

State audit faults Fairport schools

Grades changed without proper documentation

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A state audit released this week contended that five school districts, including the Fairport Central School District, showed a lack of oversight of computer grading systems and allowed student grade changes without proper documentation.

Fairport schools use an electronic grade book system where teachers input student grades, and district staff can monitor student performance, generate student report cards and maintain students' transcripts.

The State Comptroller's Office audit found that while the district generally used "lock-out" dates — deadlines when final grades are to be locked into the system — to restrict grade modifications during the audit period of July 2013 to mid-March 2015, staff modified some grades after lock-out dates without backing documentation.

About 2 percent of over 90,000 grade changes made by teachers during the audit period were made after lockout deadlines without proper approvals, according to the report.

Grade changes made by non-teachers after marking periods had closed were made without proper documentation, such as a "Grade Correction Form" given to the registrar, 70 percent of the time, the report stated.

These changes were sometimes made by district staff who had "heightened user" status in the district system, such as some guidance department and information technology staff. A total of 96,478 grade changes were made by teachers and support staff during the audit period.

Audit recommendations included tightening policy guidelines to maintain lock-out dates, track grade changes and corresponding documentation, and monitor users' classifications within the system.

In a release Tuesday, Fairport Superintendent Brett Provenzano noted that school districts have to define their own grading and reporting policies, as there are no New York State Education Department policies or regulations for those practices. The Comptroller's Office audited district grade systems as part of its oversight of districts' fiscal responsibility.

An official district response letter said the district would back policy changes to monitor what grade changes are made and when. The response noted that heightened user accounts are integral to district staff members' day-to-day operations and do not jeopardize the integrity of grading system controls. There are only 26 such accounts in a district of over 1,000 staff members, the letter said.

Out of over 90,000 grade changes made by teachers, 88,000 of those were actually initial grade entries, rather than modified ones, according to the response. The district contacted the system vendor to ensure these entries were accurately described.

Auditors targeted certain students related to district officials and their teachers in audit inquiries, rather than searching for irregularities in the data first, the letter argued.

The State Comptroller's Office responded to this complaint by saying they identified grade change data for "potentially high risk students and selected them for audit testing to determine whether they were appropriately authorized and documented." There were no findings about the grade changes of these students versus other students, according to the auditor's response.

Under state law, the district school board must prepare a corrective action plan, or CAP, that addresses the recommendations within 90 days of receiving the report. To the extent practicable, the implementation of the CAP must begin by the end of the next fiscal year. Several of the districts already had started implementing corrective action, the audit stated.

The audit examined computer grading systems in the Arlington, Elmira, Freeport and Saratoga Springs School Districts, as well as the Williamsville Central School District, which does not track or detail grade change history.

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State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli

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