

Albemarle school surveys give insight into grading
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Albemarle County teachers vary widely in their approaches to grading student work, according to a new survey the school division recently released.

“Grading is a very personal practice for most of our teachers,” said Patrick McLaughlin, the school system’s chief of strategic planning. “When it’s that personal, you are bound to see some differences.”

During the 2017-18 school year, McLaughlin oversaw a study of grading practices within the school division that included a survey of nearly all teachers in grades 4 through 12.

The study is part of Albemarle’s High School 2022 initiative. Created in 2016, it guides the planning of new educational programming and future facilities for high school students.

One of the guiding principles outlined in the school division’s program guide for High School 2022 is “to develop equitable grading practices that clearly identify student achievement of content knowledge, processes and skills.”

“That is the vision for where we want to go,” McLaughlin said. “In order to move forward with that, we need to know the current state [of grading].”

Of the 685 teachers surveyed, 76 percent reported feeling very confident in their ability to use assessments and assign grades that measure and support learning. However, the survey did not find strong consensus on many grading practices. Among the findings:

- » Thirty-four percent of teachers said they almost always give students a zero for a missing assignment; 25 percent said they never do so.

- » Thirty-one percent of teachers said they often give bonus points for extra credit.

- » Fifty-six percent of teachers said they frequently allow students to redo assignments for full credit.

McLaughlin said the survey was not meant to track or curtail any particular grading practice. He said the results will serve as a starting point for conversations with teachers this fall.

“We just have the raw data. What we don’t know yet is: What’s the story behind that?” McLaughlin said.

Lars Holmstrom, an equity education specialist in the school system’s Office of Community Engagement, said students and their families also should be involved in decisions about grading practices.

“The best thing we can do to achieve equity is to make sure we are including families and stakeholders in the conversations,” Holmstrom said. “Even on the classroom level, ensuring that you are getting fair representation from all students and their families is a challenge.”

He said effective grading practices can ensure that every student is held to a high standard. However, he said teachers also must consider that a student’s grades can sometimes be influenced by events and circumstances that they cannot control.

“Embracing and recognizing that dynamic of tension and attending to nuance is important,” Holmstrom said.

The School Board is slated to receive an update on the grading study at its meeting Tuesday, which will begin earlier than usual, at 2:30 p.m., due to the observance of Yom Kippur starting at sundown.

Albemarle also conducted a separate survey recently to obtain feedback on weighted grades.

Currently, grades in honors, dual enrollment and Advanced Placement classes at county high schools are given an extra point when calculating a student’s grade point average.

McLaughlin said the school division doesn’t want to see students give up electives they enjoy to take courses that could boost their GPAs.

“We want kids to develop and pursue passion-based course credits; we want students to choose courses based on their interest, not competition,” he said.

About half of the 2,047 students who took the survey agreed that weighting grades motivated students to maximize their enrollment in AP classes. Twenty-four percent said that weighting grades increased student stress levels.

Albemarle's high schools do not select a valedictorian. In 2014, they ceased reporting senior class rank on academic transcripts.

Jessica Klees, a senior at Western Albemarle High School, said she believes students shouldn't worry too much about small differences in their GPAs.

"[GPA calculation] varies so much from school to school, and each college will configure it in their own way," Klees said.

"There's no right answer to how many [AP classes] you should take, but I think people generally want to take the highest-level class that they can," she said. "There are a good amount of people who would take an AP class just because it's AP."