

Chalkboard

By

Dr. Randy C. Barrett, Superintendent
Gentry Public Schools

If you are a parent, it may make your child smile when you tell them you read an article where the superintendent was describing some homework the principals had been assigned. It may make them smile the second time when they discover the principals' assignment also involved the teachers having an assignment also.

The assignment was simple enough. The principals were asked to provide a list of all the students who had made a "D" or "F" at the first mid-nine weeks grade period. Attempting to be a good teacher, I e-mailed each principal with a K-12 roster of names on a Microsoft Excel[®] spreadsheet. The sheet had two columns where information was to be provided. The heading of one of the blank columns said, "Why does the teacher think the student made a "D" or an "F"?" The second was "What will the teacher do to intervene?" Notice the appropriate focus on the teacher; that is where the grades originate.

When I gave this assignment in my last Monday morning staff meeting, I expected, as an old veteran teacher and ex-principal myself, to hear some mild groans. You will know what I am referring if you will recall your own school days when you were assigned some seemingly odious task for homework. However, my expectations were proven to be wrong. The principals instantly saw the value of the assignment.

In fact, the assignment was only an expanded version of something principals and teachers already do. Even the information to be provided was a task normally done to a lesser degree anyway.

The "new" part was to compile the information on a spreadsheet so that the data could be analyzed to see if any campus wide or district wide patterns for student failure existed. I promised to do some homework of my own and look for district wide patterns.

There were approximately 500 instances where a student made a "D" or "F" on his or her report card. That number seems alarming until you consider that 1269 students receive an average of six grades per report card. That means that of the 7614 grades recorded, 6.56% were less than passing. That means conversely that 93.43 % were passing grades. While 93% success is good, the mission of the school is that no child fails any subject area. Thus, anything less than 100% success means intervention.

A quick look at the reasons why teachers believed students made a “D” or “F” produced three clear and one “catch all” category. The three major reasons given were “missing assignments”, “homework”; and “low test scores”. The “catch all” category had a multiplicity of reasons.

Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the reasons were missing assignments. Sixteen percent (16%) was homework problems. Thirty-eight (38%) dealt with low-test scores. The remaining answers were of the assorted variety including such reasons as language difficulty, not paying attention, cannot stay on task, lack of foundation skills, excessive absenteeism, and so forth. I note that I was the one categorizing the responses and it would have been easy to lump “missing assignments” and “homework” into the same group. If so, almost half the reasons for failure in the district had to do with work not completed outside the classroom. If that was a fair assessment, the other half of the reasons dealt more with students experiencing academic difficulty in the classroom.

A question to be asked is what is it that is causing the homework and other assignments not to be completed. Is it because the students cannot perform the work, or do not take time to do the work, or do not have time to do the work, or what? It will be difficult to determine a proper intervention until the cause is identified for each child. Obviously different interventions would be required for the child who watches T.V. instead of doing homework to the child who needs glasses to the child who just doesn’t understand.

Some of the teacher listed interventions were giving students extra time to complete assignments, conference with student, conference with parent, daily reminders, encouragement, after-school tutoring, require students to make up work at lunch or before school, modify assignments, and conference with other staff members.

At this Monday’s meeting the principals and I will review their homework for the purpose of determining what, if any, interventions will be required on their part. Again, this school year our school staff is maintaining their collective focus on student achievement.