

Educational Forums: Students as Leaders of Their Own Learning, December 17, 2014
Questions and Answers

This Q and A has been prepared to provide specific information in response to parent questions.

What happened at the beginning of this year with respect to grading practices at FHS?

Response:

The high school faculty has been studying assessment and grading practices that support a “growth mindset” and promote deeper learning for three years. This focus has been clearly documented in the high school’s School Development Plan and written about in the Design Team Updates shared at Board of Education meetings and published on the district’s website.

There was an established grading practices committee for the 13-14 school year comprised of students, teachers, and administrators. The work of this committee resulted in the decision by the high school administration to begin implementation of one new school-wide grading practice that essentially separated a student’s grade into 2 parts – academic achievement (mastery of standards on assessments) and a “habits of work “ score that was based on work completion, participation, and perseverance. Grading practices are routinely modified by departments and communicated to students and parents through teacher-developed syllabi distributed at the beginning of the year. This school-wide change in practice was communicated by the principal.

Although there had been a great deal of professional development and thoughtful study, it soon became clear that teachers and students needed more time to prepare for this shift. In early November, Dr. Silva made a decision to eliminate the “habits of work” score as a school-wide grading practice. Teachers were directed to review student grades and make appropriate adjustments as necessary based on their typical grading practices without implementation of the “habits of work” score before the close of first quarter grades. Due to the timing of this process, no data was collected to compare first quarter grades this year to other years in the past. Any adjustments that were made reflect departmental / teacher grading practices in place prior to the start of the school year and consistent with current practice. No further changes to school-wide grading practices will be made through the end of this school year.

Are these grading practices coming back? If so, when? Are there other changes planned?

Response:

We are continuing to align our grading and reporting practices K to 12 to reflect a standards-based system and a focus on the thinking and learning skills in Farmington’s Vision of the Graduate. We will not reinstitute the “habits of work” score on the report card for the fall of 2015. Rather, a more phased in approach to the core principles of standards-based grading and mastery-based learning will occur over time, and parents and students will be informed of anticipated changes well in advance of their implementation.

Some have expressed a concern that we will be eliminating letter grades as a part of the mastery-based system. We are planning to maintain a letter grade system while simultaneously developing a mastery-based system of awarding credit for courses and meeting graduation requirements.

Some have asked if the high school is considering the elimination of AP or Honors classes. There is no consideration being given to the elimination of Honors or AP classes. We continue to consider the expansion of our AP and Honors programs in terms of both offerings and access. For example, we are

currently investigating an opportunity for students to elect to follow a sequence of courses that would result in an AP Diploma designation. We are also considering adding the highly challenging two-year Cambridge Pre-University course entitled "Global Perspectives and Research." Any and all new courses are discussed with the Board of Education and their approval is required for full implementation.

What are the basic ideas behind a standards-based grading system that Farmington is considering for the future?

Response:

There are many interpretations of standards-based or mastery-based grading systems that districts across the country have implemented. Farmington's definition of a standards-based grading system designed to ensure that all students reach or exceed mastery of essential learning goals will, when fully implemented, have the following features:

- Varied and multiple assessments that allow students to demonstrate mastery or exceed mastery of established standards/learning targets in different ways. A student's grade in class is based on a reasonable number of assessments, projects, papers, tests, and other graded assignments so that no one assessment becomes inappropriately weighted or the sole basis for the final grade.
- Specific and timely feedback on all work so that students clearly understand learning targets and their own progress toward meeting or exceeding standards. Formative assignments and practice assessments will often not count toward the grade but rather provide a teacher with critical feedback on student misunderstandings and likewise provide students with a clear sense of their own strengths and needs.
- Receiving credit for a course is dependent upon meeting or exceeding all of the essential learning goals or standards that have been articulated. Some students may need additional time / instructional support to do so.
- Grades are predominantly based on demonstrations of understanding – through multiple and varied forms of assessment. Learner behaviors such as homework completion, active participation and persistence are considered essential to academic success. However, these behaviors must not overshadow a student's gaps in understanding of essential content standards if it exists. Therefore, they are not weighted heavily in a student's grade in class, but are the gateway to opportunities for assessment or assignment "do-overs." Students who demonstrate sophisticated and deep levels of understanding when taking on complex and challenging work will exceed the standard and be graded accordingly.
- ALL students in every course will have clearly defined opportunities to revise projects or papers and retake/delay assessments as defined by the teacher. This means that not every assignment or assessment that is graded will be able to be revised or retaken. However a reasonable portion of the graded work for the quarter will be designated as something students can do-over to demonstrate new learning. Where revisions/retakes are permitted, the higher score will be calculated in the academic grade. Alternatively, students may be given opportunities to delay taking a test or other form of assessment with the teacher's permission. This time extension allows students to access additional extra-help opportunities to build skill and confidence.
- Departments will establish specific guidelines for late work, missing work, and the timeline for handing in revisions and allowing retakes. Guidelines will be published in writing for every student. Students who are completing assigned homework and turning in assignments by the due date will be afforded opportunities for revisions and retakes. Students who are not exhibiting good habits of work may forfeit these opportunities temporarily and instead be assigned to support-based tutorials or intervention classes. The goal is to develop a "growth mindset" in all students promoting the belief that effort is the key to achievement.

- Homework is most often designed for students to practice skills taught in class and mistakes or misunderstandings are to be expected. Teachers develop instruction responsive to those needs and encourage students to persist in developing understanding through this teach, practice, and reteach cycle. This is why homework of this type is considered a formative “check for understanding” and not a summative grade. Teachers may assign minimal points toward the grade for doing homework. Some homework, however, is designed as preparation for a graded discussion in class or a component of a longer project. In these cases, work that is done independently at home does indeed count toward a summative grade.
- There are many opportunities for students to access the help they may need beyond the classroom. There is a strong network of support systems designed to help every student reach their goals, meet or exceed established content standards, and exhibit the thinking and learning skills of Farmington's Vision of the Graduate.
- ALL students can achieve and succeed at high levels through excellence in teaching, learning, assessment and student effort.

Though we have not fully implemented all aspects or features of this standards-based system of mastery learning, we are committed to these conceptual ideas that will transform teaching, learning, and assessment to support a student-centered learning environment over time.

Why are we making changes when we are already a successful district?

Response:

Farmington has always been and will continue to be a district that embraces the notion of continuous improvement. We are widely regarded as a leader that other districts emulate. Our students are extraordinarily successful and our reputation for excellence is an advantage in the college application process. We have not gained this reputation by remaining stagnant. Current college and career readiness standards look quite a bit different now than they did only a decade ago and we are committed to preparing our graduates to be globally competitive as they move on to their future endeavors. We remain strong on state and national rankings and outcomes.

Some have wondered if Farmington has contracted with an organization that is now going to dictate programmatic changes. Farmington has not signed any form of contract with an external organization. We do actively participate in a number of professional organizations. Through these organizational networks we learn from other high-performing innovative school districts across the country and stay in touch with national and international educational research and developments that will influence the future of schooling. Farmington has a long tradition of customizing innovative programs and practices to ensure that new initiatives are a good fit for our students and our community. We would never relinquish control over local decision making. We have a long documented history of collaborative planning with all stakeholder groups when new ideas are being implemented.

In what ways do parents have a voice in the decisions made regarding program improvements and changes?

Response:

There are multiple and varied ways in which parents can learn about school and district improvement work. We encourage parents and community members to express their opinions and engage in a dialogue with district administration and teachers.

Some of these opportunities include:

- School-based Parent Advisory Boards or Parent Teacher Organization meetings

- Annual District Surveys
- Board of Education Meetings – attendance and public comment
- Superintendent’s Parent Forum (K-12)
- Individual meetings with principals or central office administrators
- District and school communications and website postings
- School Development Plans and Results and Outcomes documents

In addition to these, we are establishing a Design for Continuous Improvement Council, 7-12 to include representative parents, students, teachers and administrators to act as an advisory group whose main purpose will be to provide input and feedback on school and program improvement plans. It was suggested at the Forum that we increase the number of parent representatives on this council. We are pleased to know that parents are committed to supporting the work of our schools in this way, and therefore we will look for additional parent representation. Parents on the council will be encouraged to share feedback and input they receive from other parents in the district in order to allow multiple voices and perspectives to be included in the discussion.

The first meeting of this council is scheduled for February 9th.

How are the Design Team Recommendations influencing school and program improvement work?

Response:

There is no longer a functioning Design Team. Design team members were selected by the former high school principal and considered a one-year “think tank” group with a specific charge from the outset. From November 2011 to November 2012, there were 7 students, 4 parents / BOE members, 8 teachers, and 5 administrators participating in Design Team work. The resulting set of 10 recommendations has been used to guide the next level of innovation at FHS and IAR over the last two years.

The recommendations are visionary statements very much in line with pending legislation around “personalized learning” in CT and high school reform. The CT Association of School Superintendents published a report entitled, “Next Ed: Transforming CT’s Education System” which outlines their recommendations for more student-centered teaching and learning in CT and this document was influential in crafting the recommendations. The Design Team’s work was also significantly influenced by a 2010 document produced by the New England Secondary School Consortium called the “Global Best Practices” rubric.

The Design Team recommendations will continue to shape the district’s work going forward as they represent the leading edge of innovation in education that will distinguish Farmington’s graduates as they move on to college and career goals.

Each year, all district administrators make informed decisions about the next level of improvement work in their schools through careful analysis and by

- Aligning their goals with the BOE’s 5 year goals
- Engaging in an analysis of current and longitudinal data
- Considering stakeholder feedback from students, parents and teachers
- Focusing on district priorities that create systemic coherence across the school system

Our district’s school development plans are posted on our website so that parents and community members can read about and better understand the school’s priorities.

What does “Students as Leaders of their Own Learning” really mean?

Response:

For too long, educational rhetoric has presented the public with false dichotomies. Do we need greater accountability or more autonomy to allow schools to be responsive to local needs? Do we need to demand higher levels of rigor in the classroom or greater student choice in the learning process? Should the curriculum focus on learning the basics or acquiring skills and dispositions like teamwork and problem solving? Farmington’s response to all of these questions has been YES and YES. All are important.

We have a set of core beliefs that clearly state the importance of Results, Effort, and Expectations. Our BOE five-year goals articulate the content knowledge and skills as well as 21st century thinking and learning skills that are expected of all students. Naming our improvement efforts this year – “Students as Leaders of Their Own Learning” – signifies that we will make greater gains in achievement when students are included in the conversation about their own learning.

In the past, the idea of “student-centered” learning was misunderstood as not results-focused. Some would envision a student-centered classroom as unstructured and relaxed with little to no accountability for learning and an emphasis on “feel good” activities that were far from challenging or rigorous. Many believed that we had to make a choice between schools with teacher-directed structure and high levels of rigor OR student-centered freedom and mediocre outcomes. Farmington believes that these are not choices we have to make. The most current research on motivation and learning indicates that when students have a clear sense of purpose, when they believe they can master the content and skills, and when they are given some elements of autonomy in the learning process, they will apply persistent effort to the tasks at hand and take individual responsibility for their own progress. Challenges and struggle become opportunities for a greater sense of accomplishment and students develop an academic resiliency that motivates them to take on even more intellectually difficult work. Farmington is committed to making instructional shifts that move away from the student as passive learner and recipient of knowledge to the student as engaged, active learner. The following chart illustrates some of these shifts:

| New: “Inquiry Approach” with students as active engaged learners | Old: “Coverage Approach” with students as passive receivers of information |
|---|--|
| Teacher as model, coach, and designer | Teacher as expert presenter |
| Strategic Thinking | Memorization |
| Interaction and talk | Quiet listening |
| Student responsibility | Student compliance |
| Multiple resources, analyzing / questioning source and author bias | Reliance on textbook, assuming accuracy and no need for other perspective |
| Multimodal learning | Visual and verbal sources only |
| Students giving and receiving feedback, setting goals for improvement | Teachers grading work, students accumulating points |
| Doing the work of experts in the field, authentic experiences | Hearing about the discipline, completing worksheets and assignments |

It is important to understand that teachers do continue to develop the curriculum, select materials and resources for lessons, write lesson plans, and grade student work. The teacher is critical to the learning process.

Will our students be college ready and competitive in the college application pool?

Response:

Farmington has been a standards-led district for at least 15 years. Standards articulate what a student should know and be able to do at the end of a course. Mastery-based learning places an even stronger emphasis on these standards. It is a system in which students must “prove” that they have indeed mastered or exceeded these expectations before receiving credit and/or advancing to the next course or level. Currently a student who has a grade point average of a D- or better receives credit. In this situation it is unlikely that this student would have mastered essential standards.

Content and Cross-curricular Standards aligned with the Common Core State Standards coupled with a mastery-based system of accountability ensures that students are college and career ready as they graduate. This is what colleges require and are looking for in their students.

Farmington High School students achieve at very high levels and have the benefits of a rigorous curriculum and instruction that challenges them to do their best. Nonetheless, students are encouraged and guided to have a balanced approach to academics, athletics, activities, and family life. We will continue to focus on the whole child and to support students as they negotiate the rigors and challenges of high school life.