

Concerned parents ask Pittsburg district for better assessment process

By Paul Burgarino
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The current grading criteria at Pittsburg High School, with its heavy emphasis on standardized tests, is failing students, a large group of parents and students argued this week.

A standing room-only crowd led by interfaith group CCISCO — many waving distributed signs with messages like "What will my future be?" and "I am what I'm taught" — went before the Pittsburg Unified School District board Wednesday night to voice their concerns.

Currently, 80 percent of Pittsburg High's math and English grades are based on common district assessments — which includes tests, quizzes and common exams — given every three weeks. The rest of a student's grade is based on

homework, projects and class participation.

District officials said that students have shown improvement in standardized proficiency scores and that other high schools in the area weigh grades similarly. In 2003, only 14.9 percent of Pittsburg High students were proficient in math while 16.8 percent were proficient in English, according to Academic Yearly Progress testing results. District officials say those percentages have jumped to 23.1 percent and 29.8 percent, respectively, in five years.

While acknowledging that AYP scores are improving, concerned parents painted a different picture. During their presentation, parents pointed out that 62 percent of students are below proficient in math and 53.4 below proficient in English. Their data showed that 86.5 percent are not proficient in math and 66 percent are not proficient in English when looking at state testing.

Parents also point to an overall decline in student grade point averages since assessments started in 2005.

Board members acknowledged that there are some inconsistencies in the

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current system, noting that evaluating students is a complex issue, given the district's challenging demographics. Board member Vince Ferrante suggested revising the grading policy, though assessments are critical.

"We need to look for some kind of middle ground," he said.

"There's a valid concern here," said board President Ruban Rosalez, adding that a glitch in the way grades are calibrated causes the assessments to skew grades in the beginning of the semester and affect eligibility for extracurricular activities.

"It's not the content but the calibration that's causing all this friction," he said.

The current assessment system makes students "fall into a ditch" because they can fall behind and give up or feel like failures — even reverting to drugs and gangs, parents Cheryl Cooper and Tamika Henry said. Much of the blame stems from a lack of resources to help students who are struggling, other parents said.

Several students also lashed out at the current grading structure — some broke

into tears or used profanity when venting about the assessments.

Among the suggestions offered by parents were to reinstate D grades for those scoring 59 percent to 69 percent in a class; changing the weight and frequency of assessments; better staffing for the school's Mastery Center; more accountability procedures for teachers; and better communication with parents. Currently, scores of 67 percent or below merit an F grade.

District Superintendent Barbara Wilson said that the district would continue to work with parents and staff members on how to communicate student progress both accurately and in a way that does not discourage students. Pittsburg High Principal Todd Whitmire added that staff members heard the suggestions about communication loud and clear, and some ideas, such as auto-dialer messages for parents, can be implemented quickly.

CCISCO and Pittsburg parents will hold a meeting next month, and the groups hope the school district will come back with a plan for change.

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