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SCHOOLS' SAFETY NET

GRADING ON A CURVE

"We have been given the gift of time. This safety net has given us the opportunity to fall and get back up."

KATRINA HUDSON, Coquina Principal



Coquina Elementary "coach" Jennifer Clarke works with Cierra Jett. MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

Grades for 1 in 6 Brevard middle and elementary schools would have fallen further if not for a state safety net

By Mackenzie Ryan
FLORIDA TODAY

Coquina Elementary School in Titusville has been an A-rated school for six straight years. But without a last-minute measure by the Florida Board of Education, the school would have received an F for the past school year.

Instead, because of the state's decision to limit schools to a one-letter-grade drop, Coquina was given a B.

More than 1 in every 6 Brevard elementary and middle schools would have had lower grades, if not for that grade-protection measure. Across that state, the rate is closer to 1 in 5.

"We don't say that we earned it," Coquina Principal Katrina Hudson said of the school's designation. "We're not pleased."

Elementary and middle school grades are based mostly on how its students performed on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests, also known as the FCAT.

With two schools closing in the Titusville area in as many years, Coquina has seen a high turnover of students as boundaries have shifted: Both this year and last year, almost two-thirds of the student population was new to the

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SCHOOL GRADE PROTECTION

Thirteen Brevard Public Schools had higher school grades than they earned, thanks to a last-minute protection by the Florida Board of Education that prevented grades from dropping more than one letter. Only elementary and middle schools have received letter grades; high school grades are expected to be released later this year.

SCHOOL AND CITY	2013 GRADE		
	WITHOUT PROTECTION	WITHOUT PROTECTION	WITH PROTECTION
Cape View Elementary Cape Canaveral	A	C	B
Columbia Elementary Palm Bay	B	D	C
Coquina Elementary Titusville	A	F	B
Croton Elementary Melbourne	A	C	B
Golfview Elementary Rockledge	B	F	C
Harbor City Elementary Melbourne	A	C	B
Mims Elementary Mims	A	C	B
Palm Bay Elementary Palm Bay	A	C	B
Port Malabar Elementary Palm Bay	A	C	B
Roy Allen Elementary Melbourne	A	C	B
Sea Park Elementary Satellite Beach	A	C	B
Central Middle West Melbourne	A	C	B
James Madison Middle Titusville	B	D	C

Source: FLORIDA TODAY analysis based on Florida Department of Education data and information

FDLE: Needelman used email to try to skirt law

Private accounts used, according to agency

By Rick Neale
FLORIDA TODAY

Former Brevard County Clerk of Courts Mitch Needelman and his staffers used private email accounts to conduct BlueWare business — including behind-the-scenes contract negotiations — to try to hide details from public scrutiny, Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigators allege.

Email correspondence since April 2012 played a key role in developing and shaping the FDLE political-corruption case against Needelman and two BlueWare executives, newly released documents show.

Now, Needelman faces charges of bribery, bid tampering and unlawful campaign contributions after investigators accused him of steering an \$8.52 million document-scanning contract to BlueWare in return for illegal campaign funds.

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Email correspondence played a key role in developing the FDLE political-corruption case against Mitch Needelman CRAIG BAILEY/FLORIDA TODAY

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Literacy coach Liana Coulson, center, works with fifth-grade teachers at Coquina Elementary School in Titusville. PHOTOS BY MALCOLM DENEMARK/FLORIDA TODAY

Grades

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school, she said.

And that's taken a toll. Hudson's been up-front with parents about the would-be F school grade. Along with teachers and district leaders, she is working to improve the school's performance.

"We have been given the gift of time," Hudson said. "This safety net has given us the opportunity to fall and get back up."

Both the safety net and the school grading system have come under increasing scrutiny.

State education leaders first used the grade safety net in the 2011-12 school year and are considering using it again when grading school performance this year. They cite the implementation of Common Core State Standards next year, which sets new learning targets for English and math.

State education officials say the safety net was put in place to ease the transition.

But in the meantime, parents say that school grades are downright misleading.

"Because of the safety net, you can't trust the performance of the schools are what they're saying," said Kathleen Neace, a parent from Rockledge who has previously used school grades when deciding where to send her children under Brevard's choice options.

Only one school in Brevard received an F grade, Endeavour Elementary in Cocoa, which dropped from the previous year's D.

But without the safety net, Coquina and Golfview Elementary in Rockledge also would have failing grades.

The two schools actually performed worse — earning fewer points — in the school grades formula than Endeavour.



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The initiative to protect grades, first adopted two years ago, comes after the state set more rigorous standards to determine if students were performing at grade level. One such move raised the bar for writing — meaning students must earn a 3.5 out of 5 on the FCAT, instead of a 3, to be considered on grade level.

"I know the standards are harder, but it's ridiculous to mask the true progress or lack of progress that schools are making," said parent Deb Clark of Indialantic. "What's the point of school grades if we're not going to report them accurately?"

Brevard Superintendent Brian Binggeli said that the state-administered school grading process has been "very confusing." "We have some schools that did better in their actual school performance, and their grade went down," he said.

Meanwhile, other schools did worse, but their grade didn't drop as far as they should have.

With possible changes to the school grade system on the horizon, Binggeli says he supports a multipronged approach that better aligns current measures.

He suggests implementing Common Core State Standards, developing high-quality assessments to replace the FCAT, and then using Florida's Value-Added Model to determine how well schools are doing.

The VAM formula compares students to similar students around the state, projects how well they are expected to do on state tests and compares it with how well they actually did. Depending on where a student starts, it's



Coquina Elementary School coach Jennifer Clarke works with Lexi Talbert on her science fair question.

possible to have a positive VAM score and still have students below grade level.

Many new faces

Coquina Assistant Principal Joyce Jeffrey said she used to walk into each classroom and know each child's name. She knew their parents and their siblings.

Now, more than half the faces are new. The school absorbed former South Lake Elementary students after it closed this summer, and previously Riverview Elementary students after it closed the year before.

School leaders say that the turnover and population growth, along with other factors, is why students scored so dismally on the FCAT.

Once known as a small neighborhood school that prided itself on its relationships with students and families, Coquina is, in a way, starting from scratch. The school once taught 450 students. Now, it has close to 570 students and is still growing.

Misty Belford, now a school board candidate, was among those who voiced concerns about the impact of closing schools and moving students, some of whom went to

CALCULATING SCHOOL GRADES

All school grades include the performance of students on state reading, math, writing and science tests, learning gains for all students in reading and math, and learning gains for the lowest performing students in reading math.

Elementary school grades are based only on the above measurements for a total of 800 possible points.

Middle school grades add 100 possible points for students who take advanced classes, as well as how students perform on end-of-course and industry certification exams, for a total of 900 possible points.

High schools grades are split between state test performance and other indicators, which add another 800 possible points for a total of 1,600. That includes participation and performance in accelerated classes and tests, the overall graduation rate and the graduate rate of at-risk students, and college readiness in reading and math, as measured by college entrance or post-secondary placement tests

three different schools in three years.

"The cultures of the schools are very different," said Belford, whose children attend Oak Park Elementary in Titusville. "The discipline issues have been significant. Not that the kids are bad kids, but it's like when parents go through a divorce, you expect some behavioral issues with kids. The same thing happens when you bounce kids from school to school."

Some students said they had trouble concentrating during the school closures, despite efforts by teachers like Debra Mattheus, who said she has made a point to make students feel welcome.

Fourth-grader Stephon Jimenez attended now-shuttered Riverview three years ago. "It made me sad because I liked the school," the 9-year-old said. "I kept thinking about it."

To help improve student performance, Coquina has added math and science "coaches," joining a reading coach already at the school. The coaches assist with lessons, work with students and help the school keep track of and analyze student test data. In addition, the school is working with

teams from both the district and the state on ways to improve.

"We cannot continue to instruct our students at the level that they are being taught. We have to adapt and change some things," Hudson said.

In particular, the school struggled with math last school year. While 50 percent of students in grades three to six were on grade level in reading, only 36 were on grade level in math.

The previous year, 55 percent of students were on grade level in reading, and 52 percent were in math.

Lowers numbers

The grade safety net was welcomed by some, but critics have accused leaders of padding the self-esteem of teachers while preventing some consequences from reaching the state's most struggling schools.

Across the state, Florida would have had 262 schools with F grades. With the safety net, about 100 received the designation. Only four elementary and middle schools, including Coquina, dropped from an A to an F.

Failing schools go through a state intervention process, including

implementing an improvement plan.

If a school receives two Fs in a row, state law calls for certain "turn around" options, from reassigning students to a different school to converting it to a charter school.

"They are receiving the same support, they just aren't subject to the turn-around process," said Jane Fletcher, Florida Department of Education's director of accountability, of schools like Coquina, which would have earned an F rating but did not.

"We want to make sure that there are processes in place so they can improve their performance before next year," she said.

As Florida transitions to Common Core, it remains unclear how the state will change grades.

Florida Education Commissioner Pam Stewart is convening a group, including educators and parents, to review the accountability system with the goal of working toward a fair, accurate and transparent grading system.

At Gov. Rick Scott's education summit last month, ideas ranged from calculating the grades on three years of test scores, to adding "pluses" or "minuses" to grades to replacing them all together.

Many said they want a more nuanced approach. Others have criticized the complexity of the formula or questioned its transparency.

The state has made changes since it first was rolled out and grades were determined by the percentage of students on grade level.

At the time, critics said it was too simplistic and didn't account for other factors that show the quality of a school.

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BlueWare

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Needelman was also charged with official misconduct, a third-degree felony, for allegedly telling employees to use private email accounts to circumvent public records laws and obtain benefit for BlueWare.

"To direct employees to use their personal accounts in an attempt to avoid public-records requests is ignorance. That shows a level of ignorance, frankly, on his part. It's an ignorance that's shared by some elected officials in Florida," said Barbara Peterson, president of the Tallahassee-based First Amendment Foundation.

"He was dumb on lots of levels here," Peterson said.

Emails sent by public officials in connection to official business are covered by the same public record laws as emails sent from government accounts. "If it relates to public business, it's public record," Peterson said.

Last week, the State Attorney's Office released 179 pages of documents, including summaries of interviews by FDLE agents. These interview summaries seem to indicate a concerted campaign by Needelman and his staff to circumvent Florida's Sunshine Laws:

» Michael McDaniel, Needelman's former finance officer, said Needelman instructed him to use his personal AOL

email account to communicate with BlueWare, "because there was some information that Needelman did not want to become public."

McDaniel also said Needelman had instructed him and other employees to "get rid of" work-related emails on their personal computers.

» Rose Harr, BlueWare founder and president, said Clerk of Courts staffers frequently used personal email accounts to communicate with her workers.

Harr told investigators she did not know why.

» David Eggli, a former BlueWare software salesman, said: "It was made clear" that he should send emails regarding the scanning contract to Needelman's per-

sonal account.

Eggli added that he was advised to send "some generic emails to the BCCC government email addresses to keep up appearances" and show there were communications between BlueWare and the department.

» Renee McGrory, Needelman's former executive assistant, said she gave out personal email addresses for the "Clerk's Executive Team," which included Needelman and his top staffers.

» Sean Campbell, Needelman's former chief deputy, said Needelman used his personal email account on a regular basis and instructed Campbell to send emails there, not to his Clerk of Courts account.

» Carol Brancato, a

former Spherion Staffing Services employee who briefly managed the BlueWare scanning project, said she asked Clerk of Courts staffers to stop sending emails to her personal account.

FLORIDA TODAY obtained some of Needelman's work-related emails from his personal EarthLink account through a public records request. Dozens contain BlueWare-related communications.

Key among them were a trio of April 2012 emails containing a 14-page proposed BlueWare document-scanning contract, a 14-page proposed BlueWare information-technology contract, and an 111-page proposed invitation to negotiate. These email attachments were

copied to Needelman's EarthLink account, his finance officer and to BlueWare executives.

Needelman's office later publicly advertised for bidders for the scanning project in May 2012. FDLE alleges that Needelman tried to skirt public-records law by directing vendors' questions to an employee's private email account, where they were later answered by BlueWare.

Needelman's office signed a contract with BlueWare in late June.

Harr faces charges of bribery and bid-tampering. Matt Dupree, Needelman's former business partner who now works for Harr, faces charges of bribery, bid-tampering and unlawful campaign contributions.