

## Eyebrows raised over city school policy that sets 50% as minimum score

### 1+1=3? In city schools, it's half right

Monday, September 22, 2008  
By Joe Smydo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Public Schools officials say they want to give struggling children a chance, but the district is raising eyebrows with a policy that sets 50 percent as the minimum score a student can receive for assignments, tests and other work.

The district and teachers union last week issued a joint memo to ensure staff members' compliance with the policy, which was already on the books but enforced only at some schools. Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers President John Tarka said the policy is several years old.

While some districts use "F" as a failing grade, the city uses an "E."

"The 'E' is to be recorded no lower than a 50 percent, regardless of the actual percent earned. For example, if the student earns a 20 percent on a class assignment, the grade is recorded as a 50 percent," said the memo from Jerri Lippert, the district's executive director of curriculum, instruction and professional development, and Mary VanHorn, a PFT vice president.

In each subject, a student's percentage scores on tests and other work are averaged into a grade for each of the four marking periods. Percentages for marking periods later are averaged into semester and year-end grades.

A student receives an "A" for scores ranging from 100 percent to 90 percent, a "B" for scores ranging from 89 percent to 80 percent, a "C" for scores ranging from 79 percent to 70 percent, a "D" for scores ranging from 69 percent to 60 percent and an "E" for scores ranging from 59 percent to the cutoff, 50 percent.

The district and union insist the policy still holds students accountable for performance.

"A failing grade is a failing grade," district spokeswoman Ebony Pugh said.

At the same time, they said, the 50 percent minimum gives children a chance to catch up and a reason to keep trying. If a student gets a 20 percent in a class for the first marking period, Ms. Pugh said, he or she would need a 100 percent during the second marking period just to squeak through the semester.

"We want to create situations where students can recover and not give up," she said, adding a sense of helplessness can lead to behavior and attendance problems.

"It's not grade inflation. We're not saying, 'Give people passing grades,' " Ms. Pugh said.

But the policy strikes some teachers and parents as rewarding bad work and at odds with the district's "Excellence for All" improvement campaign.

"Clearly, some people will not be pleased with this policy," Mr. Tarka said. But he added, "We stand by that decision."

Judy Leonardi, a Stanton Heights resident and retired district home economics teacher, said she objected to the notion that a student could "walk in the door, breathe the air and get 50 percent for that."

"I don't think it sets kids up properly for college, for competition in life," she said.

To Ms. Leonardi, a 20 percent score means a student isn't trying or needs more help with the material. Automatically putting 50 percent in the grade book, she said, doesn't help the student in either case.

"To me, it's morally wrong," she said.

Ms. Leonardi worries that the policy could cause high-performing students to goof off from time to time, safe in the knowledge that they wouldn't have to bounce back from anything lower than a 50 percent.

And she said one teacher she knows already worries about how awkward it will look when a student correctly answers three of 10 questions on a math quiz -- and gets a 50 percent.

The state Department of Education doesn't regulate grading scales, and schools and districts across the state use various models. Districts nationwide have debated use of a 50 percent minimum.

Northside Urban Pathways, a Downtown charter school, gives students zero credit for any work below a "C." Linda Clautti, chief executive officer, said that approach complements the school's college-preparatory mission.

"I have not had any complaints. We do parent surveys every year," Ms. Clautti said.

In a recent article in Harvard Educational Review, Freedom Area School District Superintendent Ron Sofo recounted an experimental program that he said helped to dramatically raise the math scores of struggling sixth-graders. Among other features, the program included "A, B, Not Yet" grading, in which students were required to redo work until it merited an A or B.

Some Freedom Area teachers opposed the special grading scale, calling it coddling of bad students, Dr. Sofo said.

In suburban Philadelphia, a Bensalem School District task force on testing and grading has recommended that 50 percent be the minimum score a student receive.

Superintendent James Lombardo said he's in favor of implementing the idea, partly as a fairness issue. He noted that a failing grade carries far more mathematical weight than any other grade if the "E" or "F" has a range of zero to 59 percent.

"I guess I laud the Pittsburgh district for recognizing some of the foibles of our numerical system," he said, adding low percentage scores sometimes are given to students because of their attitude or work ethic, rather than their level of accomplishment.

Asked whether she agreed with the 50 percent minimum, Regina Holley, principal of Pittsburgh Lincoln K-8 and president of the Pittsburgh Administrators Association, said: "Well, that's the board's policy, and that's what we have to use."

She said teachers and principals should take other steps to give parents a clearer picture of how their children are performing in class.

"Our school provides that to the parents in a conference. We provide it in a letter. We give it to the parents in a phone call," Dr. Holley said.

Joe Smydo can be reached at [jsmydo@post-gazette.com](mailto:jsmydo@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1548.

First published on September 22, 2008 at 12:00 am