

## Report confirms school credits complaints

**Students earned credits for repeating easy classes and laundering towels for sports team; special meeting to be held Tuesday to discuss findings and superintendent's 'status'**

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Students earning credit for washing towels, getting two credits in a class where other students receive just one and getting credit for courses they haven't taken are just some of the claims against the Collier County School District in a report released Wednesday.

The investigation, which was countywide, comes to an end some four months after some students and parents at Naples High School objected to the way the School District named the first half of Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

The investigation found that the district "failed to uniformly award credit to students taking courses paired with AP courses, and has instead awarded credit for alternative non-AP courses to some students, while awarding credit for lower level courses to other students doing the same work," according to the report.

The Collier County School Board hired Hinshaw and Culbertson, a national attorney firm based in Miami, to conduct an independent, objective investigation of the records, transcripts and other relevant data with respect to courses offered, credit awarded and the validity of the academic records produced by Collier County Public Schools.

The results, released Wednesday, weren't good.

"This is the worst report I have seen," School Board Chairman Steven Donovan said. "It goes to the heart of what is wrong in Collier County. It tells me that the rigor we want in our curriculum has been a lie."

The report indicates that some students were receiving different credit for taking the same course.

Since AP course credit can only be given for one semester and the School District requires students to take an AP course all year, the district splits the class into two semesters — an honors semester and an AP semester. School officials said this is done to ensure students are prepared for the AP exam and they don't have to take the test in May, five months after they might have completed a one-semester course.

Other students, who had exhausted credits in a particular course like weightlifting, were credited for courses like leadership development, peer tutoring or water sports when the content of the course continued to be weightlifting, according to the report.

"Some students even received credit for courses such as Leadership Development and Peer Tutoring even though these students were washing towels/carrying water for a sports team," according to the report.

"I think the integrity of our whole school system comes under attack," School Board member Richard Calabrese said. "This is about our kids and we are setting up our kids for failure. We are allowing kids to wash towels and receive academic credit. Who came up with the idea to do that?"

The report also indicates that the district added the term "honors" to course titles, despite the fact that the Florida Department of Education has not authorized a course title to include that designation. The district is allowed to add weight to the classes for the purpose of class rank provided they are paired with an AP course, but it cannot add the term "honors" to the class, according to the report.

The report found that the decision to make an exception in the district's policy or state mandate is usually made with the intent of helping a student. And while Hinshaw and Culbertson's report said it only happens occasionally, the report acknowledged that it could open the door for all students requesting an exception be made for them.

The report found that between the 2002-03 and 2006-07 school years, the School District gave 191 students in the eight high schools credit for courses that differed from the traditional classes paired with the AP course in the same subject matter. This includes 56 Immokalee High School students in a biology II class and 22 Naples High School students in a chemistry II class.

Superintendent Ray Baker said district officials were giving the report a thorough review.

"Our greatest area of concern is that students are receiving credit for courses when they are taking something else," he said. "We do not approve of practices like that."

Baker said district officials, including Assistant Superintendent Eric Williams, have had meetings

with the high school principals to ensure that the courses correspond to the instruction.

The parents also alleged that some counselors are more available and responsive to some students than to others and that some favored students and called them out of class to fill out college scholarship forms.

While Hinshaw and Culbertson's report indicates areas of improvement, "the current investigation did not result in any findings of serious misconduct on the part of the counselors."

Michelle Fernandez, whose son, Alex, originally complained about the classes, said she is happy the students' complaints were validated.

"I don't want my son to be the bad guy. He did the right thing. At least they are listening to us now," she said.

Fernandez said her son was told to take algebra, a class he took in middle school, over again by his counselor at Naples High to earn a better grade and boost his grade point average. The Hinshaw report found that some students who had taken classes in middle school were allowed to repeat to boost their grades.

"If they don't give him credit for that, we're OK with it," she said of the class. "It was wrong, but we did it because our counselor told us that is what we should do. I just want it to be right. I am not interested in people losing their jobs. I just want it made right."

Baker said he wanted to assure students, parents and community members that students are receiving a quality education in Collier County. He cited the district's recent review from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, which is the group responsible for giving the district its accreditation, as proof.

Donovan called a special meeting, to be held at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 31, to discuss the Hinshaw and Culbertson report. The meeting also will include a discussion about the "status of the superintendent," Donovan said.

"The School Board receives a report from the superintendent and it is his job to make sure the course descriptions are accurate before we send them to Tallahassee for review," Donovan said. "The fidelity of that report has been called into question."

Baker said he was open to a discussion and acknowledged that he is responsible to bring the course descriptions to the board.

"I think my board evaluations for the past couple of years speak for themselves," he said. "We are always going to have situations that need to be addressed, and I am open and willing to talk

about that.”

Baker said district officials need to finish reviewing the report and get some direction from the School Board before moving forward with a plan of action.

Board Vice Chairwoman Linda Abbott said she is concerned about how the district will address the issue before school starts Aug. 20.

“We have recognized the problem and we need to deal with it to make sure we are not continuing a practice that is not equitable for all students,” she said. “The fact is, this is an issue that should have been addressed from the beginning and we shouldn’t have let it get to this point.”

Baker said there probably will be nothing done retroactively to students’ transcripts.

“Our School Board attorney and the firm that prepared this report have not advocated going back and changing grades or credits,” he said.

The public is invited to the meeting, which will be held at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Administrative Center, 5775 Osceola Trail.

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