

Bad math: Software error tweaks grades in N Carolina schools

January 18 2019, by Jonathan Drew

A software error caused public school students around North Carolina to receive incorrect end-of-term grades this school year, state education officials said.

The Department of Public Instruction said it has been advising districts about the problem with PowerSchool software since December, after many schools sent home first-quarter report cards. The error could have affected as many as 109 school districts and 59 charter schools in the state, but it's not clear exactly how many students were impacted.

The software incorrectly rounded class grades up or down after teachers entered individual assignments into the PowerSchool software, department spokesman Drew Elliot said. A department news release said the error comes from a change this school year in the software's grade calculation methods.

"It could either increase or decrease a student's final grade," Elliot said.

The department initially thought the rounding problem was limited to grades ending in certain decimal points, but Elliot said state officials are now hearing the problem extends to other numbers as well.

A webinar was scheduled Friday for local school officials to discuss the investigation and remedies with the statewide department.

"The districts are making their own decisions on whether or not to

recalculate these grades," he said.

Josh Morgan, a spokesman for PowerSchool, said the company was reviewing the situation and couldn't immediately say if the problem is affecting schools in other states. The company said on its website that it provides classroom technology, including web-based systems for grading, to 45 million students in 70 countries.

Not every North Carolina district was impacted. The software is available to public schools but not every district uses it for grade calculation, DPI said.

The Wake County Public School system wasn't affected because, as the largest district in the state with about 160,000 students, it runs an iteration of the software that it can independently configure, said spokeswoman Lisa Luten.

The second-largest district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, is working with state officials to "troubleshoot the issue, find swift solutions and minimize impact" on its 147,000 students, spokeswoman Renee McCoy said in an email.

The problem is being investigated at a time when many schools are preparing their second-quarter grades. Some local officials said it was caught soon enough to head off problems with upcoming report cards.

A Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools statement says: "With Q2 report cards going out in 3 weeks, we feel confident that we will have time to implement a solution, and communicate to parents and staff."

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