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Fairfax schools add D-, allow test retakes as districts rethink grading.

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Fairfax County schools will allow students to retake tests for full credit and will add a D-minus to their grading scale as the district and others try to rethink how to measure student performance.

School leaders say the new policy will create a more consistent and fair grading system. But critics worry that the policy will be difficult to implement and lower expectations for students.

The changes were born out of the division's secondary grading advisory committee after students and administrators raised concerns in recent years about inconsistency in grading across different schools in the division -- and sometimes even between classes in the same school.

Schools Superintendent Michelle Reid said the district wanted to create a "seamless" grading structure that "is really workable for educators and meaningful for students, and communicates clearly to families and stakeholders."

"That's what we're shooting for, and we're gonna continue to refine our practices in alignment with those ideas," Reid said in an interview.

Traditional grading uses factors such as student behavior, participation and study habits to determine a student's final score or grade. But some education policy researchers, teachers and administrators are turning to models that prioritize a student's mastery of topics by focusing on grading assessments and allowing students to turn in assignments late and redo assignments. The move away from traditional grading picked up steam during the pandemic as educators looked critically at student performance and sought ways to close performance gaps along racial and socioeconomic lines.

In Fairfax County, the new model for middle and high school courses prioritizes summative assessments, such as projects and tests, that account for 70 percent of a student's grade. The remaining 30 percent is made up of formative assessments, or smaller assignments such as homework and quizzes. This will be uniform for all classes.

Susan Brookhart, an education professor emerita at Duquesne University, said that in traditional grading models, teachers can assign points for tasks such as bringing tissues to class. Newer grading policies remove those types of behavioral metrics and focus instead on what a student has learned by emphasizing summative assessments and allowing retakes.

"The grade is supposed to reflect what I learned, where I ended up," Brookhart said. "Even if it took me an extra step to get there."

She said she anticipates seeing more school districts moving away from the traditional model. Some major school districts, such as those in Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Boston, have already done so.

In Fairfax County, the largest school district in Virginia, discussions about grading policy have been happening for years. The district considered changes in the past, including proposals in 1997 and 2015. During the pandemic, when models of learning and teaching flipped upside down, Fairfax implemented temporary grading policies to adjust for the changes. Then in 2021, the county made a 50 the lowest score a student could receive on an assignment. Last fall, the district then reversed that policy, allowing teachers to give a zero if a student does not make a "reasonable effort" on an assignment.

Previously, students in Fairfax have been able to redo assignments to receive up to 80 percent credit. Under the new changes, students will be able to receive up to 100 percent.

Across Northern Virginia, other school districts have also looked at grading policies. This year, Arlington implemented a policy similar to Fairfax's that allows students to redo assignments for up to 80 percent credit.

In Loudoun County, school system spokesman Dan Adams said the district has not changed its grading policy since 2021. But the district gathered feedback on grading from students and teachers in the spring, and the school board is interested in looking at the policy later this year. Addressing the grading policy was also listed as a priority in Schools Superintendent Aaron Spence's "post-entry plan," a strategy outlined last month after his first year with the district.

Other school districts in the region have similar approaches to grading. In D.C., the public school system uses a "standards-based" grading system that focuses on measuring mastery.

"Grades are not a mechanism used to sort students, perpetuate opportunity gaps, or manage students' behavior," the D.C. district's website reads. "Grades are not based on institutional compliance or compatibility nor a tool for teaching accountability or consequence lessons to students."

Meanwhile, school districts such as those in Montgomery and Prince George's counties have outlined policies around issues such as when to give a zero grade and how to weigh tests. And some districts haven't seen change in a few years, including Alexandria City Public Schools, where the grading policy has not been revised since August 2022.

The changes are a divisive topic in education. Researchers at the conservative-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Institute wrote this year that nationally, these types of "equitable grading" policies reduce expectations and accountability for students and make it more challenging for teachers to manage their classrooms.

"Some aspects of traditional grading can indeed perpetuate inequities, but top-down policies that make grading more lenient are not the answer, especially as schools grapple with the academic and behavioral challenges of the postpandemic era," researchers Meredith Coffey and Adam Tyner wrote.

In Fairfax County, Eric Wolf Welch, the AVID Program coordinator and a social studies teacher at Justice High School, has been vocal about his opposition to the district's grading changes. He said he worries that the new system will lower expectations by not prioritizing the importance of studying, practicing and participating in class, and that students will "game the system" to get a better grade. He's concerned the changes -- particularly letting students redo assignments for up to 100 percent credit and an emphasis on summative assessments -- won't prepare students for the next phases of life.

"What is the purpose of grading? Do we want to simply measure what a student knows on a specific academic subject? Or do we want to measure holistically how a student learns and all that comes with being a student?" Wolf Welch said.

Reid said she understands that there's opposition to the new grading policy and that some people think the changes will not prepare students for the "real world," but she stands by the changes.

"I absolutely believe that students ought to be able to reassess or rework assignments or assessments," Reid said. "I think about a driver's test. It may be sometimes that a person has to take the driver's test more than once. But once we pass the test, I can drive seven days a week, 24 hours a day. There are no restrictions on my license."

Kevin Hickerson, a special education English teacher at Chantilly High School, said the constant grading changes in Fairfax have led to some fatigue from educators who have to accommodate the updates nearly every year. But Hickerson is on board with the direction in which Fairfax is moving. He said he believes it is important to find more equitable grading practices, something he said Chantilly has been doing for a few years.

But Hickerson said he also understands why some educators are opposed to the model. It takes some adjusting and can be an intimidating jump from the traditional model that's been used for decades. He also understands, like many things in public education, people are going to be split on the issue.

"We all want to do what's good for the students," Hickerson said. "We just have different philosophies of what that is."

Reid said she knows there will be challenges for teachers as they adjust to the policy changes, and the district plans to use its advisory committee to monitor the rollout next school year. The district will continue to adjust the grading model until they find the best fit for students.

"We need to be very clear about the intent of grading," Reid said. And in Fairfax, "a grade should be reflective of what a student knows and is able to do as a result of the content in the course they took."

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