

Finals exemption researched

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

After studying the current finals exemption policy for Holyoke students in grades 7-12, the District Accountability Advisory Committee (DAAC) made a recommendation to the Re-1J School Board at the May 1 board meeting.

Current policy in Holyoke School District Re-1J for students in grades 7-12 offers incentives for students to exempt out of final exams the last couple days of each semester. Incentives include the areas of standardized test grades, attendance and good behavior.

Julie Elliott represented the DAAC and said the committee majority recommends all students take final exams and the same incentive criteria be applied to a reward of days off school at a different time than during final tests.

All committee members agreed on the criteria, but staff members on the DAAC favored leaving the finals exemption in its current form with minor revisions on the last two days of school.

The board requested administration and the leadership team do some additional work with the recommendation in the near future for a policy proposal for the 2012-13 school year.

Discussions in the DAAC's four meetings since January brought forward different points of view including those of staff, students and parents.

Elliott emphasized it was clear in the discussions that the DAAC would have a split opinion among staff and parents which will increase the difficulty of any policy decision.

From a brief survey of teachers, Elliott said staff members feel the finals exemption incentives should remain, while committee members feel final tests are important to prepare students for college.

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Supt. Bret Miles said he was pleased with the effort and information gathered by the DAAC. They just came to a point that was a difference of opinion.

Board member Kim Killin pointed out some “finals” are still being given but not on the last two days of school. The tests or assignments on the last days are not necessarily at the level of a comprehensive final or a final project.

She added students highly value the incentive to get out of school early the end of the semester. She favors changing the name and dropping “finals” from the phrasing, as she doesn’t feel it’s truly an exemption from finals.

Linda Jelden emphasized it’s important to understand why the criteria was selected for exemption. She said the standardized tests have to be taken seriously.

“We definitely want to take some time on this and get it right,” said Kris Camblin.

Elliott shared additional comments from the DAAC. When implementing a finals schedule where all students take finals, there needs to be adequate time for teachers to grade a quality exam prior to semester break or the end of the school year.

Comments by DAAC members and parents they surveyed indicate using MAPS and TCAP scores as part of the criteria for finals exemption raise the greatest amount of concern. Using these scores as part of some other time-off incentive does not raise the same concerns.

The DAAC agreed any decision should acknowledge staff’s input on the criteria and have an understanding it will take time for staff to implement procedures associated with any new system.

Elliott concluded by noting the DAAC is willing to work with staff and the board to develop a time-off incentive plan that’s not tied to finals.

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Timeline concerns were addressed, in that policies for 2012-13 need to be in place by the first meeting in June in order to be printed in the year's handbook.

Ideally, it would be nice to have the policy resolved for the June 5 meeting, said Supt. Miles. While meeting the deadline of the handbook printing is ideal, Miles emphasized it's not the end-all.

If another meeting or two is needed this summer to finalize the finals exemption policy, Miles said the handbook could simply say something along the line of, "Finals exemption policy will be available the first day of school in the office" or "is on the school website."

Staff, student and parent input will continue to be considered as the administration and leadership team move toward a finals exemption policy recommendation.

School climate survey results reported

In other reports at last week's school board meeting, Tiffany Watson represented the Standard of Excellence team and reported on the 2012 staff/student/parent school climate survey.

She said survey results indicate the district is moving in the right direction, with both buildings receiving an overall grade in the A-B range. Overall, she said the survey was very positive.

One of the biggest favorable increases over the past three years was adequate technology in the district. There was also positive support for the homework centers helping students master skills.

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Several areas were cited for concern or more study. They include students feeling safe at school, acceptance of each other and discipline consistency.

It was suggested this information be used to start conversation in next year's roundtable discussions with students.

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