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Vital tests offer more than scores

Award system for some Salem-Keizer students who pass state tests earns both praise and criticism from educators

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North Salem High School Assistant Principal Martina Mangan interrupted an English class Monday — something she does every Monday morning.

"We have a winner in this room today," Mangan said, announcing that Maria Gasca passed the state reading test and could chose a prize.

"I thought it was going to be you," a student said as others applauded for Gasca. Grinning, the sophomore walked to the front and chose a Starbucks gift certificate.

The new awards at North Salem are among the ways many Salem-Keizer schools are starting to reward or publically recognize students who do well on the high-stakes tests — as staffers try to motivate and encourage students to take the standardized tests seriously. It also becomes part of the school's culture.

Yet some say rewarding or recognizing students for their performance on state tests can put too much emphasis on those tests, creating stress and anxiety among students and staffers, and influence a school's culture away from learning for the sake of learning.

Such rewards and recognitions are by-products of the No Child Left Behind law and the importance of state tests, educators say. The federal law qualifies schools based on how many students pass state tests.

"We want our kids to pass the test," Richmond Elementary School Principal Lizi Aguilar-Nelson said. "It's very hard not to put a lot of pressure and weight on that."

In Oregon more and more students are expected to pass state tests until 100 percent are passing in 2014. If not enough students pass each year, and if the school also receives federal funding for low-income students, the school can receive progressively harsher sanctions until it is forced to restructure.

At Richmond, such rewards are a positive experience, Aguilar-Nelson said.

Students receive charms for passing state tests, as well as charms for good behavior or attendance. Many students wear them to school, showing them off on necklaces.

"Even the ones that are not getting it, they are clapping," Aguilar-Nelson said of when she presents awards to each classroom. "They're just happy for the others, and I'm encouraging them to do their best."

It's very positive."

For about four years, Hammond Elementary School has given out symbolic dog tags to students who have passed or showed improvement on reading, writing, math or science subject tests.

"We have seen it make a difference with the scores," Hammond Principal Greg Cole said. "It adds the element of adding an extrinsic reward, something that they can claim as an accomplishment, just like you would as a ribbon if you finished the race."

Ninety percent of students at Hammond passed state math tests and 89 percent passed state reading tests, according to state data. That's increased from 67 percent passing math and 69 percent passing reading in 2005-06 school year.

And students are proud of the dog tags, Cole said. They wear them to school, at home, or even hang them up on a wall at home.

Creating school culture

At it's heart, a school's culture — the shared values and beliefs, which are often ingrained and exist unconsciously — can help give a school its identity or set standards or expectations.

Based on a school's vision, values and assumptions about education and student learning, a school's culture can be seen through its traditions, symbols and ceremonies.

Rewarding students for a passing score on their standardized state tests becomes a part of the culture, something parents and staffers should recognize and consider, said Brett Jones, an associate professor at Virginia Tech, who has researched student motivation.

"What kind of culture of students are we creating — and that's a bigger philosophical question," he said. "What impact will this have on students down the road, and how curious and creative they are, as opposed to doing well on the test?"

Rewarding and recognizing students for passing tests places importance on those tests, he said.

"The good thing is it places the focus on academics, as opposed to football, which already has a lot of emphasis on it," Jones said. "Are they really excited about academics and learning, or are they excited about passing a standardized test?"

He said that publically rewarding students can have both positive and negative effects, and it might depend on what works for individual students or teachers.

"If good students do well, it gives them more validation for their academic abilities," he said. "The poor academic students that aren't doing well, if they fail at this and they don't get the help they need... it would negatively affect their motivation."

Salem-Keizer teachers union president Jane Killefer voiced concerns, saying a rewarding or tracking system of who passed state tests can add tension among staffers and among students.

"We are always concerned, always concerned, about when kids are pitted against kids or staff pitted against staff," Killefer said. "That's not good for morale."

Students know when their names are attached to something, and if they cannot deliver, she said.

"We had a school where they had these great big thermometers outside their door of whether the teachers' kids passed the state assessment," she said. "That's just terrible."

The bigger issue, she said, is student achievement and how to define it — and like many who are critical of the No Child Left Behind law, she said standardized tests are not the best way to measure the many components of education.

"Why are we judging kids based upon one frame of a total length of film," Killefer said. "There isn't a one-size-fits-all of the whole thing."

Yet principals interviewed for this story said the intention of such rewards or recognition is not to create competition, but to create a positive incentive for students to take the state subject tests seriously.

"It didn't seem to feel so much as a competition among the kids for who was going to be better than other kids," Four Corners Elementary School Principal Phil Decker said of a recognition program he started while principal at Swegle Elementary School.

"It seemed liked the reward gave them something to earn," he said.

Taking tests seriously

At North Salem, Mangan worries that some students don't fully understand the gravity of the tests.

"We have had kids that just randomly clicked on any of the answers to get done and out of the way, not even trying and reading the text," she said. "You can't pass a test if you're only randomly clicking."

In high school, the pressure to pass the subject tests increases. Not only is there the No Child Left Behind law, but there are new graduation requirements that require students to demonstrate proficiency in certain subject areas, commonly by passing state subject tests.

If they fail multiple times — they can take it three times a year up through their senior year — they must submit a work sample that shows proficiency in order to graduate, she said.

The raffle drawing is one more reason for a student to try their best, and it serves as a weekly reminder for students that passing the test is important.

And so every Monday she draws two names of students who passed a test, goes to their classroom, and offers them a small prize: Candy bars or donated gift certificates to places like coffee shops, pizza places or movie theaters.

"If we know something is at stake, we will try harder," she said.

Athletes are routinely recognized at schools, she said. So why not students for their academic

achievement?

"Our kids were raised in a system where in elementary school, they got student of the month, they got certificates," Mangan said. "Research shows that success breeds more success."

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