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Group asks board to improve communication, delay altering system until options are studied further

Members of a recently formed group of Grafton parents told the School Board on Monday that they are concerned about plans to revamp the district's grading system and want to play an active role in the decision-making process.

About 20 members of Educational Excellence for Grafton appeared at a board meeting to question proposed changes in grading practices for grades six through 12, as well as guidelines for tests, homework, extra credit and other ways to evaluate students.

Among the options being explored by the board's Curriculum Committee is a plan to replace the traditional grading system that uses A to F letter grades and scores on a 0% to 100% scale with a grading scale of 4-3-2-1-0. The Curriculum Committee has spent several months exploring options and will receive input from the Parent Advisory Committee.

No committee recommendations on changes are expected until the end of the current school year. In January, the board also decided that there should be no grading or curriculum changes until final decisions are made.

Supt. Jeff Pechura said the district is exploring ways to remove inconsistencies in the grading system, establish guidelines consistent with state standards and remain progressive in teaching and evaluating students. However, the parents group told the board it wants a more open discussion of proposals.

"As a whole, we as parents are very frustrated and disappointed with this decision making process," the group said in a statement to the board.

"Most communication to parents — when it does happen — is vague, broad-based and often times shares very little insight into what these proposed changes mean to our children."

Jean Fugate, a founding co-chairperson of Educational Excellence for Grafton, said the group represents about 50 families that have been meeting for several months to share concerns. She said that despite the board's January decision, some English and math teachers have already made changes in grading, testing and curriculum.

"We are very concerned. What assurances do we have that the board directive will be obeyed?" Fugate said.

She said her group wants the board to "cherry pick" from Curriculum Committee recommendations rather than take an "all or none approach."

Among the standards the group supports, Fugate said, are: using a rubric matrix to outline expectations for students to achieve grade levels, retaining the 0%-to-100% and

A-to-F grading system, holding students accountable for failing to complete homework assignments, and giving students a chance to do extra credit.

Fugate asked the board to allow the group to be represented on the Parent Advisory Committee.

“The board should rejoice in the chance to have parents who want changes in the district,” she said.

Board President Terry Ziegler said he understands the group’s concerns and believes its members should provide input to the committee.

“Your group will be accommodated,” he told Fugate. “We do appreciate parent involvement.”

Pechura concurred, saying district officials should try to do a better job of communicating with parents. He said teachers who want to begin new grading practices need to receive the approval from the board and administrators to do so.

“We’re not going to be nonresponsive,” Pechura said. “I’m encouraged to hear the passion of parents here. We need to regain and rebuild the bridge of trust.”

Fugate and several other members of her group said they were encouraged with the board’s response and look forward to working with the Parent Advisory Committee.

The Curriculum Committee is scheduled to continue its work on a revised draft of grading guidelines in March. Among the areas the board decided need further study by the committee are the grading scale; how students’ effort, conduct and attendance will be reported; how teachers should handle failed and incomplete assignments and late work; and grade averaging.

Plans call for the Curriculum Committee’s recommendations to be presented to the Parent Advisory Committee for review before going to the board for final approval.