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A's for Good Behavior

By PEG TYRE

A few years ago, teachers at Ellis Middle School in Austin, Minn., might have said that their top students were easy to identify: they completed their homework and handed it in on time; were rarely tardy; sat in the front of the class; wrote legibly; and jumped at the chance to do extra-credit assignments.

But after poring over four years of data comparing semester grades with end-of-the-year test scores on state subject exams, the teachers at Ellis began to question whether they really knew who the smartest students were.

About 10 percent of the students who earned A's and B's in school stumbled during end-of-the-year exams. By contrast, about 10 percent of students who scraped along with C's, D's and even F's — students who turned in homework late, never raised their hands and generally seemed turned off by school — did better than their eager-to-please B+ classmates.

Some of the discrepancy between grades and test scores could be explained by test anxiety — that some students have trouble showing what they know in a standardized, timed environment. And some teachers simply may have done a poor job teaching what the standardized exam tested. But Austin's school superintendent, David Krenz, and the principal at Ellis, Katie Berglund, said the disconnect between semester grades and end-of-the-year exams was too large and persistent to be the result of such factors.

“Over time, we began to realize that many teachers had been grading kids for compliance — not for mastering the course material,” Ms. Berglund said. “A portion of our A and B students were not the ones who were gaining the most knowledge but the ones who had learned to do school the best.”

Last fall, over protests from parents of some of the above-average students, the eighth-grade math teachers at Ellis tried a new, standards-based grading system, and this fall the new system is being used by the entire middle school and in high school for ninth graders.

As test scores fast become the single and most powerful measurement by which educational outcomes are being judged, more schools might find themselves engaged in what has become a pivotal debate: Should students be

rewarded for being friendly, prepared, compliant, a good school citizen, well organized and hard-working? Or should good grades represent exclusively a student's mastery of the material?

For Sandra Doeber, a superintendent who oversees a high school with 1,500 school students in Lemont, Ill., a middle-class suburb southwest of Chicago, the answer is clear. "In this age of data and with so much information available to us we can no longer confuse how students act with what they know." She, too, is revamping the grading policy so that grades reflect subject mastery, not compliance.

At the urging of [President Obama](#), more high schools are making "college readiness" a goal. The percentage of students who attend college is rising; 67 percent of high school graduates now enroll in some sort of post-secondary school after graduation (up from 43 percent in 1973). But the reality is that many don't succeed, in large part because they are not academically prepared. Federal data shows that fewer than 60 percent of students graduate from four-year colleges in six years. Among students at a community college, only one in three earns a degree. Recently released data from ACT shows that only 24 percent of high school seniors knew enough in four subjects — math, reading, science and English — to do college-level work.

There are no national statistics about the number of schools shifting to standards-based grading. But the idea has been around for a while, and Ken O'Connor, a former Canadian high school teacher turned grading consultant, said that more schools have been adopting the approach. It's an inevitable extension, he says, of standards-based learning.

"Schools are finally realizing if you don't have standards-based grading you really do not have a standards-based education," said Mr. O'Connor, author of "A Repair Kit for Grading: Fifteen Fixes for Broken Grades." "We are focused not on exposure to content and activities for their own sake but on outputs" — what students can show they've learned.

When parents of students at Ellis Middle School look over their children's report cards, they will find a so-called "knowledge grade," which will be calculated by averaging the scores on end-of-unit tests. (Those tests can be retaken any time during the semester so long as a student has completed all homework; remedial classes that re-teach skills will be offered all year.) Homework is now considered practice for tests. Assignments that are half done, handed in late or missing all together will be noted, but will not hurt a student's grade. Nor will showing up late for class, forgetting to bring your pencil, failing to raise your hand before shouting out an answer or forgetting to bring in a permission slip for the class trip — infractions that had previously caused Ellis students' grades to suffer.

(In addition to an academic grade, the 950 students at the school will get a separate “life skills” grade for each class that reflects their work habits and other, more subjective, measures like attitude, effort and citizenship.)

Some parents welcome the change. Nitaya Jandragholica says her son Clyde, an eighth grader at Ellis, finds the new grading plan more equitable. “He saw that teachers had favorites. Kids — even ones that were not that smart — could get good grades if the teacher likes them,” Ms. Jandragholica says. The principal, Ms. Berglund, says that some students’ grades have gone up and some have gone down but that she’s confident — and has the data to prove it — that their grades are more accurately reflecting their knowledge, “not whether or not they brought in a box of Kleenex for the classroom,” a factor that had influenced grades at Ellis in the past.

After a high-performing public school district in Potsdam, N.Y., began changing its grading formula, 175 parents and community members — many of them professors from local universities — signed a petition in protest. Carolyn Stone, an adjunct professor of literacy at SUNY Potsdam and a mother of a Potsdam high school freshman, was one of the protesters. She says the new policy, which makes daily homework, even when it is handed in late, account for only 10 percent of the grade, encourages laziness. “Does the old system reward compliance? Yes,” she said. “Do those who fit in the box of school do better? Yes. But to revamp the policy in a way that could be of detriment to the kids who do well is not the answer.” In the real world, she points out, attitude counts.

But Mr. Krenz, the superintendent in Austin, Minn., said that parents — as well as kids — would be the winners. Conversations between parents and teachers can now focus on what students need to learn, rather than classroom attitude or missing homework. “Before we started this, a teacher could complain to a parent that their child slumps in the back of the classroom and doesn’t bring a pencil,” he said. “Now the conversation is about the fact that the child doesn’t know how to calculate slope, and we can put our heads together — parents and teachers and administrator — to figure out how to help that child obtain that skill.”

The superintendent in Potsdam, Patrick Brady, who has been rolling out a revamped grading system this fall in his 1,450-student district, said it would allow teachers to recognize academic strengths where they often are not discovered — among minority students, or students from poorer families, or boys — subgroups whose members may be unable or unwilling to fit in easily to the culture of school.

“We are getting rid of grade fog,” Mr. Brady said. “We need to stop overlooking kids who can do the work and falsely inflate grades of kids who can’t but who look good. We think this will be good for everyone.”

