

Remaking the Grade: A District's Quest for Equitable Homework Policy¹

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Located across the Potomac from Washington, D.C., the Arlington Public Schools in Virginia faced a challenge. As a high-performing district so close to D.C., APS was sought after by families looking for quality public schools. And for many students, the schools delivered a quality education.² But some students found themselves left behind. To help close this gap, in 2020-2021 APS convened a working group with seven members to center equity in their five-year review of policies specific to homework and grading. In November of 2021, the working group released its draft policy to the schools. Among the key recommendations for grades 6-12: no grading of homework, no late penalties for homework, no extra credit assignments, and unlimited redos and retakes.³

A firestorm quickly followed. Within days, several teachers at Wakefield High School anonymously issued a statement condemning the proposal. They argued that, if adopted, these modifications to homework policy would cause a “decline of high expectations and rigor” and that the all-important “accountability piece of the learning process” would exist “in theory only.”⁴ The proposal made local and then national news when Jay Matthews, education columnist for the *The Washington Post*, characterized the proposal as a “catastrophe” and the anonymous Wakefield educators as “smart teachers fighting a dumb plan.” Rather than fostering equity, Matthews argued, abolishing grades on homework would “hurt the neediest kids.”⁵

A Heterogeneous District Seeking Equity

While Arlington was known for its highly-educated, middle-class population,⁶ it was not a homogenous community. Low-income families and families of color tended to be disproportionately clustered in South Arlington, south of Route 50 bisecting the city. By some measures, their students were doing well. For example, Wakefield High, which served many students of color and low-income students,⁷ was ranked in the top two percent of schools nationally, as measured by AP and IB participation.⁸ Indeed, across the district, 94.4% of economically disadvantaged students graduated on time in 2021.⁹ Jay Matthews of the *Post* used his column more than once to praise the district for “chang[ing] the lives of impoverished students.”¹⁰ However, these overall data obscured a significant academic achievement gap—or what Gloria Ladson-Billings termed “education debt.”¹¹ In Arlington, many students were not in fact achieving at the levels these statistics would suggest. “We are not educating Black and Brown kids,” argued Symone Walker, Vice President of the Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee (ASEAC), Executive Committee Member of the Arlington NAACP, and Co-Chair of the NAACP Education Committee. Walker had data to support her assertions. For example, on state tests in 2018-19, only 72% of Black students and 66% of Hispanic students in grades 3-8 were proficient in reading, compared to 94% of White students; only 54% of students with disabilities were proficient.¹² While Arlington boasted strong results for students overall, those results were not equally shared by traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

Some work had already been done in the district to address these disparities. In 2017, for example, Principal Lori Wiggins had noticed a disproportionate number of students of color at the lowest end of the grading scale at Gunston Middle School, which served a diverse population in South Arlington.¹³ At that time, Dr. Wiggins initiated a staff-wide study of the school's grading practices. As a result, Gunston

joined a number of schools in the district that had adopted standards-based grading. In 2020, APS' Chief Academic Officer (CAO) Bridget Loft invited Dr. Wiggins to join the new working group that would examine the district's homework and grading policy. The working group also included two other school principals, Dr. Erin Russo and Tony Hall; two other district administrators, Sarah Putnam and Tyrone Byrd; and English teacher Kelly Dillon. According to a presentation the group made to the school board in October 2021, equitable grading practices in Arlington should be "accurate," "bias-resistant," and "motivational."¹⁴ The new grading policy would "provide guardrails for our teachers so that we're clear that all students have similar consistent experiences when it comes to grading," according to the superintendent.¹⁵ The new homework policy specifically would help ensure that grades "reflect student achievement and not student behavior,"¹⁶ since teacher perceptions of student behavior can be impacted by implicit bias.¹⁷

One month later, in November 2021, the working group released its draft policy to the schools. The proposal identified four key recommendations to make homework and grading practices more equitable, three of which struck some as quite radical: (1) *no grading of homework*, as students "are less likely to take risks when they fear they will be graded down for making a mistake and more likely to cheat or copy when homework is graded"; (2) *no late penalties for homework*, as these "lead to inaccurate grades, as they reflect student behavior, not achievement", and "lead to biased grades, penalizing students with learning differences and fewer resources"; and (3) *unlimited retakes and redos*, which would "reduce pressure on students to constantly be at their best, motivate students to continue learning by offering redemption, and increase rigor by insisting that all students achieve mastery rather than accept failure."¹⁸ In making these recommendations, APS joined other districts from Massachusetts to California that were considering eliminating homework grades, including Marlborough,¹⁹ Los Angeles, Sacramento,²⁰ and San Diego.²¹

Whose Vision of Equity?

While the proposal's advocates and critics all agreed that APS' achievement gap for Black, Brown, and low-income students needed fixing, they disagreed about whether the new homework policy was the right solution. District leaders deemed the existing homework policy "so broad that it encourages inequitable grading practices" through "a lack of consistency."²² Thus students in different classrooms could earn the same grades for vastly different performances, even within the same subject. "How is that equitable for students?"²³ wondered Dr. Wiggins. By setting consistent standards for ungraded homework, the district sought to create a new, equitable policy that would benefit all students. But critics argued that this consistency actually worked against equity goals, leaving no room for individual cases. A middle school teacher argued that removing consequences for late work would "take away structure from the kids who need structure."²⁴ One Wakefield teacher worried that under the new policy teachers "would very quickly lose a lot of students who need an incentive to practice."²⁵ Indeed, some feared the new policy would exacerbate the challenges teachers already faced in reintroducing students to structures and routines after the disruptions caused by COVID-19. Moreover, the consistency of the new policy felt more like a constraint to some. One teacher deemed the revised policy "a creativity crusher."²⁶

Beyond establishing consistency, district leaders also believed the new policy would particularly benefit low-income and other historically marginalized students. When teachers grade students' homework for timeliness, Bridget Loft explained, "We're also grading the capacity of their environment at home."²⁷ While some students had parents at home to monitor their assignments, other students lacked even a quiet space to complete their work. Moreover, some students had jobs or took care of siblings after school, which reduced their time for homework. In the current policy, district leaders saw "bias towards school-independent kids," alongside the policy's failure "to recognize that our kids have very different

home experiences.”²⁸ By eliminating late penalties, they hoped that students whose home lives made homework completion more challenging would no longer be penalized for those circumstances.

However, others questioned whether the new policy would actually benefit the students it was designed to serve. While abolishing late penalties might boost the grades of students who struggled to complete their work, it would not give them time, space, or resources to get their assignments done. Plus, some teachers who had already abolished homework grades and late penalties when their schools shifted to standards-based grading reported “a drop in the quantity of formative work that’s been handed in.”²⁹ Would the new policy make it any easier for students without a quiet workspace at home to complete assignments on time? Would equitable policy instead do better to require that assignments be doable “without support at home,” as one district administrator wondered?³⁰ Others wondered: while the policy was designed to benefit low-income students, how much input from low-income families went into its creation? “If we are searching for equity in our educational system,” said John Stewart, a Wakefield teacher who didn’t sign the open letter, “then I want to hear the voices of parents whose students do not have access to tutors and free time at home or quiet spaces to do schoolwork. But it’s not the voices of those parents that we get to hear.”³¹ While the district aimed to promote equity, the reasoning behind the new policy seemed rooted in a deficit view of low-income families as compared to middle-class families. Did the new policy perpetuate prevailing assumptions about the forms of family support that were valuable to school? Or did it simply attempt to level the playing field given the reality that some APS students lacked the resources that their more privileged peers enjoyed?

Other parents questioned whether a revised homework policy was the best vehicle for tackling inequity. For Symone Walker of the NAACP, equity concerns in APS had nothing to do with homework, but rather were rooted in more serious systemic issues. Inequities in the district, she argued, have to do with “the quality of instruction” and supports that students might not be receiving, particularly students of color and students with disabilities. “Through a prolonged practice of social promotion and failing up,” Ms. Walker argued in the local paper, “APS has a sordid history of graduating generations of Black students who are functionally illiterate.”³² For Ms. Walker, Arlington’s achievement gap “is not a homework issue—it’s a preparation issue.”³³ Would the new homework policy be an important step toward addressing systemic inequities? Or was it simply a distraction from larger problems?

Different groups in the district also clashed on the issue of accountability. Some parents and teachers questioned whether abolishing grades and late penalties for homework would leave students unprepared for the demands of higher education and the workplace, where there are consequences for unfinished work. “If you don’t allow kids to live the reality they’re going to face as they get older,” one parent explained, “you’re just going to delay the inevitable.”³⁴ There were also concerns that some parents would simply fill that accountability gap, requiring their children to complete assignments on time despite the new policy, while students without those structures at home would find themselves at a disadvantage. “Such results are anything but equitable,” the Wakefield teachers argued in their letter. “Conversely, they offer our most needy students reduced probability of preparing for and realizing post-secondary opportunities.” Advocates of the new policy, however, pointed out that preparing students for the demands of higher education and the workplace didn’t necessitate replicating those demands. “Our job is not to bootstrap our kids to be ready for college,” Ms. Loft argued. “Our job is to teach adolescents and to recognize the wide spectrum of readiness and executive functioning skills that are in front of us, and to accommodate them accordingly.”

In addition to questioning the new policy’s efficacy for meeting equity goals, critics felt frustrated by the lack of input from key constituencies in its creation. In particular, teachers felt the policy was part of a long line of decisions in which they had little say. “We’re at a particularly challenging moment with teacher morale,” one teacher noted. “And consistently Arlington has not been great about listening to

teachers or asking for input when making these big changes.”³⁵ Teachers who were already experiencing challenges with standards-based grading in their schools reported feeling “demoralized” that the district had not worked out the logistics of tracking student work completion without homework grades. Their students felt “overwhelmed” trying to keep track of their assignments, and the “backlog of work” was a struggle for teachers and students alike.³⁶ Parents, meanwhile, had their own concerns. One school board member reported that even after three years of standards-based grading at his child’s school, he still struggled to understand their academic progress: “If I don’t see a grade, I don’t understand what ‘approaching mastery’ means.”³⁷ Would the new policy stymie parents wishing to track their children’s performance?

The new policy’s advocates and critics were also divided on the very purpose of homework, with the distinction between academic and socioemotional skills at the center of the debate. The district’s procedures policy stated that grades “should reflect student achievement and not student behavior.” Bridget Loft argued that “punitive obstacles,” such as giving students zeroes for missing a deadline, “run counter to the motivation that’s required to work towards proficiency.” Indeed, some research has found motivation for doing homework diminishes and cheating increases when students perceive the teacher as controlling rather than supportive of their autonomy and responsibility.³⁸ Tellingly, students report completing homework assignments they find meaningless solely because homework completion counts in their final grades. These students may seem engaged in their schoolwork, but their negative affect around homework suggests they are not deeply absorbed in learning.³⁹

In their open letter, Wakefield’s teachers countered that in addition to developing knowledge and understanding, homework helps students develop “organizational, time and stress management skills and grow as responsible, civically engaged, and considerate young adults.” Eliminating grading and late penalties would likely undermine the development of critical “work habits (timely attendance, work completion, positive participation in group activities) that make for successful careers.”⁴⁰ These teachers’ concerns are supported by some research. Homework that is graded or otherwise carefully monitored by teachers enhances conscientiousness and achievement, especially in less attentive students.⁴¹ And students report that they appreciate graded homework because it provides them with clear and frank feedback.⁴² Similarly, students are more likely to adopt homework management strategies when they know teachers will grade their homework assignments.⁴³

What Happens Now?

Given the intense pushback from teachers, the district adopted a new approach that would give educators latitude around homework and grading practices. As of April 2022, the office was working on a second draft of the proposal, which would allow teachers to continue grading homework assignments because, as Sarah Putnam, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, put it, “people aren’t in a place yet to think about shifting their practice.” A goal for 2022-2023 was to encourage principals and instructional lead teachers to consider new approaches to grading practices as a whole: “Try something different, and see what it does for kids.”⁴⁴

The debate about homework reverberating through Arlington can also be heard in communities across the country. In December 2021, for example, nearly 900 people in La Grange, Illinois, signed a petition to reinstate graded homework after a local high school changed its policy to make homework reflect “practice,” not “achievement.”⁴⁵ It seems clear that the controversy around homework and its uses will continue to be contested by educators, parents, and academics. Given the competing concerns, how should the Arlington County School Board, and leaders in other communities, write equitable homework policy? Whose input should determine what these policies say? And how will schools know that their policies are serving marginalized and disadvantaged students well?

Endnotes

1. We conducted ten interviews for this case study, with district leaders, parents, and educators. Some of the people we interviewed wished to remain anonymous. In these cases, we have identified them only by their role in the district.
2. Districtwide, in 2018-19, 84% of students in grades 3-8 scored proficient on statewide reading exams, compared to 76% across the state. In math, 87% of students scored proficient, compared to 82% of students statewide. See: <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-2> (After the disruption of the pandemic, APS did see some falling scores for standardized tests. To give a more accurate reflection of achievement in the district, this case uses scores from before 2020.) In 2020, the average SAT score for seniors was 1198, compared to 1116 statewide and 1051 nationwide. # And in 2021, 94.4% of seniors graduated on time. See: <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-4>
3. The working group relied heavily on Joe Feldman's 2019 book *Grading for Equity*, which argues that students' grades should be tied to achievement, not behavior. In our interviews with educators and district leaders, many mentioned the strong influence that Feldman's work had in the district.
4. For the full text of the Wakefield teachers' letter, see: <https://wjla.com/news/crisis-in-the-classrooms/va-teachers-push-back-on-equity-proposal-to-abolish-some-grades-late-homework-penalties>
5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/26/homework-grading-curve-arlington-assignments/>
6. In 2022, the median household income in the district was around \$120,000, and 75% of residents held at least a bachelor's degree. See: <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/APSQuickFacts-update0122.pdf>
7. At Wakefield, around 41% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch (See: <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SNPMonthlyEligibilityReport.pdf>) and 76% of students were non-White (See <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/virginia/districts/arlington-county-public-schools/wakefield-high-20363>)
8. Also, in 2018, 56 percent of Wakefield's graduating seniors passed at least one AP final exam, nearly three times the national average. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/26/homework-grading-curve-arlington-assignments/>
9. <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-4>
10. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/26/homework-grading-curve-arlington-assignments/>
11. In her influential 2006 address to the AERA, Dr. Ladson-Billings pushed back against the widespread focus on an "achievement gap" for students of color and English learners, arguing that educators, scholars, and policy makers should instead consider the education debt owed to these students, which has been accumulating for generations. https://thrive.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/From%20the%20Achievement%20Gap%20to%20the%20Education%20Debt_Understanding%20Achievement%20in%20US%20Schools.pdf
12. <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-2> It's also useful to note that districtwide, the on-time graduation rate for Hispanic students was only 85.5% in 2021, compared to 98.4% for White students. See: <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-4>.
13. 37.4% Hispanic, 30.5% White, 18.6% Black, 7.6% Asian, and 5.7% representing multiple races. Almost one-third of its students are economically disadvantaged. See: <https://schoolquality.virginia.gov/schools/gunston-middle#fndtn-desktopTabs-enrollment>
14. The group's definition of equitable grading drew heavily on Joe Feldman's *Grading for Equity* (2019), published by Corwin. For the presentation to the board, see: [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/C7XLVB557627/\\$file/101421%20School%20Board%20Wor%20Session%20-%20Grading%20%26%20Homework.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/C7XLVB557627/$file/101421%20School%20Board%20Wor%20Session%20-%20Grading%20%26%20Homework.pdf).
15. Dr. Francisco Durán, school board meeting on October 19, 2021. You can find a recording of the livestream from this meeting here: <https://www.apsva.us/school-board-meetings/school-board-work-sessions-meetings/>
16. APS PIP I-7.2.3.34 PIP-2, 11/29/21. This language directly echoes Feldman's language in his book.

17. Staats, C. (2014). *Implicit racial bias and school discipline disparities: Exploring the connection*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.
18. These four quotations from a presentation to the school board on October 19, 2021.
[https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/C7XLVB557627/\\$file/101421%20School%20Board%20Work%20Session%20-%20Grading%20%26%20Homework.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/C7XLVB557627/$file/101421%20School%20Board%20Work%20Session%20-%20Grading%20%26%20Homework.pdf)
19. To read about controversy surrounding homework policy in Marlborough, MA, see:
<https://www.metrowestdailynews.com/story/news/education/2021/10/15/homework-not-graded-under-new-marlborough-school-policy/8435608002/>
20. For homework policy in Los Angeles and Sacramento, see:
<https://edsources.org/2021/why-some-california-school-districts-are-changing-how-students-earn-grades/664226>
21.
<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-08/as-ds-and-fs-soar-schools-ditch-inequitable-grade-systems>
22. Personal interview with Bridget Loft
23. Personal interview
24. Personal interview
25. Personal interview with John Stewart
26. Personal interview
27. Personal interview.
28. Personal interview with Bridget Loft
29. Personal interview
30. Personal interview with Sarah Putnam
31. Personal interview
32. See Ms. Walker's full column here:
<https://www.arlnow.com/2021/04/16/ed-talk-the-miseducation-of-black-students-in-arlington/>
33. Personal interview with Symone Walker
34. Personal interview
35. Personal interview
36. Personal interview
37. David Priddy, school board meeting on October 19, 2021. You can find a recording of the livestream from this meeting here: <https://www.apsva.us/school-board-meetings/school-board-work-sessions-meetings/>
38. Trautwein, U. and O. Ludtke (2009). "Predicting homework motivation and homework effort in six school subjects: The role of person and family characteristics, classroom factors, and school track." *Learning and Instruction* 19: 243-258.
39. Galloway, M., et al. (2013). "Nonacademic effects of homework in privileged, high-performing high schools." *The Journal of Experimental Education* 81(4): 490-510.
40. For the full text of the Wakefield teachers' letter, see:
<https://wjla.com/news/crisis-in-the-classrooms/va-teachers-push-back-on-equity-proposal-to-abolish-some-grades-late-homework-penalties>
41. Trautwein, U. and O. Ludtke (2007). "Students' self-reported effort and time on homework in six school subjects: Between student differences and within student variation." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99(2): 432-444.
42. Peterson, E. R. and S. E. Irving (2008). "Secondary school students' conceptions of assessment and feedback." *Learning and Instruction* 18(3): 238-250.
43. Xu, J. and H. Wu (2013). "Self-regulation of homework behavior: Homework management at the secondary school level." *Journal of Educational Research* 106(1): 1-13. See also Núñez, J. C., et al. (2015). "Teachers' feedback on homework, homework-related Behaviors, and academic achievement." *The Journal of Educational Research* 108(3): 204-216.
44. Personal interview with Sarah Putnam
45. <https://patch.com/illinois/lagrange/lths-grading-policy-hundreds-object-changes>