

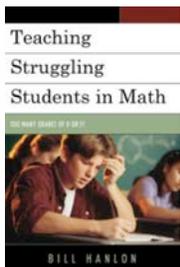
Nevada Public Education News



Graduation Rate – Game Guide

Bill Hanlon

If nobody fails, then everyone graduates. What does that say about the value of a diploma?



Since graduation rates have become a huge factor in evaluating public education nationally, states, school districts and schools are feeling the pressure to increase that rate. That pressure is being felt by teachers in the classroom to pass students even if they have not acquired the necessary knowledge and skills.

Some assistant superintendents and principals, feeling pressure from the state and district, are forcing teachers to floor the fail rates at 50%. That means, if a student does not take a test, fails or outright cheats, the lowest grade the teacher can give is 50% on that test.

While flooring grades at 50% has some merit, teachers are also being pressured into allowing students to retake tests as many times as they want for a higher grade – up to the end of the semester so they pass the class. This is just wrong. Secondary math teachers not only teach students, they are required to cover topics that depend on prior learning that is accomplished in a timely manner. That learning becomes the foundation for the next class.

Imagine trying to teach division to students who have not learned to multiply or subtract. A middle school teacher would have difficulty teaching ratio and proportion if their students were not required to master fractions before that. How would we expect an algebra teacher to teach students to solve quadratic and higher degree equations if their students did not master factoring in a timely manner. Students will put off studying until they feel the need to get the job done. We also should remember that memory diminishes over time – that means the longer

students wait to re-take a test, the less likely they will be successful. This retake policy also burdens teachers who are now expected to continually create, run-off, administer, grade and record these retakes.

And, students can pass in assignments as late as they want and still receive full credit. Are these really the soft skills we want our students entering the workforce with? This again, especially in math, becomes a pacing issue. And if students are still failing, some principals are calling their teachers into the office suggesting the teacher is the problem. It's hard to move on in the natural sciences/math when students don't have the necessary knowledge. How are teachers expected to motivate students in a college prep curriculum while they being forced to treat students with a slackers' mentality?

Clearly teaching math is different than teaching other subjects. So much depends on prior knowledge. Within math, algebra is taught differently than geometry. Algebra teachers tend to use look for a pattern, make connections, make a table, examine a simpler case, and write an equation as strategies that form the basis for most of their instruction. Teachers of geometry tend to use: go back to the definition, draw a picture, examine a related problem, make connections, identify a sub goal, and work backward as their primary strategies.

Apparently some principals and assistant chiefs need assistance understanding how math is learned. Adding to the graduation game, the end-of-year exams students are required to pass to graduate have been suspended two years. Not having to pass an exam combined with this "everyone must pass" philosophy will result in a jump of the graduation rate that will come tumbling down as soon as someone looks behind the curtain or examines national test scores and compares those results against the state's graduation rate. If we are going to award diplomas using these practices, then we may as well give students who complete 5th grade a post-dated diploma.

So, by implementing these practices, does anyone really think our students will be able to compete globally?

I'm sure the business community who supports the Governor's "educational reforms" will appreciate these students' experiences of not getting work done on time or not doing it well has become acceptable in schools. These practices are sure to devalue a diploma. These are not lessons we should want to teach our students. We might try a simpler philosophy in working

with our students, *“expect more – get more”*.

Increasing student achievement will only occur when students have highly qualified, experienced teachers having decent working conditions with the materials, supplies and resources they need to help students succeed in their classrooms.

If an increase in graduation rate is not reflected in an increase in student achievement, then we are lying to the students.