Not all grading scales are created equal

BY JEREMY SLAYTON Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Monday, December 10, 2012

12:00 am

Like thousands of high school seniors across the country, Cooper Stewart is in the midst of one of the

most hand-wringing, gut-wrenching times of a teenager’s life — applying for college.

Cooper, a senior at the Governor’s Academy for Engineering Studies at L.C. Bird High School in

Chesterfield County, is near the end of a challenging semester with six Advanced Placement classes.

But some argue that Cooper and his Chesterfield classmates are competing on an uneven playing field

for college admissions and scholarships because of the grading scale the school system uses to

measure student performance in the classroom.

For example, a student from Chesterfield and a student from Fairfax County can finish a course with

the same numerical percentage but have different letter grades on official transcripts submitted with

college applications.

“It just makes it that much tougher,” said Cooper, who is considering such schools as Virginia Tech,

the University of South Carolina and Clemson University.

Chesterfield school officials are considering a change to the division’s grading scale that would bring

it in line with other districts across the state and the nation.

A committee of teachers, students, parents and administrators that led the division’s evaluation has

proposed a grading scale with 10-point intervals (for A’s, B’s and C’s at least) as an alternative to the

six-point scale currently in place.

Chesterfield is evaluating its grading practices — including the scale to assign letter grades — as part

of its recently adopted Design for Excellence 2020 plan that will guide school policy and decisionmaking for the next decade.

It is the largest school division in the state not using the 10-point grading scale. The only four larger

school systems — Fairfax, Prince William and Loudoun counties and the city of Virginia Beach —

switched to the 10-point scale over the past several years.

But even in those four other school divisions, not all the 10-point scales are created equal. In Fairfax

and Virginia Beach, 63 percent and below is failing; in Loudoun, the failure line is 59.

Similar change has been slow to come to central Virginia. Of the Richmond area’s four largest school

divisions, only Hanover and Henrico counties use the same scale. In those divisions, 69 and below is

failing, while an A is in the 93 to 100 range.4/4/13 Not all grading scales arecreatedequal - RichmondTimes Dispatch- RichmondVA

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In Chesterfield, an A is 94 to 100 percent, while the new proposal calls for an A (to include pluses and

minuses) to range from 90 to 100. One thing that does not change in the proposal is the failure line. In

both, any grade of 63 percent and below is failing.

Hanover, Henrico and Richmond are not considering changes in grading scales.

“We’re constantly evaluating what’s in the best interest of our stakeholders but, at this time,

substantive discussions on changing the grading scale are not taking place,” said Henrico schools

spokesman Andy Jenks.

is part of a larger review of grading practices across the division, the idea

being to create grading handbooks for the elementary, middle and high school levels to provide

direction for teachers.

Chesterfield’s evaluation

“The first concern that has been raised … was (that) grades should measure achievement, not

behavior,” said Jeremy Lloyd, director of curriculum and instruction for Chesterfield schools. “The

second reason that we formed the committee is due to the concern (that) grades should be consistent

and fair for students.”

For one Chesterfield mother, that is welcome news. Jamie Stewart has long led the charge in the

county to move to a 10-point scale, which, if adopted by the School Board, would go into effect in

September 2014.

She knows that a change would not have a major impact on her children — Cooper is a senior and her

daughter is a high school freshman — but she still feels that it’s the right move.

Stewart dismisses the notion raised by critics of the change that the shift would lower standards.

Standards, she said, are set by the people who evaluate students, such as college admission officials or

employers.

“All we are doing is aligning ourselves and standardizing our grading scale to what the rest of the state

and the country are doing,” she said.

William C. Bosher Jr., a former Virginia superintendent of public instruction who now is a professor

at Virginia Commonwealth University, has stridently defended keeping the grading scale as it is, in

large part because it may suggest to students that there has been “a change in standards or

expectations.”

The counter argument, he said, is that teachers will adapt to a new grading scale and, in the long term,

it will not result in more students receiving better grades, regardless of the cutoff.

“For us to think, ‘OK, now we’re going to take a grading scale and move it from 95 to 93 or 90 is an A

and that we’re going to then wipe out all of the subjectivity that comes in evaluating a student’s

performance’ is ludicrous at best,” Bosher said.4/4/13 Not all grading scales arecreatedequal - RichmondTimes Dispatch- RichmondVA

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comes into play in some classes more than others, how a teacher calculates a

student’s final grade can be inconsistent within different schools in a division.

While subjectivity

Shonda Harris-Muhammed, a math specialist with Petersburg schools and a newly elected member of

the Richmond School Board, pointed out that one teacher may count class participation as part of the

final grade, while another may feel that students should participate anyway and not include it.

“We have become so competitive in education that we lose sight of why we’re educating children,”

Harris-Muhammed said. “We want to show that we are competitive and give everybody an equal

playing ground, which is good, but is it good for everybody?”

Not every student enters a classroom with the same level of ability, nor does every student aspire to

attend a four-year college or university, she said. And it’s up to the teacher to meet the students at

their point of need.

Cooper Stewart, who has a weighted grade point average above 4.0, is enrolled in challenging courses

not to compensate for differences in the grading scale but to challenge him academically.

“Studying is important in every class; you’re not going to get a better grade if you don’t study,” he

said. “It makes you have to work that much harder in a class that much harder.”

Along with the proposed shift to a 10-point scale, Chesterfield is slightly altering the weight for letter

and number grades, which is used to calculate a student’s GPA.

AP classes receive an additional weight of 1 point — as proposed a 97 to 100 numerical grade in a

class would be weighted as 5.0 on a 4.0 scale — and 0.5 for honors classes. Currently, a 99 and 100 is

worth 4.5 on a 4.0 scale. Chesterfield’s proposal will bring its weighting in line with that of the

College Board, while the additional points for honors and AP classes will remain.

“Their shift made the weighting system more consistent with most districts,” said Jamie Stewart, who

served on Chesterfield’s grading practices committee, which was convened in 2010. “Now that I have

a child in AP courses, I appreciate that the level of difficulty is more accurately reflected in this

current weighting system.”

grade in a course on a high school transcript the most important thing for a college

acceptance?

Is the final letter

No, it is just part of the equation, said Sybil Halloran, assistant vice provost for recruitment and

admissions at VCU.

Transcripts submitted with college applications typically cover a student’s first three years in high

school, and maybe the first semester of senior year, and do not reflect an entire senior year course

load.

She noted that the university factors a transcript in its entirety. Grades are important, but so too are4/4/13 Not all grading scales arecreatedequal - RichmondTimes Dispatch- RichmondVA

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the types of courses taken, grade point average and trends in grades, she said.

Halloran said VCU sees a variety of grading scales through the application process — “that’s why we

make it one element of many,” she said.

Admissions officers at VCU also look at standardized test scores, an optional essay and

extracurricular involvement when considering applicants. VCU does not recalculate students’ grade

point averages using a uniform grading scale.

That is due in large part to the volume of applications — freshmen applications for fall 2012 equaled

15,570 — that come into the university, Halloran said.

“We also have to look at it if a school says a student has earned an A… we trust that that school can

rank and make judgments on their students’ performances,” Halloran said.

According to a 2008 study conducted by Fairfax County schools’ department of accountability,

grading scales and weights, rigor of courses and school GPA distribution are the most important

factors considered by the responding colleges when comparing applicants for admissions.

that a statewide grading policy will be implemented anytime soon in Virginia, although

several states have instituted such policies.

It is unlikely

Del. L. Mark Dudenhefer, R-Stafford, filed a bill in January seeking the establishment of a statewide

10-point grading policy, but a House education subcommittee recommended continuing the

discussion until the 2013 General Assembly session. Dudenhefer does not plan to refile the

legislation, an aide said last week.

Virginia Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle said recently that from time to time, a

uniform grading scale has come before the Board of Education, but its response has not changed.

“The response of the board has been that grading scales are best determined locally, given all the

factors that would impact how one grading scale, while superficially identical to another one, might

differ in terms of how teachers weigh the various types of work students do and so forth,” he said.

Several states in recent years have moved to uniform grading policies, but even those vary from state

to state. Florida, for example, set its scale in 10-point increments, while in South Carolina an A is 93

to 100 and anything below 70 is failing.

proposing a 10-point scale, surveys were sent to parents and school division staff

for feedback.

With Chesterfield

A decision is months away, but when the dust settles, whatever action the School Board takes on the

scale, a layer of consistency will be added to grading practices across the district. School Board

policy currently states that teachers should be consistent within a building.4/4/13 Not all grading scales arecreatedequal - RichmondTimes Dispatch- RichmondVA

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The division wants its teachers to maintain their professional judgment so the grading handbooks will

provide direction, but “teachers in the building would work together as to their exact final format,”

Lloyd said.

But in the end, student grades are a much more complex issue than just a number on a piece of paper

(or electronic transcript) that measures student achievement by providing immediate feedback.

“Students are more than a number; they are more than a test number; they are more than a letter

grade,” Harris-Muhammed said. “They are more than just the data, but because we’re in a data-driven

society, we have to use data to make some determination about where they are.”

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