adams, who said he was sometimes allowed to retake assignments and exams as part of his college experience. This approach is increasingly common, he noted, because colleges also care about mastery of the material rather than empty scores. Additionally, he pointed out, lawyers can retake the bar exam, doctors can try again for their medical licenses, people who don’t make it into grad school the first time can try again.

“This isn’t how it works in the real world.”
Adams listed examples of how doing a task over results in success: falling in resonance of the light bulb, a beer after 10,000 tries, the household lubricant WD-40, based on the 4th attempt, Formula 409, which took 17 times as many efforts.

“We learn from our mistakes,” Adams said. “Through that trial-and-error process, the brain is working.”

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