

Remaking the retake rules

by Justin Duffy
staff reporter

A student confidently saunters into the classroom after school. He's failed the last three tests in the past month, but he still has an A in the class. How is this possible? After the student settles in, the teacher hands him the culprit—a retake.

The Mounds View retake policy needs to be changed. The current system is unfair, discourages relearning and is easy to manipulate. Instead, Mounds View should use a policy of test corrections and limited retakes in an attempt to shift the focus from grades to learning.

According to the student handbook, Mounds View has a school-wide policy that provides for students in all courses to retake tests for up to full credit. However, this system is inherently flawed. Consider the following scenario: Student A scores 90 percent on a test while Student B scores 70 percent. Student A is happy with her score and does not retake the test. Student B completes relearning (and is able to study for an extra week) and receives a 95 percent on the retake. Did Student B really demonstrate that he understands the subject better than Student A? Or did he just take advantage of the system to gain more experience with the test material and extra study time?

Students can easily work around the current retake system. Some social studies classes such as AP U.S. History allow students to retake specific sections of a test. "I think that it is a good system because oftentimes kids will only do badly on one section of a test, so forcing them to retake the entire test would unfairly penalize them compared to other students who retake," said Justin Benolkin, social studies teacher. "Why should you be penalized for trying to relearn?" Although this policy seems logical, students can easily manipulate the system to their advantage. A student who is short on time could only study half of the sections for the original test and rely on the extra time provided with a retake to succeed on the other sections. Similarly, a student with multiple upcoming tests could decide to only study for one or two of the tests and take advantage of the retake policy to salvage their other scores. These habits will not lead to success in college, where retake policies are much stricter.

The student handbook also mandates that Mounds View teachers use the "second score" policy for all of their retakes. This means that when a student retakes a test, the score the student receives on the retake will be their final score, even if the retake score is lower than the original score. This policy is enforced to prevent

students from taking advantage of a "free" retake; without this rule, a student could retake tests without studying and not be penalized if they achieve a lower score. However, the second score policy is flawed because it actually discourages some students from relearning.

If a student receives an 85 percent on a test, they may wish to retake the test to achieve an A. However, with a relatively high score of 85 percent on the original test, the student may fear that he or she would score lower on the retake and thus not perform a retake and relearning. Supporters of the second score policy may argue that if a student has completed relearning, they should be confident that they will score higher on the retake. This is simply not the case. There is always risk in taking a test—a student might have an off day, make a silly mistake, or not understand a specific question. Therefore, students may choose to not relearn at all rather than relearn and risk scoring lower on a retake. If a retake is similar enough to the original exam whereby



illustration by Christina Mehrkens

a student could easily score higher just from taking the original exam, it is not an effective retake. The ability to memorize the structure of test answers does not demonstrate effective relearning.

A more effective plan for relearning would be to simply allow students to do test corrections for half credit on problems that they missed. With this policy, all students would have motivation to relearn any material they missed on the test. Students also wouldn't be able to game the system by relying on full-credit retakes. Physics teacher Matt Washenberger currently uses this policy for his AP Physics C class. "We like the half points back system because it encourages students to perform well on the first test without being too puni-

tive," said Washenberger. "Additionally, most students participate in the corrections which is an activity that allow students to reflect on what they did and did not know."

As mentioned before, there are a variety of reasons that could cause a student to have an abnormally poor score on a test. Half-credit test corrections can't save a bombed test score, and it seems unforgiving to drastically drop a student's grade because of one bad exam. Thus, it may be best to offer students the opportunity to retake one test for each class each semester. This policy would be more forgiving to students, but also prevent students from using multiple retakes to scrape by in a class without truly learning the material. Leah Higginbotham, math teacher, allows students to take a cumulative test each quarter, or "quarter-op," that replaces their worst test score from that quarter. "A retake on every single unit test allows students to see the material on the test and study only that specific material for the retake," said Higginbotham. "A quarter-op still gives students the option to relearn, but students are accountable for a better understanding of more material. Because the quarter-op only replaces one test, students are still incentivized to perform well on the first assessment."

Overall, the Mounds View retake policy needs to be changed because it is unfair, easily manipulated, and discourages relearning. The best way to remedy this problem would be to allow students to perform thorough test corrections for partial credit as relearning. Students should also be given the chance to relearn and retake an extremely limited number of tests in each class to account for any uncharacteristically poor scores. This system would also make it significantly harder for students to manipulate the system in their favor. However, the ideal solution to the problem of retakes would be to shift Mounds View's culture from focusing on learning rather than points.

Many students lack the intrinsic motivation to learn or care primarily about grades. Additionally, teachers don't always teach material well the first time or create effective relearning assignments and retakes. No one wants to do extra work, and most people will take the easy way out. "Both teachers and students will try to game any system where the primary motivation is points. In a way, all grades are a way of gaming the system if they are not truly measuring learning," said Benolkin. "Ultimately, the important thing is whether students actually learn."

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