# **What problem with grading does this article identify?**

**What are the implications of this problem on student learning?**

**Give one solution to this problem in your own words.**

# **Easy grades equate to failing grads**

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Some metro Atlanta public high schools that don’t grade rigorously produce more graduates lacking the basic English and math skills needed for college, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has found.

Many graduates of those high schools are sent to freshmen remedial classes to learn what high school didn’t teach them. As many as a third or more college-bound graduates from some high schools need the extra instruction.

Problems with classroom grading came to light in a February state study that showed some high schools regularly awarded good marks to students who failed state tests in the same subject.

The AJC found that metro high schools where classroom grading appeared lax or out-of-step with state standards tended to have higher rates of students who took remedial classes. And at dozens of high schools, most graduates who received the B average needed for a state HOPE scholarship lost it in college after a few years.

Unprepared high-school graduates are a growing problem for the public university system, where remedial students are concentrated in two-year colleges.

Statewide, the remedial rate has climbed to 1 in 4 first-year students after dropping in the 1990s, said Chancellor Erroll Davis Jr. of the University System of Georgia. The cost to the system: $25 million a year.

Students such as Brandon Curry, 20, a graduate of Redan High in DeKalb County, said they were surprised to learn decent high school grades don’t always translate into college success.

“English was my strongest subject,” he said after a remedial reading class earlier this spring at Georgia Perimeter College in Clarkston. “But when I came to college, I was like, ‘Whoa.’

“I’m on this level,” he said, motioning to about knee-level. “And I’m supposed to be up here,” he said, raising his hand above his chest.

In some cases, students wrestle with basic reading comprehension, said Karen Duncan, an assistant reading professor at Perimeter.

“It’s abysmal,” she said. “We’ve got students in there who may be on the fifth- or sixth-grade level.”

The newspaper analyzed the most recent data available on graduates from 12 metro Atlanta districts who attended public colleges. The AJC compared the percentage of schools’ college-bound graduates who took remedial classes, the number that lost their HOPE scholarship, and the state study suggesting some high schools could be inflating classroom grades.

The data showed:

» For 30 of 103 metro Atlanta high schools, more than 1 in 3 of their graduates took remedial classes as freshmen in the 2007-2008 school year. At seven of those schools, at least half did.

» At 44 metro high schools, half or more HOPE scholars who began college in 2002 and remained enrolled lost the grant within four years. At a dozen of those schools, 70 percent or more did.

» In one district, Atlanta, 86 percent of the more than 200 students who entered the state’s two-year colleges in the fall of 2007 needed remedial classes. Within that group, 29 of 37 HOPE scholars needed remedial help.

However clear the problem may be to college professors, it is not one most educators in local school systems are eager to talk about. And the question of who is responsible leads to more than one answer. The classroom teacher, the principal and the school district are all under pressure to tout student successes, not failures. State education and university system officials have a role, too, yet it can be far removed from individual classrooms.

State School Superintendent Kathy Cox said Georgia is making policy changes that demand more from high school students. But she said it could be several more years before the rate of students who need remedial help falls. “For too long, we’ve kowtowed to the low expectations,” she said.

An overhaul of high school curriculum, more accountability, and changes in graduation requirements and high school course options should improve college performance, Cox said. She declined to specify when the state would be able to assess whether its reforms, which have been phased in since 2005, had succeeded.

Spokesmen for the Atlanta and DeKalb school districts issued written statements in response to questions from the newspaper about their remedial rates, which were the highest in metro Atlanta.

In an e-mail, DeKalb spokesman Dale Davis said the district encourages all schools to teach and grade rigorously. Teachers are supposed to teach the state standards and use benchmark tests to check whether students are learning what they should.

Atlanta spokesman Joe Manguno said the district believes changes it has made, such as creating smaller schools within schools and improving instruction, will over time help students perform better.

A spokesman for Clayton County, whose rate was also high, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Principals at 10 high schools with high remedial rates either did not return a phone call or referred questions to a district spokesman.

Ultimately, high schools are responsible for monitoring how their graduates do after leaving, said Patrick Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in California. But to prepare students well, he said, schools need guidance from colleges and solid teacher training programs.

“It’s a little bit of everybody that’s responsible,” he said. “It doesn’t mean no one’s accountable, but it means you have to break it up into pieces and figure out where the system is breaking down.”

Educators in other states are also struggling to raise high school standards to meet college and career expectations in a world where the labor market demands increasing academic skills from job-seekers.

For Georgia, where SAT and ACT scores as well as college graduation rates trail the nation’s, the problem is pressing. Chancellor Davis said the university system’s success hinges on how well K-12 schools prepare their students.

Classroom grading grew controversial after the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement released its study this year showing a gap between high school students’ class grades and their scores on state standardized tests – known as End of Course Tests – in the same subject.

To some, the study suggested grade inflation remains a problem in certain high schools and school districts. Even with new reforms arriving each fall, some high school teachers complain about a culture they say discourages rigorous teaching and grading.

Several current teachers said they could not agree to have their name published along with their concerns because they feared for their jobs. Their complaints echoed recent blog posts and e-mails from other teachers.

They said that some schools bar teachers from giving “zeroes” — or even failing grades — for work never submitted, let students retake classes without penalty, and punish teachers who fail too many students. They said administrators pressure them to pass students who put little or no effort into learning because of fears that the students will drop out.

Dropouts pull down a schools’ graduation rate, one of the measures used to determine whether a school has met federal standards set out in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Ann Robinson, a former high school science teacher in Cobb and Paulding counties, said friends of hers who still teach told her they believe the federal law has forced them to lower standards.

“They don’t like passing the kids who aren’t doing the work,” she said. “But the administrators will say, ‘If you don’t do this, you’ll be out of a job. We’ll find someone who will.’”

Now an adjunct science professor for the University of West Georgia, Robinson said some of her students didn’t pick up adequate study skills or knowledge in high school. They memorized enough math to graduate, for example, but can’t solve simple algebra problems.

“Speed is distance divided by time,” she said. “I say, ‘Find the distance,’ and they say, ‘You can’t do that.’”

Some students at Georgia Perimeter said high school teachers pushed them along despite gaps.

Curry, the graduate of Redan High in DeKalb, said that when he struggled in high school math, one teacher offered him an easy opportunity for extra credit.

“My teacher was like, ‘I know you want to graduate, so if you just do this one project, you can pass,’” he said. He did. He ended up in remedial math, too.

Jenai Felder, 19, who is also taking remedial reading, said most of her teachers at the public Mount Zion High in Clayton County didn’t require much to earn passing grades. One teacher even gave the class the answers to test questions regularly, she said.

The exception was an economics teacher who was tough but fair, she said.

“We really appreciated we were actually learning stuff,” Felder said. “The grades weren’t just given to us.”

Redan High’s principal referred questions to spokesman Davis, whose statement of response did not mention Redan.

Calls to present and past Mount Zion principals were not returned.

Cox, who taught social studies in Fayette County schools, said she discovered in the classroom that going easy on students doesn’t help them succeed. But she also said teachers at times misunderstand what administrators are trying to accomplish when they question harsh grading.

“Teachers are misinterpreting a lot of what these principals are trying to do,” she said. “These principals are trying to get teachers to grade based on the standards.”

If a child goofs off for part of the semester, then shapes up later, for instance, what’s most important is that he or she can do work up to state standards, Cox said.

The AJC’s analysis suggested a possible link between less rigorous grading and high rates of graduates in remedial classes for both metro schools and districts. The Atlanta, DeKalb and Clayton systems, for instance, were high in both remedial rates and measures showing students’ classroom grades were much better than their scores on the related End of Course Tests. Those standardized tests, given in eight subjects, measure how well students know the state curriculum.

The same connection appeared for some high schools.

At Cedar Grove High in DeKalb, for instance, 60 percent of public college-bound graduates needed remedial help as freshmen in 2007. When the high school’s students had taken economics, 2 percent failed the course. But 57 percent failed the economics End of Course Test.

At Washington High in Atlanta, 52 percent of graduates needed remedial help in college. Only 0.4 percent of students failed economics, but 63 percent failed the economics state test.

A call to Cedar Grove’s principal was not returned. Washington’s principal said he could not speak without permission from the district spokesman, whose statement did not mention the school.

While differences existed among schools within districts, Gwinnett and Cobb schools appeared to have more rigorous classroom grading and lower rates of graduates with remedial needs.

At one school with a low remediation rate of 15 percent, East Paulding High, Assistant Principal Misty Cooksey said the school has switched from traditional grading to the standards-based grading Cox cited, which gives students more chances to catch up during the school year.

Some teachers are still struggling with the change, she said, but most have embraced it. Ultimately, the school lets teachers have the final say on whether students pass, she said.

“We try very hard not to put any pressure on our teachers,” Cooksey said.

In recent years, high-profile reforms such as rewriting high school diploma and curriculum standards aimed to raise Georgia students’ capacity for college or career work. Despite some schools’ struggles, the state is a leader in developing a reform agenda to improve college readiness, said David Spence, president of the Southern Regional Education Board.

“Moving a big state like this is a tremendous challenge,” he said.

The goal is to eventually have graduation requirements stringent enough that all students who earn a high school diploma have the right skills to continue their education if they choose to, said university system Vice Chancellor Lynne Weisenbach. Her office works to improve Georgia students’ readiness for college or careers through efforts such as teacher training.

“Simply graduating from high school for most students isn’t going to be sufficient for careers in a 21st century economy that really provide meaningful employment,” she said.

Yet while policy leaders in higher education and the public school system are working together, teachers at both levels communicate far less often, said spokesman Tim Callahan, whose 75,000-member Professional Association of Georgia Educators is the state’s largest teacher’s group. As a result, changes that need to happen in the classroom sometimes don’t, he said.

Data make it clear which schools and students are having a hard time, he said.

“This isn’t rocket science,” he said. “We know who the people are. What’s keeping us from getting together?”

Faculties need to look at which kids are failing, where gaps in curriculum exist, which teaching styles work and whether expectations for college prep are realistic, he said.

Georgia has long given lip-service to having all education levels collaborate, Callahan said, but “at the grassroots, it’s not translating to the kind of common sense sit-downs that I’m envisioning.”

Parent Mark Eldred of Coweta County said the schools’ impulse to move children along who can’t do the work affected his son early. Now a seventh grader, he failed the math standardized Criterion Referenced Competency Test in fifth grade.

“We said, ‘Listen, let’s hold him back,’” Eldred said. “They were like, ‘No, that’s not possible, he’s a good kid.’”

Eldred was frustrated to see his son never bring home report card grades lower than a 70, despite receiving “F’s” and 30s on homework assignments. “He didn’t get the grade he earned, and I don’t think that’s right,” he said.

The 13-year-old is still having difficulty. And high school is just around the corner.

“If my kid’s failing, I need to know he’s failing,” Eldred said. “At the end of the day, it’s going to make things worse, not better.”

Staff writer Gayle White contributed to this report.