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Only in The World-Herald Passing OPS classes will become a bit harder Grading changes keep coming, in part because kids figured out how to avoid an F with little effort. Making the grade

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Omaha's middle **school** and high **school** students might have to work harder to muster a passing grade in their classes next **school** year. The **Omaha school** district is changing its grading scale, redefining what it takes to get a D instead of an F.

The changes are being made, the district says, because too many kids were passing but not doing the work to earn passing grades.

"A lot of the students figured out early that it was possible to pass a class without putting forward a lot of effort," said Chris Proulx, president of the **Omaha** Education Association, the teachers union for the **Omaha Public Schools**.

The new grading scale would affect kids in grades 5 through 12 and is among numerous changes to OPS's new grading system, introduced this **school** year to criticism and confusion from students, parents and teachers.

In a recent interview, an OPS official acknowledged problems with the rollout of the new system, called standards-based grading, but said the district still believes it was the right move.

The system is intended to make sure report cards accurately reflect students' knowledge. Homework doesn't count much toward final grades. Instead, grades are mostly based on projects and tests, with much less weight given to "life skills" such as class behavior or participation.

Numerous districts across the metro area and elsewhere in Nebraska and Iowa have embraced standards-based grading, though to varying degrees.

In OPS, the new grading system allowed some kids to skate through classes.

One concern is the grading method known as trending, which some teachers used this year, though it was not required. Under the method, students' grades are based mostly on the last few projects or tests, after nearly all of the material has been taught. The theory is that a teacher should consider students' progress throughout the course.

Some students, however, did little work at the beginning of a course, then just enough to pass at the end, said Gail Formanack, OPS director of secondary education.

In addition, some students opted not to turn in homework because it counted little or not at all toward their final grades.

Finally, because detailed grading guides had not been written for all courses, Formanack said, some teachers were confused about what constituted passing grades.

Bobbi Keithley, a junior at **Omaha North High School**, said it's "super hard to fail" under the grading system. She said she heard of cases in which teachers gave students passing grades just for putting their names on tests.

Formanack said she, too, has heard talk of that happening, though she hasn't confirmed any instances. She said that whenever she hears those rumors, she emphasizes that it would be a misuse of the system.

Much of the confusion about OPS's new grading system can be linked to what happened - or didn't happen - before **school** started last August, she said.

By the first day of **school**, only half of the district's teachers had been trained on the new grading system, and training for all teachers wasn't complete until February. "I feel bad that (teachers) didn't have what they needed when they started," Formanack said.

She said the new grading system was put in place this **school** year partly because the district had federal stimulus money to pay for training, but it had to be spent this year.

District officials had been wanting to revamp the grading structure for some time. They believed too many students were failing classes, not because they didn't understand the coursework, but for other reasons, such as missing homework assignments deflating grades. Conversely, some students were moving through classes with passing grades without reaching proficiency in the subject.

"We felt the need to just move on it," Formanack said.

Almost a year into its new system, OPS has seen a significant drop in the number of students receiving failing grades.

In the 2009-10 **school** year, in the core subject areas of math, English, science and social studies, 19 percent of the grades given out to students in seventh through 12th grade were F's. So far this **school** year, 7 percent of those grades have been F's.

There also have been fewer A's and D's and more B's and C's, according to district data.

District officials are planning numerous changes to the grading system for its second year.

For the 2011-12 **school** year, teachers will be required to use trend grading. The district also will step up efforts to compel students to complete assignments. Teachers will be asked to host mandatory homework sessions before **school**, after lunch or after **school** for students who don't complete their work.

"We're going to insist that they do it," Formanack said.

The district also is widening the range of scores that constitute an F, so students will have to get higher scores to avoid failing grades.

Report cards also will look different. They will be expanded to show how a student performs on each of the skills taught in a course, known as standards, as well as the overall grade. Report cards for this **school** year list just a student's course grade.

The district plans to develop detailed grading guides for all subject areas, and officials are planning new training sessions for teachers.

Three years ago, the Council Bluffs Community **School** District implemented its own standards-based grading system for grades 6 through 12.

Like OPS, Council Bluffs saw a decline in the number of failing grades on report cards, though the trend wasn't nearly as dramatic. In the Bluffs, 11 percent of high **school** students received F's in the 2007-08 **school** year, before the new grading system was implemented. So far this year, 10 percent have received an F.

Council Bluffs **school** officials also encountered problems with students not doing homework.

Ann Mausbach, the district's executive director of curriculum and

instruction, said students who don't get a passing grade on a test or a project now have to come in outside of class to do extra work before retaking the test or redoing the project.

Making the grade

Percentage of **Omaha** high **school** students who failed courses this **school** year and last **school** year. Results are from fall semester of each year.

Course 2009-10 2010-11

English I 27% 10%

Algebra III* 21% 13%

Honors Chemistry 7% 1%

*second year of algebra

Grading scale

Current New

A 4.01 to 5 4.01 to 5

B 3.01 to 4 3.01 to 4

C 2.01 to 3 2.01 to 3

D 1.01 to 2 1.6 to 2

F 0 to 1 0 to 1.59

Source: **Omaha Public Schools**

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