

Passing Muster: Schools Shake Up Grading Practices

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“What we’re doing is cleaning up our grading practices, really tightening up what a grade means,” said Jennifer Sublette, Western Albemarle High School’s [WAHS] principal, who worked at the division level on the grading initiative over the last several years. “When we surveyed teachers about how they determined grades, we found a lot of practices that really muddied a grade in terms of bonus points and extra credit and penalties—a lot of inconsistency between teachers. So, students and their parents were having to navigate eight different grading systems each year.”



Jennifer Sublette, principal of Western Albemarle High School. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

At the heart of the clean-up is the idea that a course grade should reflect the student’s achieved level of subject-matter proficiency and should exclude all extraneous measures. The Albemarle County Public Schools (ACPS) grading policy states broadly that grading practices will be “accurate, consistent, and supportive of student learning,” but the specifics of the current changes have been largely drawn from the work of Canadian educational consultant

Ken O'Connor.

O'Connor's 2011 book, *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades*, has been used as the basis for ACPS professional development seminars that about 250 middle and high school teachers have received over the last few years. The "fixes" are aimed at shielding the effects of students' behavior, as well as their performance on "practice" (homework, quizzes, etc.), from affecting their course grades. O'Connor proposes that teachers not consider factors such as attendance, late work, or extra credit in grade determination, instead focusing solely on achievement on quality assessments (such as tests) as evidence of mastery.

For example, giving students points for completing homework could punish them for effort that is intended to help their learning, said Sublette.

"Students are given practice, and that practice helps them to prepare, so that they're not penalized while they're learning," she said. "Homework was a benefit to some because the points were a cushion, but it could really hurt kids because they may have been confused, or didn't know how to do it, or they didn't do it ... and it's not evidence of a student having achieved mastery and understanding."

The unintended consequence of not counting homework, according to parents and teachers, is that many students simply stop doing it, removing the steps of practice and feedback from the learning process entirely. Sublette said that students will eventually make the connection that they must do the practice work to be able to do well on the test. "I don't just show up in March and run the ten-miler without practice," she said, "but I didn't get a medal for going out every Saturday morning and running. I knew I had to do that."

The new grading initiatives also encourage teachers to relegate any assessment of student behavior—class participation and attendance, turning in work late, academic dishonesty—to a separate category in their grade book. Those behaviors are noted, but now do not affect a student's grade.

“When we use a grade as either a bonus or a penalty, it becomes separated from actually communicating academic progress,” said Sublette, pointing out that parents can monitor student behavior as well if they wish. “Parents can see everything that’s assigned [via online access] and whether it was collected or missing, so they are informed about how much kids are doing.”

Questions and Answers

ACPS held an online community forum on November 9 to inform parents and teachers about the rationale for the grading changes and to allow them to ask questions of O’Connor. During the meeting, more than 50 participants posted more than 175 questions to the Q&A board about all aspects of the policy. Questions ranged from whether any research or evidence exists on the policy’s effectiveness in other school districts, to how well teachers are “buying in” to the policy, to how placing all of the points in a course on a few graded assessments will serve to reduce students’ test anxiety.

“It’s frustrating for the kids, I think, because it puts more pressure on them,” said Heather Marcel, parent of two county high school students. “For the first half of the year in science, for instance, they had only four [graded] tests, and that’s all their grade was based on. Can you imagine that kind of pressure for kids? I don’t understand how that’s supposed to be better.”

Many of the forum’s participants wondered how removing penalties for missed deadlines and allowing test retakes will prepare students for their transition to college, work, or military service after high school, and how colleges and employers will be able to interpret ACPS grades versus those of other districts. “All of my son’s grades before this were based on a whole different grading system,” said Marcel. “So now, how is that going to work? How will this be explained to colleges [who are looking at these transcripts]?”



Lynn Define, English teacher at WAHS and the county's Virtual School. Photo: Lisa Martin.

The school division chose to disable the virtual meeting function that would have allowed participants to see each other's questions and comments, and many questions were not addressed directly during the presentation, according to participants. A recording of the meeting was not posted online, so the content was unavailable for later review by the public. After the meeting, the division posted a short FAQ on its website with 10 questions or statements and brief responses, leaving many parents frustrated.

"I would say that the objective [of the new policy] is still unclear," said Marcel. "It's unclear how not counting homework will help more students do their homework." As the division has imposed required provisions this year for not grading practice work, not grading student behavior, and not giving zeros, some teachers are as skeptical as the parents.

"It's one of those things we encounter in education where on paper it sounds great, but I think in practice it's not realistic," said WAHS photography teacher Cass Girvin, who has also taught English at the high school. "You want to be able to grade a kid on exactly what they know, unrelated to when or how they learn it or how long it takes, but that just isn't the reality of the system we have in place. Certainly the 'fixes' that are being thrown at us right now really don't work in a classroom of multiple students with one teacher."

Zeros and Retakes

One of the most striking changes this year has been the truncation of the traditional 100-point grading scale so that its lower boundary is now 50. This means a score of zero can no longer be assigned for late, incomplete, or missing work, and that, counterintuitively, a student will receive 50 points on an assessment for which they have turned in nothing. O'Connor's view is that a zero is mathematically extreme in its effect on a student's grade average and detrimental to student motivation, and that it gives a numerical value (0) to something that has never been assessed, so it's meaningless.

"You can read about [the idea of no zeros], you can be told about it, but then you have to experience it," said WAHS English teacher Lynn Define. "What helped for me was talking with one of the consultants who said that the 50 just means 'no evidence.' To me, that made sense because it simply means that, as a professional teacher, I cannot evaluate the student on that knowledge because I don't have enough evidence yet to assign a grade. And that's what I can communicate to parents as well." Some teachers have opted to use an 'I' or 'IG' (Incomplete Grade) in a similar way.

"Zeros really make it impossible for a kid to stumble and then catch back up," said Sublette, "so we're moving the floor because we felt that giving a zero was a nuclear option." The 50- to 100-point scale is intended by the division as a step toward an eventual 5-point grading scale—a simple range in which, for example, a 4 or 5 indicates at- or near-proficiency and 1-3

means a student is not there yet. Under the 50-point floor system this year, parents, teachers, and students see disincentives.

"The automatic 50% rule is unjust to all students," said one WAHS junior frustrated by the change. "It teaches students that they don't have to try and they will still get 50% ... [which] is absolutely not true in the real world. Also, it prevents the students who have been getting good grades from distinguishing themselves among the rest. Someone who works very hard and gets a 56% on a test is not distinguished from someone who did not even try but got bumped all the way up to 50%. Please reconsider this policy for what it takes away from students and for the misconceptions it teaches."

Girvin said he and his colleagues have observed that the policy has led to students gaming the system. "The idea of giving someone 50% for doing 0% of the work just does not compute for most people," he said. "There are students who don't turn in anything all semester and then turn in four assignments during the last week, so their grade is then a 60% for the semester and they've passed the class having only done a quarter of the work. I know the county doesn't necessarily approve of that."

Another policy adopted by many teachers this year allows students to retake assessments, in some cases multiple times, which parents say also inspires unproductive behavior. "If a student is stressed or busy, then they just don't study for the first test but will take it anyway because they know they can retake it," said Marcel. "[The retake] might not be exactly the same but it's similar, and they can see what's going to be on it, what are the questions they need to study."

While this behavior may be a form of what O'Connor calls practice, it requires extra work for teachers, who must prepare additional assessments and provide a (sometimes indefinite) window for students to take them, impeding the class's ability to move forward at a steady pace with course material. Test-taking procedures have varied widely among teachers this year, leading to a lack of consistency, one of the core tenets of the grading

policy.

“That’s part of our growing pains,” said Sublette. “That’s part of the fact that we’re implementing something in the first five months, and it’s probably not perfect yet. But it definitely is a learning process, and we’re very aware that it has to be a really carefully done process because grades are really important, especially in our community. I think we’ve learned a lot in the first couple of months about doing quick assessments, providing feedback, and really helping be clear with kids about preparing for small and large assessments.”

Feedback Loop

For a strategy like O’Connor’s grading practices to work, the burden rests squarely on teachers to provide students with individualized feedback on each piece of ungraded practice work. That feedback may take the form of written comments, a teacher conference, or a numerical score that isn’t factored into the student’s grade, but the feedback drives the whole process by providing a path for students toward mastery of the material. If practice work “doesn’t count,” the success of the new system hinges on convincing students that those efforts still matter.

Define, who is teaching in the county’s Virtual School this year, said it’s a process that takes time and trust. “I’m always giving feedback—like a 1 to 4 assessment of the first few paragraphs of their essay, for instance—so they know where they are,” she said. “That’s valuable feedback, but it doesn’t count, so they’re willing to take the risk in doing the work. I’ve taken the grading out and instead we brain-storm, we peer edit, and there’s always this feedback going on. They see there’s room for improvement and they work on it, so by the time they get to that assessment, it’s a breeze.”

While Language Arts and Fine Arts classes seem tailor-made for this gradual building approach, what happens in classes like AP U.S. History or Advanced Calculus, where class material arrives in a constant deluge and assessments

are frequent and often standardized? Time will have to tell, as several middle and high school teachers declined to speak on the record to the Gazette about the impact of the new grading policies on their classes.

With respect to ungraded student “behaviors,” many teachers believe that skills such as accountability are just as important for young people to learn as course material. “I view teachers as trying to work with the student as a holistic entity, not just a writer or reader,” said Girvin. “Punctuality and consistency are also important in life. The county has a credo about being a lifelong learner and model citizen, and I think that stuff matters. You need to be able to write well and read well and turn things in on time, so, yes, I feel that is part of my course content.”

Senior division officials such as Director of Secondary Education Jay Thomas have stressed that changing grading policies is an equity goal that will ultimately reduce achievement gaps among student groups. Officials plan to move ahead with more grading practice changes next year, as Superintendent Matt Haas has had a goal of fixing what he calls a “broken” grading system since he took the position in 2018. “Testing and grading is at the center of so much of what we do in schools,” he said in the fall of 2018 in an address to the School Board. “If we do not get grading and assessment right, all the other good work our teachers are doing to improve student learning will fail.”

Down on the ground, teachers will continue testing out the practices to see what works best for their students. “We’re trying to move them away from playing that points game,” said Define, but she admits it’s a difficult transition. “The librarians used to bring in great speakers—writers and poets—to talk with the students during lunchtime, and they would ask if we could offer extra credit to convince students to give up their lunch period to attend. Of course, we want students to come and be exposed to these great people, but now I say, well, you’ll have to persuade them a different way.”

Ken O'Connor's 15 Fixes for Broken Grades

Fix 1: Don't include student behaviors (effort, participation, adherence to class rules, etc.) in grades; include only achievement

Fix 2: Don't reduce marks on "work" submitted late; provide support for the learner

Fix 3: Don't give points for extra credit or use bonus points; seek only evidence that more work has resulted in a higher level of achievement

Fix 4: Don't punish academic dishonesty with reduced grades; apply other consequences and reassess to determine actual level of achievement

Fix 5: Don't consider attendance in grade determination; report absences separately

Fix 6: Don't include group scores in grades; use only individual achievement evidence

Fix 7: Don't organize information in grading records by assessment methods or simply summarize into a single grade; organize and report evidence by standards/learning goals

Fix 8: Don't assign grades using inappropriate or unclear performance standards; provide clear descriptions of achievement expectations

Fix 9: Don't assign grades based on student's achievement compared to other students; compare each student's performance to preset standards

Fix 10: Don't rely on evidence gathered using assessments that fail to meet standards of quality; rely only on quality assessments

Fix 11: Don't rely only on the mean; consider other measures of central tendency and use professional judgment

Fix 12: Don't include zeros in grade determination when evidence is missing or as punishment; use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine real achievement or use "I" for Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence

Fix 13: Don't use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.

Fix 14: Don't summarize evidence accumulated over time when learning is developmental and will grow with time and repeated opportunities; in those instances, emphasize more recent achievement

Fix 15: Don't leave students out of the grading process. Involve students; they can and should play key roles in assessment and grading and promote achievement

Source: A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades by Ken O'Connor

Albemarle High School Teachers Lament Chaotic Year

October 7, 2022



Albemarle High School. Photo: Lisa Martin.

On a spring day toward the end of last school year, a sea of Albemarle High School students charged through the hallways at lunchtime. News of a fight in the cafeteria had sent the outdoor breezeway crowd scrambling inside to see, but when someone in the throng yelled "Gun, gun!" the stream became a panicked rush. "For around ten minutes, we just had a stampede going through the school, screaming," said then-freshman Kayden Wright. "The administrators lost control of the bottom floor of the building. It was bad." He paused, reflecting. "I think that was the epitome of what school was like last year."

Wright described the environment to the School Board in remarks during the board's July 14 meeting, where he begged them to prioritize school security. "Last year there were school shooting threats, violence, smoking, vaping, truancy, trespassing, and drug use, and the list continues," he said. His focus was on protecting both students and staff. "Please don't be complacent. How can you expect teachers or students to be successful in a learning environment if they are not safe?"

During 2021-22, the first full year of in-person instruction since the Covid-19 pandemic school closures, everyone knew that recovering "normalcy" would be a challenging and gradual process. Nearly a dozen current and former Albemarle High School (AHS) teachers and students described for the Gazette how decisions to loosen disciplinary and academic policies during that critical time made their jobs profoundly more difficult, creating an environment that was damaging to the school's core mission.

"We as teachers felt responsible for students' [learning loss] during the pandemic year, and when they came back we were trying to triage their trauma at the same time we were dealing with our own trauma, and we didn't know how to do it," said Cathy Coffman, math department chair and 22-year AHS veteran. "I think, in hindsight, that when we came back from Covid we shouldn't have made all those changes—grading changes, not penalizing for being late to class, and others," said Coffman. "Kids needed the structure, and we didn't give it to them. That was our fault."

AHS principal Darah Bonham, now in his fourth year, said that trying to enforce prior rules was unrealistic. "You have to understand the dynamic of where we were, coming back after fifteen months of [virtual and hybrid] school, where we'd had loose attendance standards and forgiving deadlines," he said. "When [last year] started, we were literally just happy the kids were here. Trying to keep track of large numbers of attendance gaps and tardies was a very difficult task."

Disorder

To ease students back into the confines of a regular school day at AHS after a year of virtual learning, no penalties were imposed for being late to class or for leaving class without an excuse, and the limit on how many days of class could be missed while still receiving credit for a course was relaxed. As the rules and incentive systems shifted, students and teachers described the environment last year as "chaotic."

"When the kids returned, they didn't know how to behave, or how to get along with each other, or how to sit still for even 20 minutes," said Coffman. "The administration didn't know how to handle so much chaos. So, when it was decided that, for instance, we were not going to worry about penalizing tardies, well, then kids didn't go to class." With no mandatory attendance, students took to drifting around the school.

"When the year started, the bathrooms were bad, like really bad," said Wright. School bathrooms became lawless zones that many students avoided, where drugs, sex, and violence coexisted with the filming and posting of provocative TikTok videos. "Someone actually stole an entire stall at one point," said Wright.

As students made videos and posted them on social media, unrestricted cell phone use meant that any sort of (real or unreal) threat in the posts radiated through the student body in seconds, forcing the administration to issue several shelter-in-place lockdowns in as many weeks. "Some teachers [resigned] early in the school year because they couldn't handle that kind of trauma after trauma," said Coffman.

Later in the year, teachers were assigned to patrol certain areas of the school to keep them clear, but eventually, rather than enforcing rules on student behavior, administrators temporarily

Albemarle High School Principal Darah Bonham.

closed and locked the two largest school bathrooms for all students. Teachers said that dozens of students roamed the halls with impunity every day, but Bonham said his team was accounting for students out of class.

"I have administrators and Student Support Specialists, so that when we see kids who are not in class in the hallway, they have to go to class or they'll go to somewhere like an in-school suspension for defiance, or we'll contact home," he said. "It's a misrepresentation to say that there were kids just roaming the halls and nobody knew about it.

"We had a general rule about cell phones, which is that they must be put away during instructional time," Bonham said, "but it became much more of an issue than we would have anticipated. Young adolescents being connected to everybody at any point in time during the day, and then coming back into a school setting where that had to one hundred percent flip—that was a difficult task."

Even in the face of disruptions, administrators did not tighten disciplinary policies during the year, and staff had limited options for controlling behavior. "It starts with having thousands of kids in an area where we don't have any authority presence," said Chad Townsend, a health and P.E. teacher who's been at AHS since 2005 and has also taught special education and ESOL students. "The kids haven't been held accountable for their actions."

Conflict

Hosting nearly 2,000 students, AHS is the county's biggest high school—drawing largely from the dense urban ring surrounding the city of Charlottesville—and the most diverse, recently evolving to a majority-minority student population. Built in 1953, the school has been chronically overcrowded in recent years and currently has 200 more students enrolled than its official capacity of 1,785, necessitating the use of 16 trailer classrooms set up behind the building.

Teachers said that fights between students at AHS were a regular event last year, with brawls occurring multiple times per week, some between two or three individuals and others involving large groups—even one during a Career Fair in the courtyard in front of potential employers. At times, the staff tried to step in.

“The fighting was completely out of control,” said Townsend. “I broke up a fight last year [where two students were beating up a third], and ended up with 14 stitches in my hand. One of those students had already been involved in another fight at the school, yet he was still in the building. That’s a problem.” Townsend was not the only staff member to be injured last year; a female teacher was knocked unconscious while trying to intervene in a fight.

Bonham said that claims of frequent fights in school are “inaccurate.” “There were certainly a couple of instances where there were a couple of fights [last year], be it either they were filmed, or we had one in particular where a teacher was involved,” he said. “But the notion—and you could ask any of our administrators—that the place was unruly with fights every week is not the case.”

He pointed to state Department of Education tallies, which are based on reports filed by the school’s own admin team, that listed 390 behavioral incidents at AHS last year, but just 17 events in categories defined as fighting or assault. “Every single physical altercation I can attest to was dealt with in the administration with consequences,” said Bonham, such as in-school or out of school suspensions, suspension alternatives, and mediation and restorative practices.

By comparison, Monticello High School, half the size of AHS, reported 241 incidents including 26 fights. Western Albemarle High School reported 86 incidents and one fight. “We call it ‘the fight,’” said Western principal Jennifer Sublette. “We did have an uptick in vandalism that I hadn’t seen before, and to me that’s a sign of kids not feeling a sense of belonging in school, of pride

in their place. It's an important indicator of school climate and student engagement."

Accountability

The declining school environment at AHS was accompanied by the erosion of basic civility, particularly in the way students treated adults. Teachers said their simple requests for students to get to class or turn down their music were often met with aggressive verbal pushback and foul language.

"I think a lot of the [school environment] problems had to do with the pandemic, but not all of it by any means," said Townsend. "When you write a disciplinary referral and there are minimal repercussions, and the kid is back in your class the very next day cursing you out, it's incredibly frustrating."

Bonham said he and his staff "never allow" students to talk back to a staff member. "I can't measure if kids were sassier or talked back more [last year] based on any data," said Bonham, "but I would say that students are more likely to follow rules and do what's asked of them when they know the adult. And essentially half the school had no connection whatsoever with the teachers, and that's a huge factor."

Some teachers have pointed to new grading policies as another element that fostered class disorder. In a letter sent to the School Board in March and co-signed by eight other AHS faculty members, math teacher Bill Munkacsy decried the set of significant changes mandated by the school division in 2020-21: homework is not graded, the minimum grade that can be given on an assignment is a 50% (even if no work is turned in), students can retake graded assignments and tests at will, and there is no deadline for turning in work.

"Almost none of our students are doing homework now that they have no incentive," read the letter. "Because we cannot give a grade lower than 50%, a student can earn a "D" [passing] while only doing 20% of the graded

material for a class."

Munkacsy addressed the School Board in person at a May meeting. "This year has been utter chaos," he said. "Students are not completing their work in a reasonable timeframe, and it is very difficult to maintain class momentum when so many students are behind. We're now at the end of the year, the only enforceable deadline is upon us, and it's extremely stressful for students and staff alike—we're lost in a sea of no structure and no expectations. I implore you to consider the effects of taking away our ability to enforce reasonable expectations on our students through grading."

The School Board never publicly discussed the problems at AHS or how they might be remedied, the letter-writers received no response from school division leadership, and Munkacsy and five other math teachers resigned or retired. Meanwhile, standardized test scores for AHS students dropped between three and five points in English, Math, and Science from 2021 to 2022. Almost 20% of AHS students were "chronically absent" as defined by the state (missing 18 or more days of school in the school year)—including 30% of Black and Hispanic students.

When asked about the school environment at AHS last year, School Board member Kate Acuff (who represents the school's district) redirected inquiries to Principal Bonham, and said her understanding was that "things were off to a good start this year."

Exodus

Thirty-two out of about 180 AHS teachers resigned or retired last year, some among the most experienced in their discipline, many to continue their careers at area private schools. Departments like math and Spanish suffered double their normal levels of attrition, and teachers left the school at twice the rate they had during the previous (pandemic) year.

"Unfortunately, our kids did not get the best instruction they deserved this

year, because every one of us [in our department] lost our planning period [due to resignations]," said Spanish teacher John Glass at a School Board meeting in May. "I'm sure you all know the situation in our hallways, in our classrooms, is not ideal, and our students and teachers are struggling. I need to know that we are supported and that you have our backs."

Faculty say that the constant attention to discipline and security issues meant that administrators could not properly attend to their staff's needs. "Teachers are leaving because they don't feel valued and heard," said Coffman. "They're supposed to be evaluated [for job performance], but nobody walked into their classroom [to observe them]. The administrators are so busy with all the discipline that they don't have time to really work with teachers and help them get better, support them, and tell them they're doing a good job."

Bonham acknowledged that it was "more of a difficult task to get into the classrooms and work with teachers as much as we wanted, just because of all the other things [going on]."

Recovery

This year, some of the relaxed policies are being newly enforced. The tardy and attendance policies—the latter of which threatens to withhold course credit for 10 or more absences—are back in use. The cell phone policy now requires a teacher to first warn the student, then to contact their parent for a discussion, and finally to write up a disciplinary referral after the third violation, though the process has been slowed due in part to a new, laggy paperless system for referrals.

"It's really about structure," said Bonham. "[Last year] we didn't start the year saying 'This is our policy, this is what we're doing.' We were trying to get students acclimated to education again and giving them a lot of grace [in terms of rules and policy], and sometimes that's not helpful, as we have learned. All those pieces in isolation made sense, but when you combine

them together after a pandemic, trying to get back to normal social expectations, that created the need for more structure, and that's where we had to make some changes going into this year."

As with any big change, follow-through issues persist. "I've written numerous referrals for cell phone and tardy policy violations this year, but because of the volume of referrals, the administration isn't able to address them in a timely fashion," said Townsend. Several large fights erupted during the first few weeks of school, at least one generating an extended police presence the following day on the AHS campus. "It's still not under control," he said.

Still, teachers are cautiously optimistic. "I think we learned our lesson the hard way last year, and the county is making changes in discipline policies that are helping students make better choices," said Coffman, though she still hopes that some of the new grading policies will be pared back as well. "There is more structure and enforcement of the rules—getting to class on time, not wandering in the halls—and the cell phone policy has really helped. The administration has also made a concentrated effort to get into teachers' classrooms to offer more support and encouragement. Last year was hard for everyone—teachers and administration alike."

Students, too, are seeing improvement. "Things have been going better with a few exceptions," said Wright. "Transportation has been a mess and there have been a few fights, but hopefully ACPS [Albemarle County Public Schools] is on the right track."

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County Schools Move to “Unlevel” Most Classes

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County Schools Move to “Unlevel” Most Classes

Albemarle county public schools have been working to “unlevel” course instruction across the curriculum for the past several years in an effort to increase equity and decrease the stigma around taking lower-level classes compared to one’s peers. After slow progress on the initiative during the pandemic-impacted school years, teachers are now fully implementing the division’s unleveling policy, and parents have lots of questions about how the plan is working.

A system of “leveled” instruction means that a school offers separate sections of a class—for example, Standard English and Honors English

sections—for students of differing levels of readiness. Unleveling (or de-leveling) is the process of removing those options by pooling all students into single-level classes, each taught by one teacher. A decade ago, county high school core subject classes were offered at five levels: Practical, Standard, Advanced, Honors, and AP or Dual Enrollment.

“My question is, why do we need so many levels?” said Director of Secondary Education Jay Thomas, who is also a former high school principal. “Why do we level in the first place? The reality is that whether you’re in a Standard, Advanced, or Honors class as we used to call them, it’s the same exact standards from the state that need to be taught.” Thomas says that offering so many levels creates problems for teachers with multiple class preps moving at different paces through the material.

“If you’re teaching, say, English 11 three different ways, that’s more preps, and more stress,” he said. “So [the reason for unleveling] is a combination of those things and just trying to have equitable opportunities regardless of the schools we’re in across our division, because at the end of the day, we’re one Albemarle County Public School system.”

Henley Middle School principal Beth Costa said unleveling has to start in elementary school to avoid labeling students based on early testing. “A second or third grader knows what group they’re in, and why that group is together,” she said. “They’re very savvy. They start to use words like ‘that kid’s smarter than I am,’ or ‘I’m in the dumb class,’ so they are making decisions about themselves as a learner because of these groupings.” Costa said that a leveled approach changes instruction for students who may not “get it” yet.

Henley Middle School principal Beth Costa. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

“What teachers do, with the best of intentions, is they slow down, and then it’s a train that students can’t get off,” she said. “If you start to lose out on curriculum because of the pacing at which you’re receiving grade level instruction, then you’re almost bound to be behind grade level, because you haven’t received the same instruction as your peers. It starts to put little ceilings on students. It’s just a dangerous model, separating kids based solely on readiness.”

Leveled instruction has also been decried by some education professionals as inherently inequitable because of imbalances in how students are assigned to lower-level classes and upper-level or advanced sections. The division’s anti-racism policy commits to “ending the predictive value of ... race, class, or gender on student success,” and one of the school division’s 2019 Equity Report key goals is to “consider alternatives to removing struggling students from core instruction in the Tier 1 [top level] setting and

provide more unleveled classes in secondary schools.”

Rise to the Challenge

Parents have begun voicing their concerns about the unleveling policy as it's been implemented in practice in middle and high schools, chief among them the worry that more advanced students are no longer being challenged in school. “This initiative is leading to less rigorous academic opportunities for all our students in the subject areas of language arts, history and science and, as a result, less engagement in the classroom by the students,” said Katie Fusco, parent of a seventh and ninth grader, in a letter to the School Board.

Fusco's letter listed several “negative educational outcomes as a result of unleveled classrooms,” including the re-use of books and films that have been taught in previous years, the grading of student work based on lowered expectations (e.g., grade level benchmarks vs. individual potential), and significant amounts of wasted time while other students are still learning class material.

Tracy Betsworth, parent of a fifth grader, wondered about data or studies supporting unleveling. “It was difficult to get information from the middle school, but we finally did hear that classes like English would have no levels,” she said. “So, we connected with a group of other parents asking the same questions about data.” Division officials pointed one parent in the group to a 1992 study in support of the unleveling paradigm, but the study actually showed the opposite—it concluded that placing average-achieving eighth graders into (leveled) advanced math classes helped improve their math scores.

The school division says that to meet students' needs successfully, an unleveled class requires a teacher who is adept at “differentiation,” a technique that uses flexible grouping and continuous assessments to tailor instruction to individual students. The teacher should be trained to group

students creatively so they are not always clustered together with students of similar ability—perhaps grouped instead by interest or affinity or learning style—so that their in-class experiences are varied.



Henley Middle School. Photo: Lisa Martin.

“Exposing children to children who may not have had the same experiences is a good thing,” said Henley eighth grade English teacher Elizabeth Sweatman. “Kids can learn from each other, and I don’t necessarily mean academically, I mean they can just learn about other perspectives. So there’s a diversity aspect, and even though we aren’t very racially diverse, we are diverse in other ways.”

Sweatman also sees behavioral differences in her students under unleveling. “When kids struggle they tend to act out, trying to deflect from the fact that they can’t read well or are having trouble learning, and with all those kids in one [leveled] class we sometimes struggled to reach our goals,” she said. “Now that we’re unleveled, I have zero behavior problems because students

who may want to act out do not have an audience the way they used to. My students are amazing, and I try to create an environment where every child can thrive, no matter their background or ability."

Kristin Smith, parent of a sixth grader, wonders how one teacher can manage an unlevelled classroom. "It requires so much of these teachers, to differentiate within a single classroom," she said, "and I just don't know how that can be successful for anyone, including the ones who need it the most. I think that it's possible to be done well, and beautifully, but I think that it's completely unrealistic to expect all teachers to have that level of talent and patience."

Smith's son is an advanced learner and reports "feeling bored and like school is a waste of time." "He's disappointed," she said. "He's becoming old enough to be able to think past this year and ask himself, 'Am I going to be ready for high school?' 'Am I going to be ready to compete with the kids in college who are getting more than I'm getting at other schools?' We don't have time to waste—we don't want to be the guinea pigs, and we can't wait another four years to figure out that this isn't working for us."

The Onus on Teachers

The school division says it is committed to training teachers on differentiation techniques, though only two of Henley's teachers attended a summer seminar in 2019 at UVA on differentiation in the classroom. (School division officials were unable to provide the total number of county teachers who have attended external training sessions on the subject.) Other teachers have participated in weekly or monthly online Professional Learning Community meetings with their school and county peers, and Kristina Doubet, an education professor at James Madison University who specializes in flexible grouping, has provided support at some of those meetings.

"Teachers weren't alone in this process," said Megan Wood, principal of

Lakeside Middle School. "It wasn't like, okay, we're de-leveling and good luck. Extensive professional learning was put in place to support de-leveling. For instance, in English this year our teachers are focused on incorporating literature circles into the classes as part of English curriculum strategies, so that students can pick texts that are related to a common theme, but then be challenged by what they are reading."

Ashby Johnson, principal of Jouett Middle School, echoed Jay Thomas' point about grade level standards being the same no matter the readiness level of the student. "The SOL's [required standardized testing] are the same by grade, so even if you have a reader that is a tenth grade level reader, they can be working on the same standard as a second grade level reader, but they might have different passages," she said. "Passages are leveled differently so that they're able to focus on the skill, but also achieve that and master that grade level standard."

During the pandemic school year (2020-21), progress on unleveling courses was stalled, and this year teachers have been playing catch-up while also navigating new policies that radically shift gifted student identification and grading practices. "This year we've done more with culturally responsive teaching, trying to get teachers to evaluate their curriculum and assessment through a culturally responsive lens," said Costa. "That's a form of differentiating too—the two ideas intersect. I'm trying to be mindful of everything I'm asking teachers to do, trying not to burden them with too much in terms of training."



Henley Middle School English teachers Jenna Magistro, Elizabeth Sweatman, and Andrew West. Photo: Lisa Martin

Teachers also have less control over who is in their classes, because in recent years the school division dropped mandatory prerequisites for most classes, and teacher recommendations regarding which class a student is ready to take next—and at what level— are no longer required to be followed. So, students may choose to enroll in whatever level class they or their parents prefer, including AP classes. Though the division’s goal is to increase enrollment of underrepresented demographic groups in upper level classes, the pace of such classes can cause complications for all students.

A junior at Western Albemarle High School described the problem. “In my AP Calculus class, a lot of students who might fare better in a slower-paced class do not do well on the tests and assignments, so my teacher has to go over those topics again,” he said. “Now my teacher says that it is going to be tough to get in all the content before the AP exam in May. Because there aren’t other levels of advanced math [offered], students are put into this

class where they require a slower pace to better understand the material, which takes away from the students who took AP Calculus to have a faster-paced class."

Future Perfect

At this point, only math instruction provides advanced options, partly because of the nature of defined instructional strands in math such as Algebra and Geometry. "At the middle school level, accelerated learning opportunities are limited to the area of [leveled] math instruction," said Fusco in her letter, noting that the rest of the curriculum does not benefit students who learn new concepts quickly or are interested in more challenging materials. "Students need the opportunity to be challenged in the classroom, by their regular teacher, on an ongoing basis."

School administrators dispute the idea that access to more class material sooner is better for advanced learners. "One thing that kind of gets conflated is that acceleration equals enrichment," said Wood. "Just because you're moving faster through content, does it mean that your kids are getting a deeper understanding of the information—acceleration doesn't always equal enrichment."



Western Albemarle High School. Photo: Lisa Martin.

Costa said that teachers are working to build a database of sorts within the online Schoology learning platform that will allow students to have greater access to more advanced materials. "We don't have a gifted model anymore, and I don't want students ever sitting in class biding their time," she said. "So, the part that I am heartened about is that once we have everything in Schoology, I can give kids lots of choice and action and depth to work on if they're finished or if they want to go further than their peers. It takes time to develop those resources."

Costa said that more county teachers will attend a Curriculum Assessment and Instruction Institute at UVA in June, where a team of specialists will work with teachers from across the country on differentiation skills, and there's a waitlist for teachers from Henley who wish to attend. "[Looking ahead to next year,] we're going to sort of recommit to this whole idea [of unleveling]," she said. "If we're going to unlevel, and we told families and kids and the division

that we're changing the instructional model, we really have to do that. You can't teach 'whole class' in an unlevelled class, you just can't, and there is [still] a lot of that happening."

Measures of Success

Many parents say they would have appreciated more transparent discussion about the policy and its implementation over the last few years. "We were not really aware that [unleveling] was happening, and we just wanted to understand why," said Betsworth. "When we asked questions, we were told by administrators and teachers that 'oh, your child will be fine,' but I'm not okay with 'fine.' I want to ensure that my child is given every opportunity to rise and I just don't feel confident that he's going to in Albemarle county right now."

Measures of the success of the policy, such as improved SOL scores for underrepresented groups, will take a while to untangle from the pandemic era's learning losses, though school officials see glimmers of progress on other fronts. "Anecdotally, people have said that the classroom or the school culture is improved because students aren't moving from class to class in terms of cohorts," said Wood. "We have a variety of students that are engaging with each other, and they know more of their classmates, and teachers report that the classroom community has actually improved."

But Smith says that prioritizing education can't wait, and will have withdrawn all of her three children from the system by next year. "I feel like there's a mass exodus—half of our neighborhood is going private," she said. "I think that the explanation [for unleveling] is that they've been tasked with the goal of narrowing the achievement gap, and they think this is the answer. And they're probably right—I agree that this is probably going to narrow the achievement gap because the kids at the top are leaving."