



## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

May 2022

Authors: Hannah Pallotta & Marie A. Sell, Ph.D.

### **Key Findings**

#### **Survey Results**

- 78% of principals mentioned that having a school-wide policy or culture around grading was a top factor in reducing failing grades from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3.
- 44% of principals cited students having redo opportunities as a contributing factor in reducing failing grades.
- 44% also stated that communication between school administration, teachers, students, and families is important. Communication can include meetings, frequently run grade reports, and sending home notes.
- A majority of principals (56%) indicated that a common challenge is reframing the mindset around failing from student accountability to setting students up for success and mastery over the content.

#### **Focus Group**

- All principals commented that adherence to the District's grading policy was a key factor in reducing student failure rates over the year. Principals and administrators monitored teacher grade books regularly to ensure that grades were entered on time throughout each grading period.
- Principals and other administrative staff used grade book grades among other student data (e.g., universal screener or formative assessment scores) to identify struggling or failing students and to create ways to support these students.
- Teachers were supported through PD and other strategies to ensure they were familiar with the expectations of the grading protocol and that they understood the importance of recording grades on time.
- Principals noted that students miss work for different reasons, so their schools engaged in multiple strategies to support student success. These strategies include accepting missed assignments late, assigning make up work, setting up times during school for grade recovery work, reteaching content and standards, and linking students to tutoring opportunities.
- Communicating with families was identified by principals as a key component of student success. Schools viewed entering grades in the grade book as a form of communication. Additionally, schools used multiple communication methods (email, messaging, monthly calendar, family meetings, phone calls, etc.) to share school information on grades and grading.
- Schools noted that relationships with students, families, and the community were important in being able to support students to success.

### **Introduction**

Beating the Odds is a series of reports prepared by the Research and Performance Management department. These reports focus on schools that have improved in a certain area. For this Beating the Odds report, we focus on schools that have reduced their failing grade percentage from Quarter 1 (Q1) to Quarter 3 (Q3) of the 2021-22 school year. We selected District-managed, in-person schools that had at least a 4 percentage point decrease in failing grades from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3. Ten schools met these criteria and were selected to participate. Figure 1 below shows the school category breakdown of the schools that had this decrease. Table 1 lists the schools with their enrollments. Once the schools were selected, a survey was sent to these schools' principals to learn more about



## Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

how this decrease occurred. Principals were also invited to a focus group where they could discuss this topic in more detail.

Figure 1.

School Categories included in Survey

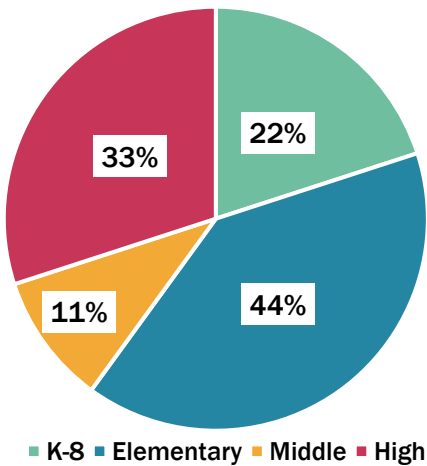


Table 1.

School	Current Enrollment
Cummings School	296
E.E. Jeter School	352
Georgian Hills Middle School	322
Hamilton High School	603
Hickory Ridge Elementary School	648
Manassas High School	309
Peabody Elementary School	311
Trezevant High School	451
William H. Brewster Elementary School	405
Winchester Elementary School	402

### Survey Results

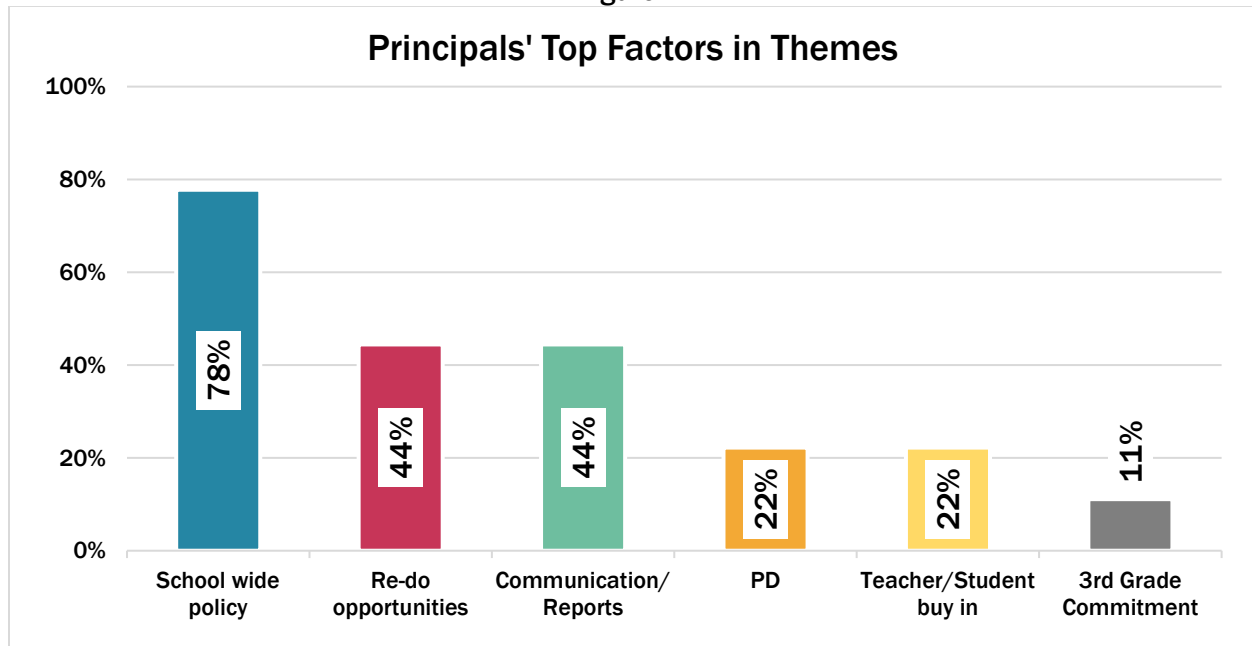
Nine of the school principals gave their response to the survey. Principals from these schools had an average of eight years of experience as a principal (median of six) and had an average of four years of experience at their current school (median of three). Two thirds of the principals had been at their current school for at least 50% of their careers as a principal.

Principals were asked to list the top two factors that helped their school reduce failing grades from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3. Figure 3 shows all of the themes mentioned by principals. As principals could note several things in their responses, the chart's values will exceed 100%. The most common theme was having a school-wide policy or culture in place; 78% of principals refer to this. Examples of culture or policy include having "a shared vision around 'failure is not an option,'" having a failure plan that teachers go through if a student is struggling, and having a school-wide grading policy using a rubric. Another common theme noted was allowing students to redo work if they got a failing grade or if they miss an assignment. Frequent communication was equally mentioned. One principal said their school runs bi-weekly failure reports. Others wrote that they have meetings with teachers to go over grades and another stated that family contact was vitally important.



## Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

Figure 2.



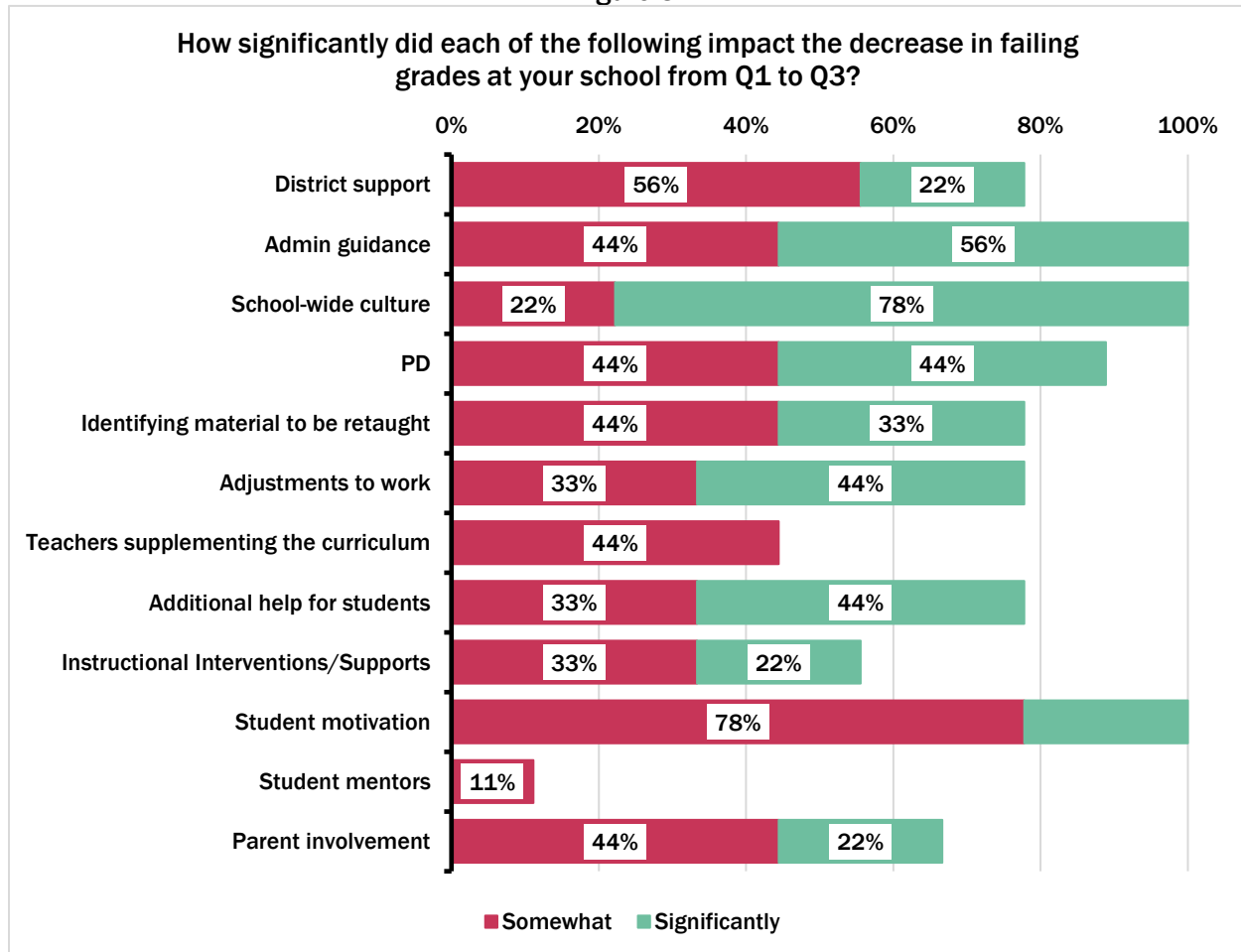
Principals were then given a list of factors that could have affected the reduction of failing grades from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3 and were asked to indicate how much they thought each impacted the process. All principals agreed that support/guidance from school administration, having a school-wide culture that emphasizes student success, and student motivation were either somewhat or significantly impactful. Two factors did not have majority of agreement that they were somewhat or significantly impactful on reducing failing grades between quarters: having student mentors (11% indicated it was somewhat impactful) and teachers supplementing the curriculum (44% indicated it was somewhat impactful). Figure 3 below shows all the factors and whether principals found them significantly or somewhat impactful on reducing failing grades.



## Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

Figure 3.



Five out of nine principals (56%) mentioned that their biggest challenge around ensuring students succeed was teacher mindset. They explained that teachers were accustomed to holding students accountable for missing work or scoring poorly on work. These principals explained that changing the mindset from holding students accountable to setting them up for success and mastery of the content was difficult but worthwhile.

Principals reported some ways to change this mindset included professional development and having regularly scheduled meetings with teachers to discuss grading practices and viewing their grade books, as well as running bi-weekly grading reports to see if any students have failing grades. This is to ensure that students and families are not blindsided by a failing grade at the end of the quarter. Consistent communication with families and students was stressed by some principals. A few principals mentioned having educational assistants pull students who needed extra help on content and that certain times of the week were set aside for re-teaching content.



## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

---

#### **Focus Group**

Principals from nine of the ten identified schools participated in the focus group. The topics and themes that emerged in the discussion are presented in this section. The overarching theme that was woven throughout the focus group centered on the need to identify struggling or failing students and provide them the support necessary for them to succeed.

#### **Topic 1: Adhering to the District's Grading Policy or Other Grading Protocols**

##### **Theme 1: Adherence to the Grading Policy Supports Teacher Accountability**

Multiple schools mentioned adjusting their grading practices to ensure strict adherence to the District's grading policy. These practices included purposeful and regular reviews of grade books with teachers to ensure assessment and assignment grades were entered in a timely manner.

"...we did biweekly reports where we would meet with teachers around their grading of their students. So we would actually have the teachers open up their grade books with an administrator and they would go through...things such as how many assignments do you have in? How often have you been putting in the assignments? ... How many students are failing currently? And sometimes just sitting down and having those questions you learn a lot of information and what's happening in those rooms in regards to the grading."

"We do two things. One is I do two grade book checks throughout each quarter and that grade book check is like a checkpoint...to see if you have the appropriate number of grades according to the protocol and then sending the teachers [that] feedback."

"Teachers have to also make sure that they put in the grades. So the grades are monitored in Power Teacher biweekly by the leadership team. If teachers are not having the number of grades, we do send them information on making sure those grades are put in by the end of the week."

##### **Theme 2: Adherence to the Grading Policy Helps Identify Struggling and Failing Students**

Additionally, regular grade book reviews were used to identify struggling and failing students to know where to offer extra supports. One school stated they "made sure that we tracked when students had low grades...." Another stated:

"...we took a look at the policy and shared out some possible strategies...we can use to reduce our failure rate.... I sat down with my admin team.... We came up with a plan of action for our teachers. We thought of ways we could, first, keep an eye on who was failing and the failure rates. So one of this things I did...[was have] the counselor to generate biweekly grading reports to keep an eye on it."

##### **Theme 3: Some Schools Created School-Wide Grading Practices Unique to Their Schools**

Some schools created grading practices unique to the school to support struggling or failing students. One school shifted from grading assessments on a 100-point scale to using a four-point scale that focuses on levels of student mastery and aligns with the TCAP achievement levels: 4=advanced, 3=proficient, 2=approaching, 1=below. The four values are then each assigned a standard percentage that feeds into the students' grades: "So that two is worth 80%, that three is worth 90%, and that four is worth 100." Another school uses the strategy that "zeros aren't permitted" on



## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

assignments with the expectation that students will be allowed the opportunity to submit missed work.

A second common grading practice schools relied on routinely was to use forms to document various parts of the grading process. One school created a grade book audit form that was shared with teachers and included the expectations for the number of grades that should be entered into their grade books each week. Another school requires teacher to complete forms of students earning Ds or Fs on progress reports or report cards that includes assessment information and the strategies they are using to support these students.

#### **Theme 4: Monitoring Grade Books and Tracking Students Must be Done Frequently**

Most schools that emphasized the grading protocol also discussed how regular and frequent grade book checks were vital to the process of reducing student failure rates so that students and teachers had a chance to work on areas of concern continually throughout the semester. A couple of schools noted that they reviewed grade books biweekly, whereas others checked a couple of weeks prior to the progress reports and report cards being issued. One school stated that information about missing assignments and grade repair work was sent home weekly with every student in a Wednesday folder, including steps needed to be taken by students to redo or submit failed or missed assignments. The continuous identification of struggling and failing students allowed for timely, targeted assistance to be provided.

#### **Topic 2: The Importance of Supporting Teachers and Ensuring Understanding**

##### **Theme 1: Broadening Perspective to Focus on Grading Protocol**

Schools indicated that shifting the focus to stricter adherence to the grading protocol included asking teachers to do things in ways in which they were not necessarily familiar. Several principals mentioned the need to work with their teachers to help them shift their mindset on grading and to create teacher buy-in for an emphasis on grading protocols. Principals not only helped teachers understand the benefits of recording assignment and assessment grades in a timely manner, communicating with parents of struggling or failing students, and offering makeup opportunities for missed or failed work, they also pointed out the consequences of not following the grading policy. One principal pointed out:

“So by really [ensuring] that the teachers understood that in a way we had been unfair to the students, so to speak, because we had a couple of teachers who weren’t consistently entering grades and so students didn’t know where they stood. So by realizing that, [teachers] were much more willing to provide the support that [students] need going into the next quarter.”

##### **Theme 2: Strategies to Promote Understanding**

Schools tended to examine student data in depth as a means of promoting teacher understanding of student failures. A couple of principals specifically mentioned that student data were discussed during PLC meetings and that outcomes of the discussions included identifying struggling or failing students, identifying content areas and standards for reteaching, and identifying the resources needed to bridge the gaps between instruction and student mastery.



## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

A second strategy focused on providing teacher PD to establish common knowledge on certain topics related to student success. One school commented that at the beginning of each year, all teachers participated in training on the District's grading policy. Other teacher PD that was noted as being particularly helpful included training on the Teacher Toolbox connected to iReady, and training on the various resources available and which resources to use given different scenarios of student progress or achievement. The resources training was particularly helpful for novice teachers who may not be familiar with all the options available as they begin their teaching careers.

#### **Topic 3: Additional Supports and Opportunities for Students**

##### **Theme 1: Schools Emphasized Opportunities for Students to Submit Missing Work and Redo Failed Assignments or Assessments**

Virtually every principal stated that they provided ample opportunities for students to submit missing work or make up work and to redo failed work. As one principal noted, students miss submitting assignments for a variety of reasons, and the school's role is to give them every opportunity to make up the missing work. Through grade book review and other data points, schools were able to keep track of students needing extra support. In addition to accepting late assignments, schools provided opportunities in a variety of ways. One school used its weekly intervention and enrichment hour to have students work on grade recovery and other make up work. They also pulled students by grade level from support classes to work on assignments or assessments. Another school tried to connect students with tutoring opportunities both during the school day and after school. A third school sent home information on missing work, make up assignments, and redos on a weekly basis.

One school reviewed the District's Third Grade Commitment criteria with the teachers and families of students in Grades K-2. Teachers of K-2 students were then able to push for students to do their best on assignments and turn them in so they could accumulate the most points possible to feed into their report card grades. This strategy gave parents a sense of being able to control some aspect of the Third Grade Commitment criteria compared to other benchmarks.

"We could clearly show to parents how many points the students were earning and how critical it was for them to...have that grade. To make sure that they did the best that they could to earn those points just from their report card.... K through two teachers really amped up their push to make sure that kids are getting their assignments in just in case those scores were not high enough on those other benchmarks that we couldn't really control. So, I think for us [it] was just bringing it to awareness.... Here are some things we can control. And it gave parents more control and kids more control over their grades and that push to get the highest amount of points."

##### **Theme 2: Focus on Student Mastery**

Schools used the strategies described in the section above to make sure students earned available points; however, their overall focus was on student mastery of the material. One school identified standards students had not mastered and included them in the students' iReady work. This school also stated that their goal was for students to achieve at least 80% on grade recovery work. Another school stated it was important for students to do "the best that they could" so they had a good understanding of the material.





## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

Other schools used feedback from students or parents to help inform how to support failing students. For example, one school asked students why they got a failing grade on an assignment. If the students indicated they did not know how to do the work, teachers worked with them through reteaching. Another school talked to parents to get their sense of why students were not doing well. If the parents indicated that students are “just being lazy knowing they are going to get another chance,” the school worked with them to create a plan to complete their assignments on time. But if students were not able to understand the material, the school looked at the reasons a student might be struggling and worked toward subject mastery.

#### **Topic 4: The Importance of Communication**

Many of the schools indicated that continual communication with parents was an important aspect of student success, especially for struggling students. More than one principal mentioned that regularly entering grades in the grade book was a form of communication with students and parents.

“They need to be consistently entering assignments...on a weekly basis...because that’s a way of communicating.... You can’t wait for the interim, not having any grades and, all of a sudden, drop 10 grades in there and say, ‘hey, here’s how many your child is failing.’”

“We don’t want to just, at the end of nine weeks, put those grades in and the parents have no idea that their child is actually not passing the nine weeks.”

One principal noted the importance of reaching out to parents through multiple avenues and making sure parents were aware of the purpose of the communication.

“We thought we had communicated to our parents through our Wednesday folders, and the information we were sending home, and talking to parents that students had opportunities to redo their failed or missing assignments.... And we were noticing that even though teachers were sending home assignments to be redone, they weren’t necessarily getting redone. And what we did [was] we met with our parents, ...we sent out emails and messages and put it on our monthly calendar.... We put a definition on what does grade repair mean [in the weekly folders]. [We learned] that [parents] were looking at some of the papers like, ‘oh, my child got bad grades. Oh well, there’s nothing I can do about it.’ For some reason, parents just weren’t well informed.”

Some schools required teachers to document communications with parents and to notify principals of those communications.

“They also have to inform me if they’ve talked to the parent and submit a parent documentation [that] parents know that the students are needing more assessments and more grades to complete to actually have a passing grade.”

“Teachers had to show proof that they reached out to the parents and let them know that ‘hey, your child had these grade recovery assignments inside iReady, but your child did not complete it and, as a result, your child’s grade will be negatively impacted.’”





## **Beating the Odds: Reducing Student Failure Rate**

### **Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management**

---

#### **Topic 5: Additional Comments**

Principals made some additional observations about the reduction of student failure rates from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3. Two principals commented on student absenteeism challenges they faced:

“Earlier in the year we had a chronic absenteeism problem and so we wanted to make sure, as we were getting students back in the door, ...that parents were aware that we do care about the success of their students and that we would give them the opportunity to make up the work.”

“We noticed this school year, early on, that second grade had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism, which was a scare for us, [so] then we started having our Third Grade Commitment meetings.”

Additional comments centered around the impact of relationships and school culture:

“I’m dealing with a very experienced staff. I’m very fortunate that I have veterans who, not only have been at the school, but they’ve engaged with the community and many of my staff members actually live in the community.... It’s a situation where...we know who’s struggling, we know who needs help, we know their families, we know their circumstances.... For the most part, everybody knows everybody out here.... Retain your effective teachers. Retain your teachers who know about the community and school culture. That’s key.”

“First the children had to get back accustomed to being in class [after the pandemic], but with all of the celebrations and recognitions, that [was] relationship building with our children. The teachers build a relationship with children. [Then] the children want...to do well.”

Finally, schools commented on using incentives such as school dollars to purchase goodies from the school store or parent-participation lunches as motivating strategies to keep students engaged and striving for academic success.