

Falls City to bring back traditional grading system

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

FALLS CITY — A plan to bring back the traditional A-B-C-D-F grading system at Falls City High School was approved by the Falls City School Board on Thursday.

For the last several years, the school has used a system that awarded students with As, Bs, or Cs based on their performance.

Those not achieving at least a C were given an I, or incomplete, and given two weeks to bring their grade up before being assigned a failing grade.

No Ds were given, even though it would have been considered a passing grade that would allowed students to move on.

Removing Ds from the grading scale was part of a push toward proficiency grading, said Superintendent Jack Thompson.

He said school officials believed at the time that earning anything less than a C didn't show proficiency.

Stephanie McEwen, the



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Students at Falls City High School will be able to earn Ds again.

high school social studies teacher, and other teachers and school officials, say it hasn't been working.

"We are seeing just as many kids get Is as before,"

said Art Houghtaling, the elementary school principal.

McEwen said she's witnessed the frustration of students who just can't get to the C in a class. Without

using a name, she explained to the board the disappointment of one student.

"She tries really, really hard, works extremely hard. She does all of her work, all

of her homework," McEwen said. "She shows up before school and comes to my classroom to get extra help. She goes to her teacher to ask for help. She just can't make the C, but she doesn't deserve an I that turns into an F."

McEwen appealed to the board to end the experiment and bring back Ds. She and other high school teachers have been discussing a change for two years.

"It's students like her that we are thinking of," McEwen said. "You're giving someone who has a 59 percent in the class the same grade as someone who has a 2 percent in the class. That is a huge variance."

McEwen is afraid that some students will get so discouraged that they consider dropping out because they simply can't earn a passing grade in a class.

"We would rather them have that success, so maybe they would build their confidence," she said.

Board member Larry Sickles supported switching back to a traditional system.

He describes shunning D's as "an experiment that didn't work."

"In my mind, we do it immediately and bring that D back," Sickles said. "I can give a lot of examples of kids where a D instead of an F changes them."

Athletic Director Dennis Sickles said participation in sports was affected because the district's policy that stated all athletes had to be passing classes to play. That meant having all Cs or better.

"There are students who have fallen through the cracks," Dennis Sickles said. "Through no fault of anybody's, that has taken away their opportunity to participate in sports, which I think is a real detriment to them. What you are doing here is certainly the right thing to do."

The board voted to change the grading policy effective immediately.

Thompson will work with staff to update the sports participation policy to reflect the change.

School board looks for new ways to fund facility

By Jolene Guzman
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FALLS CITY — Having voters turn them down for the second time on a bond to build a new gym hasn't completely discouraged members of the Falls City School Board.

It does mean the board may have to consider other options for facility needs.

The board discussed the results of the Nov. 8 election on Thursday in which the district's \$2 million bond to build a multipurpose gym and cafeteria at Falls City Elementary School failed 297 yes votes to 329 no votes.

While the board de-

ferred serious talk about options until all members were present — directors Bob Young and Shane Castle were not at the meeting — those in attendance agreed doing nothing was not an option.

"We need to really brainstorm for what we can do to get a facility up there and not just throw our eggs in the bond basket," said board member Larry Sickles. "We have to come up with a way to do it."

Board chairwoman Jami Kidd suggested the district hold a work session to come up with a strategic plan that would include more ideas than a third run at a bond.

Falls City facilities bond wasn't the only one to suffer defeat. Central and Jefferson school districts also had voters say no. Falls City and Jefferson were on the list of districts slated to receive a matching grant from the state if the bonds passed. Central was the first on the waiting list.

Kidd said the failures, especially among school districts with high poverty rates, was disappointing.

"Now we have to figure out how we are going to provide those opportunities that we know our kids need in another way," Kidd said.

School officials said the district faces vocal opposi-

tion, and some information circulating among voters wasn't accurate.

Facilities Manager John Gilbert said he found out that one of the arguments against the bond was that the school wasn't using the space it has efficiently. He pointed to a line of desks in the board room at the high school, saying, next term, the space would have to be used as a full-time classroom, uprooting the school's music program.

"Music is going downstairs in the only storage (room) I have left," Gilbert said. "I have to give it up."

Superintendent Jack Thompson added the en-

rollment growth the district has seen is holding steady, with 186 students attending. The district had to split the seventh- and eighth-grade class, and may need to do that for other classes soon.

"We are growing and that is awesome, but with that, we are not where we were three years ago. We're maxed; the buildings are," Gilbert said. "That was a very frustrating thing to see on my side of the fence, the facilities side. When people started talking about how we are misusing our space. I'm thinking we are using some spaces for three or four different things."

Thompson said he's disappointed by the vote, but not out of hope. It only lost by 32 votes, he noted.

"I do not feel like this was a resounding no," he said.

Thompson stressed the need for more space still is a reality, but there is an additional cost to appealing to voters a third time. If the school were to try for the bond and grant in 2017 or after, the state would require a facilities audit, Thompson said. That could cost about \$10,000.

"If we decide to go out for it again, we may want to look at delaying a year so we can budget for the facilities audit," Thompson said.



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