

# Failure is Not an Option

By Louise Brown

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She has skipped 30 classes in a row and hasn't handed in an assignment all term, but the principal wants her teacher to cut this Grade 12 student some slack.

"He told me, 'Look, the student says she's finally willing to hand in all her work, so I want you to mark it and don't take off points for being late,'" sighs the English teacher at a west Toronto high school.

"Whatever happened to deadlines? We bend over so far for kids these days, it's a joke."

With the school year almost done, the pressure for marks is on – and not just for students, but also teachers.

A growing chorus of educators say Queen's Park's new drive to keep kids in school to 18 is pushing them to coddle students with inflated marks, too many second, third and fourth chances and too few flunking grades, adding to an already lofty sense of entitlement.

In a new survey of nearly 1,000 high school teachers in Durham Region, four out of 10 say they feel principals push them to drop standards so more students will pass. One in four feels pressured not to give an F.

Yet some say it's time to bring back the F-word – Fail – to a school system that has shunned it for a generation.

"Everyone wants what's best for the student, but teachers are asking, 'Have we gone too far?'" says math teacher Ken Coran, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

"I can't say every principal is pushing teachers to raise marks, but the buzz we're hearing in staff rooms is, 'Are we making it too easy to get a credit?'"

Worried about the true value or integrity of school credits, a new province-wide teachers' work group on "credit integrity" has called for sweeping steps to lock in standards, including letting teachers give a "zero," something discouraged by the province in lieu of giving teens another chance.

The group is planning a symposium this fall to address mounting teacher complaints, and will meet June 19 with the Ontario Principals' Council to discuss the hot-button issue.

"One teacher ran into a student last summer who thanked her for a final mark of 50," said Oshawa math teacher Rudy Schmidt, "but the teacher was confused because she had given the girl 30-something. The principal had raised it to a pass.

"Many schools want teachers to keep failure rates below 10 per cent, but how is that possible when kids skip more than 15 classes with no consequence?"

Following the murder of Jordan Manners at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate, complaints about inflated marks have been swept into a larger debate about the shifting power balance between students and teachers.

Coran says many teachers feel increasingly powerless to keep schools safe because the office won't back them up on report cards or behaviour. Indeed, Ontario's new focus is to help at-risk kids, not crack the whip over their heads.

The McGuinty government has spent \$1.3 billion on a smorgasbord of new supports, from summer literacy camps and free tutoring to "credit recovery" programs that let teens who fail a subject redo just the parts they flubbed, not the whole course.

While kids still fail courses, especially Grade 9 math, schools throw sinking students more and more remedial lifelines, and few are ever held back in grade school. Last year, for example, the York Region District School Board failed only six Grade 8 students out of 8,064 across the board. The year before that? One.

Together with Ontario's near-ban on deducting marks for late work – brought in by the Harris government so marks reflect what you know, not how you work – even some students ask if schools dole out too much help.

"It's not fair to good kids when no one gets marks off for being late," complained one Grade 10 student who handed in a final project by the May 3 deadline, only to be told to take it back because no one else was ready. "I don't think it's a good way to teach us to meet deadlines at work."

While Education Minister Kathleen Wynne says this kinder, more thoughtful approach to schooling helps more children learn, others charge it can drag standards down.

"Whatever happened to being allowed to fail?" asks Durham Region music teacher Jeff Pighin, who says he is one of a vanishing breed of teachers who fails several students each year in his Grade 9 music course and hands out exactly the marks he believes students deserve.

"I gave one student 8 per cent on his interim report card because he hadn't done a single assignment," said Pighin. Yet rather than let the student fail, the school is looking for alternate ways for the teen to earn this arts credit, he says.

"No wonder kids come to school thinking they're getting a free ride. There's some sense that you just can't fail," said Pighin. "We hand out credits like tic tacs."

Toronto student trustee Nick Kennedy thinks Ontario is right to let teachers deduct marks for lateness only as a last resort, and mark tardiness on a report card under "learning skills" instead.

"It's good because it doesn't confuse your work habits with your knowledge," says the Grade 12 student at North Toronto Collegiate. "School isn't there to teach you all life's lessons."

Jon Cowans disagrees. The Pickering English teacher has called for the return of the F as an educational form of tough love, and says the theory that 'failure is not an option' produces students who simply aren't prepared to move on.

"I call it Credits Lite, the whole byzantine apparatus teachers must go through before you're allowed to fail a student." Principals ask how often a teacher called parents before failing the student, he says, and whether the teacher modified the work enough.

"But I teach a class of students, not just one. I'm not a tutor. If I work only with some students, the others will be climbing the wall," said Cowans. "You don't dare give a student a mark between 45 and 49 because the school will push you to raise it to 50."

On the other hand, does failing work? Research by Queen's University shows students who fail more than one Grade 9 course are more likely to drop out.

"I've been teaching long enough to remember those 15-year-old boys who were held back with 12-year-olds. It was horrible for their self-esteem," recalls Lynn Sharratt, York Region's curriculum superintendent. "I don't think we knew what to do with them."

York schools lead Ontario's remediation wave. The four weakest readers in every Grade 1 class get 12 to 20 weeks of daily tutoring through a program called Reading Recovery. And the board tops the province in reading and writing scores.

Nancy Vail agrees that failing students fails to help kids. "The teacher used to say, 'Look, I taught it, you just didn't learn it. My job's done: you try again,'" said Vail, instructional coordinator for the Peel District School Board.

"Now we know if it didn't work the first time, more of the same won't work. The onus is on the educator to find a way to reach every student."

With what we now know about the different ways people learn – auditory or visual? male versus female? left brain/right brain? – Education Minister Wynne says there's pedagogical bedrock under this whole new focus on help. She points to the 6,000 more high school graduates every year as proof.

"It's true, we're going to extraordinary measures to help kids who are at risk, but I won't apologize for that. It's what we need to do to reach all kids who have been struggling on the fringes." Wynne says she's open to teachers' suggestions about ensuring the value of a high school diploma, but said she trusts they're not lowering standards to help students at risk.

To principal Blair Hilts, president of the Ontario Principals' Council, it's simple: "There's no such thing as giving a student too much help."

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