



NEW SKILLS

New approach means more accurate grading system



Staff photo/Dennis Friend

Students in an Abraham Lincoln High School classroom listen to a presentation by guest speakers from Google. Report cards in the school district now list not only academic scores, but also include an ungraded assessment of employability skills.

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The Council Bluffs school district has begun listing “employability skills” on report cards issued to middle-school and high-school students.

Corey Vorthmann, district supervisor of secondary education, said the concept isn’t new, but the approach is new.

The employability score reflects classroom behavior, Vorthmann said.

Employability skills are expectations in the community and in the workplace, Vorthmann said, “and expectations have to be taught. Our community sends us their very best kids every day, and our job is to send them home a little bit better prepared every day.”

Previously, behavior could become part of a student’s grade at elementary school level. The old approach might have been called “deportment” in earlier times. Usually, those considerations were eliminated at the middle and high-school level.

However, a student who participated in class and seemed “well-behaved, kind to others and compliant” might have been able to get a better grade even if he or she did not meet all required proficiency standards.

In this new approach, we designed a way to give students and parents feedback in coursework separately from behavior,” Vorthmann said.

In other words, academic performance counts toward such things as a grade point average, but participation in class or ability to get along with others no longer affects the grade.

The employability score measures a separate set of skills. It will not affect a student’s grade point average (GPA), credit earned or class rank.

“Behavior’s not included in the letter grade, but we provide guidance,” Vorthmann said.

In a note sent to parents, the district said “This separate report of scores is designed to help communicate important 21st Century skills. These scores provide feedback to your student in order to help them develop life skills.”

Vorthmann and other district officials describe the “employability rubric” as an assessment of student work habits that help or hinder classroom or workplace performance. The rubric, essentially a score sheet, considers four skills and attributes: Participation, work completion, behavior and working with others.

Students receive scores on a scale of 0-4, so a 4 would mean the student has demonstrated mastery in the skill and a 0 would mean the student is not meeting the minimum standard.

Although it’s not part of the student’s grade, “It’s everybody’s job to help the student develop better skills along with self-image and self-esteem. If he’s not working well with others, we have to teach that skill,” Vorthmann said. Vorthmann asked parents to “Help us partner with you to teach those skills at home.”

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SKILLS/From Page 1A

Teacher Bob Hansen said, "I've had parents ask about this. It's a good thing. It's also a tool for students to monitor their own behavior."

Rob Krabbe is a parent who said he finds the employability scores helpful.

"I use them as another tool in assessing my children's performance. In the past you would have to rely on a teacher comment as a supplement to the grade, and now it is much more specific. We are now able to sit down and not only talk about the grade and how that might be improved but also talk about the behavior aspect of the classroom experience as well," Krabbe said.

"Teacher Bart Witte said most of his conversations have been with students.

"They ask, 'How would my employers grade this?' The conversations with the kids are serious. These are things

employers look at."

Krabbe's daughter, Abraham Lincoln High School junior Elizabeth Krabbe, 17, believes the employability skills scores will be helpful for students, parents and teachers.

"I am able to sit down with my parents and they know how teachers feel I am doing . . . Even though the employability scores are not graded, I believe we should address them more in school," Elizabeth said.

"I feel if we addressed the scores in a way that shows their importance once we get out of high school and into the workplace, it will be even more helpful. As a student I think a lot of people, even me, could use tips on how to improve so bringing the non-graded scores into the classroom would be very helpful. With teachers addressing the employability scores in class, I believe there

would be an improvement in classroom behavior," Elizabeth said.

Vorthmann and Ann Mausbach, the executive director of curriculum and instruction, worked with a district grading committee to develop the employability assessment. The district recommends students and parents treat the scores like academic grades.

"Your child now has two important scores to help you understand their progress in school. The academic grade reflects achievement, the employability score reflects behavior," Mausbach said.

Vorthmann and Mausbach said research has shown that both student achievement and student behavior improves dramatically when grades are reported separately from behavior.

"As with any new initiative, change is difficult. We haven't had a lot of feedback from par-

ents, since this is still in its infancy," Vorthmann said.

However, "almost all the research says to separate the grades for academic mastery and grades for behavior. They're both important. We're trying to help the students perform well in both areas," district Superintendent Martha Bruckner said.

Vorthmann said the feedback from teachers, parents and students will be important, since "The idea is to provide ways to improve. Data is great, but if it's not turned into something useful or meaningful, it's just data."

The employability numbers eventually may show up in district transcripts.

"We're trying to communicate with parents, students and teachers that this is more than just a number on a report card," Hansen said.