

Principal defends color-coded IDs; expert 'horrified'

By [SCOTT MARTINDALE](#)

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An educational psychologist who specializes in student motivation is calling an Orange County high school's system of grouping students by test score "one of the worst ideas ever" to promote learning, while the principal of a neighboring high school with a nearly identical program is defending the practice as extremely effective.

AnneMarie Conley, a UC Irvine assistant professor who studies motivational strategies in Orange County schools, said she was "shocked and horrified" to learn that La Palma's Kennedy High School requires students to [carry school IDs in one of three colors](#) based on their performance on the California Standards Tests, plus a spiral-bound

homework planner covered in a matching color.

"It goes against everything we know about student motivation and what helps students learn in productive ways," Conley said. "If you want a short-term, Band-Aid approach, then you can reward kids with stickers and pizza parties. But if you want to support lifelong learning, there's absolutely no research to support what they're doing."

Conley said the three-tiered system causes the most academically vulnerable kids – underprivileged minorities, poor students and English learners – to be stigmatized and reminded daily they are not as successful as their peers.

"Girls, minorities, the ones we want to enter science, technology, engineering and math fields – they will decide they just can't do it, or they're not going to go to college," Conley said. "The people for whom this program is not working are the ones the school is supposed to be protecting."

Under the Kennedy High program, now in its second year, students who do not score "proficient" or higher in all tested subject areas, or who do not improve by a minimum standard, are required to carry white ID cards and planners the next year. Those who score "proficient" or higher in all tested subjects, or who improve by a certain level compared to the year prior, get gold cards. Black cards are reserved for students who score "advanced" in all subjects tested.

Black cards give students free admission to all home athletic events, as well as discounts to school dances and at local businesses. Gold-card holders get free admission to certain home athletic games, as well as more limited discounts. White cards require students to stand in a separate cafeteria lunch line and come with no benefits.

"We have seen tremendous results, and the kids love it," said Ben Carpenter, principal at Cypress High School, which rolled out its program last year in parallel with Kennedy's. "It's the least discriminatory thing we do; anyone is eligible to get a gold card. It's not based on race, GPA, whether the student is an English learner. It's not based on anything other than how hard you work to learn the material in the classroom and how well you've performed in this classroom."

At Kennedy, black cardholders receive more freebies and discounts than gold cardholders, but at Cypress, gold cardholders receive the same freebies and discounts as platinum cardholders, Carpenter said. (Platinum is Cypress High's equivalent of Kennedy's black card.)

Scores boosted, motivation improved

Carpenter said the three-tiered card system has improved students' performance on standardized tests and helped Cypress High boost its all-important Academic Performance Index score, to 895 out of 1,000 last year, compared to 880 the year prior.

"When testing time came around, you saw teachers who were frustrated because kids didn't care about the tests," Carpenter said. "There was nothing in it for them, other than an intrinsic motivation they may or may not have. The intent of the gold card program was to provide an incentive for all students, to say, 'Hey, there is something in this for me. I can get something out of performing on this exam.'"

Carpenter also said the program was intentionally designed to obscure students' exam performance and thus it does not violate student privacy laws.

A student who typically scores "advanced" in every subject but suddenly drops down to "basic" in one subject will not receive a gold or platinum card that year, Carpenter said. Conversely, a student who scores "far below basic" in every subject but suddenly improves to "below basic" in two subjects will receive a gold card.

"We deliberately set it up this way," Carpenter said. "We're not releasing a specific score. We're not saying Johnny has a 250 on his math test. We're not saying Sally scored a 600 on the test."

The California Department of Education told the Register on Tuesday that any program revealing information about how well a student has performed on state tests is a violation of the student's privacy and should be terminated.

The Anaheim Union High School District said Tuesday it was looking into the matter; a district spokeswoman did not immediately return a phone call Wednesday seeking further comment. Kennedy High School on Wednesday referred all questions to the district office.

Other academic indicators public

Carpenter said schools employ many other practices that reveal student performance – honor roll, letterman jackets, honor cords at graduation, honor societies, even students walking around school hallways carrying textbooks for honors and college-level Advanced Placement courses.

"What's the difference? There really is none," Carpenter said. "Kids are walking around all the time with textbooks at different levels than their peers – AP physics, AP statistics."

But Conley, the UC Irvine educational psychologist, said recognizing students at the top of their class has a far different psychological impact than a program in which every student is required to participate. With honor roll and honors courses, students are essentially given the ability to "opt in," Conley said, while no one

has the ability to "opt out" of carrying an ID card and matching planner.

"Long-term, this is going to have detrimental effects – you're going to get more cheating, more surface-level processing where kids are memorizing rather than understanding the material," Conley said. "I challenge the very premise that they find this program successful.

"At any school, there are maybe 10 percent of kids who benefit from this competitive mentality, this kind of competition," Conley continued. "These are the kids who will go on to become the CEOs, superintendents, administrators, teachers. The problem is these are the same people who turn around and make decisions like creating this program, because they think everyone is motivated the same way they are."

Color-coding criteria

At the beginning of the school year, Kennedy and Cypress high school students received one of three color-coded ID cards, based on performance on the California Standards Tests. Student scores on these exams fall into one of five categories – advanced, proficient, basic, below basic and far below basic.

Black/platinum cards: Students must score "advanced" in all subject areas tested.

Gold cards: Students must score "proficient" or "advanced" in all subject areas tested. Students with a white card who improve their scores in at least two subject areas by at least one level (i.e. moving from "far below basic" to "below basic") also qualify for a gold card.

White/regular cards: Students who don't score "proficient" or above in all tested subject areas receive a white card. This category includes those who score "far below basic," "below basic" and "basic" in all subject areas. But it also can include those who score "basic" or below in just one subject area – unless they have met the improvement criteria necessary to receive a gold card.

Contact the writer:

949-454-7394 or smartindale@ocregister.com

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