

Finals exemption focus changes to achievement incentive program

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Holyoke School District's incentive program for students in grades 7-12 exempting out of the last couple days of each semester has been recommended to operate largely as it has in the past.

Current revised criteria in the areas of grade point average, behavior/attendance and achievement tests is recommended to be used for determining exemption.

To help eliminate some confusion, the recommendation also includes a title change to "Semester Achievement Incentive Program" instead of "Finals Exemption."

The district leadership team, with the support of administration, made the recommendation at the June 5 school board meeting.

After a directive from the board retreat in January, the district accountability advisory committee (DAAC) studied the finals exemption policy and presented its conclusion at the May 1 board meeting.

Representing the DAAC, Julie Elliott said the committee majority recommended 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.

However, while all DAAC members agreed on the criteria, Elliott said there was a split opinion among staff and parents on the committee.

Staff members favored leaving the finals exemption in its current form with minor revisions. Other DAAC members said final tests are important to prepare students for college.

The effort of the DAAC was sincerely appreciated, and it was noted they just came to a point that involved a difference of opinion.

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From there, the board sent the work back to the district leadership team. To prepare information, a 7-12 sub-committee was convened to review the history and recommendation, as well as to develop some talking points for the leadership team to consider.

Throughout the discussion at board, administrative, staff, DAAC and committee levels, several issues were considered to be worthy of discussion and perhaps adjustments.

These issues covered four areas: fairness, quality education, motivation and balancing the input and desired outcomes of staff, parents, students and policy.

Success of this program depends upon people understanding it is fair to all students. A significant leadership team discussion focused on “fair” as a matter of the criteria being achievable. It was determined all students do have the opportunity to achieve the incentive.

Also addressed was the concern that if students continually exempt out of finals, they may be at a disadvantage when they’re required to take final exams in college.

It was learned many college bound students are taking finals or exit exams that are comprehensive. They just don’t happen to be taken on the last two days of the semester.

The argument was also given that students who exempt from a final exam have already demonstrated they meet the expectations of the school and are prepared. They’ve shown their ability to succeed on a high stakes test as part of the criteria.

While there is no hard data on whether this program motivates students, all groups have agreed the incentive program has been working in the fact students try to achieve the criteria and frequently talk about it.

Balancing the diverse perspectives to make a policy decision is difficult. The leadership team pointed out it’s to be expected to find parents, students and staff may have different opinions.

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However, even within each of these groups there are differing opinions.

One area has had consistent support and that's staff support for the criteria.

The leadership team acknowledged this unified front should be given the highest consideration. They pointed out the staff sees the impact on kids and has their own personal risk at stake when student achievement results come under the new teacher effectiveness law in Colorado.

Providing an understanding of some internal adjustments is intended to demonstrate a commitment from staff to internalize the comments brought to life throughout this process.

“Next Steps” identified

Five “Next Steps” were identified, involving each group.

—The DAAC needs an update on the leadership team’s recommendation. Additionally, the administration needs to thank the DAAC for the important role in this process even if a general consensus was not reached.

—The JR/SR High staff will need to create changes to handbooks and other materials to communicate the expectations of the Semester Academic Incentive Program when students arrive in August.

—The JR/SR High will put in place their processes for types of finals allowed and how they will be monitored by the principal to increase the consistency of implementation throughout the building.

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—The administration will need to review the psychometrics of the cuts scores and growth expectations for NWEA and how they align with district expectations.

—The board needs to determine if it will review the definition of an excused and an unexcused absence, which was initiated by a member at the January retreat.

Leadership team members expressed appreciation that the board chose to refer this topic back to a staff committee for final comment.

Members noted this opportunity demonstrates the trust the board has in the staff and the value the board puts in professional judgment of the people who are in the classroom on a daily basis.

Board members expressed support for the recommendation the leadership team has come forward with and appreciates all conversations that led to the recommendation.

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