

# Grading Policy in the Time of COVID-19

## Considerations and Implications for Equity

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### About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

## Introduction

As school districts across the country respond to the unprecedented circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, their policy decisions will affect the future opportunities of their students. One such decision centers on the assignment of end-of-course grades. Course grades provide evidence of student learning for students, their families, and educators in their schools. At the secondary level, they also represent a central component of admissions packages for many institutions of higher education. However, school closures and shelter-in-place guidelines in response to COVID-19 have dramatically altered the conditions in which students learn and demonstrate evidence of their learning. Without physical access to teachers, peers, and instructional resources, learning opportunities for nearly all students during school closures may be significantly curtailed.

Although most schools and districts are in the process of shifting to distance learning approaches, including virtual lessons and meetings between students and teachers, many have limited experience with distance learning and lack both human capacity and a coherent online instructional program. This means that the content of a core course—say, Algebra 1—in spring 2020 may not be comparable to that in 2019, and thus grades for students across those 2 years may not be comparable either. This context makes it extremely difficult to determine grading practices that fairly reflect students' content mastery.

Just as important, access to quality distance learning opportunities is not evenly distributed among communities and subgroups of students. Although some families and communities have multiple devices and sufficient broadband in the home to support simultaneous internet access for both adults and students, others do not. To help address the need for learning resources, some districts have spent much of the first weeks after closure distributing thousands of devices and hotspots to students who needed them. Even if the required

technology is available, however, exposure to learning materials and communication with teachers will depend heavily on the comfort that students and their families have with that technology. Opportunities for students to receive academic support within the home already vary widely, a dynamic whose effect will be more pronounced when their access to classroom teachers and settings also is limited. Finally, psychological research shows that all people perform less well under stress, and the stresses from layoffs, lack of child care, and general uncertainty are particularly pronounced in low-income communities.

For these reasons, districts across the state and country find themselves considering the degree to which end-of-course grades can provide a fair and accurate picture of student learning during the period of school closure.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, grades are still considered an important signal to students, families, teachers, and schools that acknowledges students' academic accomplishments, motivates student effort, and reveals ongoing learning needs. On the other hand, the vastly different learning environment in this pandemic threatens to exacerbate disparities among students, schools, and districts. Drawing on research on strong grading practices and guidance from the California Department of Education (CDE), this brief explores some of the options that education institutions around the country and in California are implementing and their implications for equity.<sup>2</sup>

## Guidance From CDE

Grading policies remain a local decision in California, but many districts have turned to CDE for guidance on how to navigate the challenge of assigning grades during the pandemic. On April 2, 2020, CDE released a set of frequently asked questions that outlined possible grading options,

given the governor's announcement that physical school sites would likely be closed for the remainder of the academic year.

These options included the following:

- Assign final grades based on students' third-quarter grades or their grades when the school shutdown occurred.
- Allow students to opt out of completing a course, thereby receiving an "incomplete" until they can finish the course.
- Allow students to choose whether they want to accept their current grade or continue with independent study.
- Assign students pass/no pass or credit/no credit.
- Assess students on essential standards using a rubric model instead of percentages.

CDE also urged districts to weigh their policies through a lens of equity and access, and with the primary goal of "doing no harm to students."<sup>3</sup>

## Messages From Higher Education

With respect to postsecondary admissions, messages from several universities have provided some reassurance that grades from spring 2020 will not negatively impact admissions decisions. For example, a joint statement from the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems states that "the university systems are willing to accept credit/no credit grades in lieu of letter grades for all courses, including A-G courses, completed in winter/spring/summer/2020 for all students."<sup>4</sup> Universities with highly competitive admissions processes have offered similar guarantees. For example, Harvard University promises that students "will not be disadvantaged as a result" of pass/fail grades from the spring



2020 term,<sup>5</sup> and Stanford University similarly tells students that they “will not be at a disadvantage if your school adopts a pass/fail grading policy.”<sup>6</sup>

## Grading Policies in California Districts

Many school districts in California have yet to decide how students will be graded in the context of interrupted instruction and distance learning. However, several districts have established grading policies during the time of school closures. The examples that follow, which align with the CDE guidance to varying degrees, illustrate the range of options employed across California and the rationale through which district leaders are acting in the best interest of their students.

To minimize disruption and preserve a sense of normalcy, Elk Grove Unified School District (USD) is continuing to award letter grades to students through the end of the 2019–20 school year. In recognition of the differences in student learning environments, the district has provided training to teachers, counselors, and administrators on grading during adverse circumstances. Messaging from the district also emphasizes that grades are merely one measure of student performance.<sup>7</sup>

In response to guidance from CDE and the joint UC/CSU statement, the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) released grading recommendations to all schools in Santa Clara County on April 6. The SCCOE superintendent of schools recommended that all schools within Santa Clara County move to a credit/no credit grading structure for distance learning instruction during the remainder of the school year to ensure that all students have the same opportunity for success. The majority of Santa Clara County school districts, including Palo Alto and San José USDs, have adopted this common approach.<sup>8</sup>

La Cañada USD announced on April 10 that it is adopting a hold-harmless policy for middle and high school students with respect to second-semester grades.<sup>9</sup> The hold-harmless policy is defined as “one where a student’s final semester 2 grade will not fall lower than the closing grade of March 12, 2020, the date of school facility closure, if the student is regularly and routinely completing school assignments and assessments and is not chronically absent.” All students nevertheless have the opportunity to *improve* their grades between the date of facility closure and the end of the school year.

On April 13, Los Angeles USD, the largest school district in California, announced a variation on this hold-harmless theme with its no-fail grading policy.<sup>10</sup> A student’s spring semester letter grade will be no worse than it was on March 13, the final day of on-campus instruction. However, students will have the chance to improve their grades, and no student will receive failing grades on their spring report cards.

The San Francisco USD Board of Education is considering a more radical approach. In its April 14 discussion on grading policy, the board raised the possibility of giving all middle and high school students A’s across the board, with the rationale that students should not be held responsible or harmed by a pandemic over which they had no control.<sup>11</sup> One school board member commented that she is happy to give all students an A. However, she wants to be sure the decision does not put individual students in jeopardy by doing so. At the time of this brief’s release, the final decision was still pending.

## Grading Policies in Districts and States Across the Country

Beyond California, districts and states across the country are considering similar options for assigning

spring 2020 grades. The week before CDE released its guidance, the Illinois State Board of Education recommended that Illinois school districts not give letter grades but instead assign pass/incomplete grades and embrace the principle of “no educational harm to any child.”<sup>12</sup> The rationale behind offering an incomplete grade is that some students might not be able to complete assignments or engage in online instruction during school closures. Those students should have the opportunity to pass their classes once schools reopen.

Districts such as DC Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Stevenson High School District in Illinois, and Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia decided to assign letter grades based on third-quarter grades, giving students the opportunity to improve those grades with new assignments and tests given between now and the end of the school year. Teachers will continue to give assignments, essays, quizzes, and tests with the expectation that students complete these new assignments, but only scores that increase a student’s baseline grade will be used to calculate final semester grades. The rationale behind this approach is twofold: On the one hand, district leaders do not want students’ academic status to be jeopardized because they were unable to complete assignments during the closures due to lack of access to technology or an inequitable home learning environment. On the other hand, leaders do want to motivate students to participate and apply effort to their learning.

## “Do No Harm”?

A common feature of the school closure grading policies and rationales described here is the principle of “do no harm,” a commitment that any decision should first and foremost avoid damage to students’ educational opportunities or academic standing due to circumstances beyond their control. To their credit, state leaders, school boards,

educators, and administrators are spending countless hours discussing their options to make the best decisions possible. Nevertheless, any policy decision introduces potential unintended consequences and tradeoffs that require attention in both the short and long run.

Indeed, do-no-harm policies may themselves incorporate potential sources of inequity and unfairness. For example, by preventing grades from dropping during a time of distance learning, these approaches aim to avoid penalizing students for challenges they experience in an atypical “school” setting. Yet, by also allowing students to improve their grades during closures, school systems may end up privileging those students with the technology access, home working conditions, and supports needed to take advantage of that opportunity. The result? Some students who struggled early in the school term will thrive, while others with similar early performance will not; these differences are likely to track closely to patterns of advantage.

In addition, it is important to recognize that do-no-harm policies do nothing to counteract long-standing inequities built into the predominant grading practices within districts (i.e., those in place before the school closures). Traditional approaches to grading have received considerable criticism in recent years given their emphasis on subjective measures (e.g., behavior, effort) and homework completion rather than actual achievement against district end-of-course standards. (See the text box on page 5.) Evidence that students of color and from low-income families were systematically receiving lower grades (and thus limited access to higher education) even when their test scores showed that they had learned the content has motivated some districts, such as Garden Grove USD, to move toward a standards-based grading system.<sup>13</sup> Such systems are still the exception rather than the rule, however, and thus applying



pre-March 13 grades could simply perpetuate harm already done to some students.

Some members of the education community have taken a different tack on grading and equity during this period, arguing that options such as suspending grading or awarding credit/no credit can further disadvantage some students by removing an important source of motivation. Without the accountability of grades, students' engagement levels could wane, their learning could suffer, and their skills could diminish. The effects of reduced motivation might be especially damaging to students without strong academic supports at home. Although students from more advantaged backgrounds may have other sources of encouragement and pressure to continue their

learning (e.g., hiring tutors, learning from online resources, home schooling), students without these resources may struggle to prioritize learning. The bottom line is that none of the solutions to the grading dilemma is perfect. All have both benefits and shortcomings, and considerations of the trade-offs and consequences are critical to ensuring fairness.

Of course, grading is only one piece of what districts—and students—are grappling with during the closures. For some students, school also provides a location where there is food and shelter. For others, school may provide access to mental health services, medical screenings, and social services. These services all have important implications for students' ability to learn and for

### Highlights of Ken O'Connor's *15 Fixes for Broken Grades*\*

Ken O'Connor's *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* (2011) examines many of the shortcomings of traditional grading practices. O'Connor's recommendations for overcoming these problems include the following:

- Grades should not include subjective measures, like behavior, effort, and attendance.
- Grades should include evidence of mastery at the end of a course or term, not the beginning or middle of the term.
- Grades should include evidence collected in class because students' access to learning and material outside of class is unequal.
- Grades should not be the only form of feedback that students and their families receive about students' progress, and the process by which grades are calculated should be transparent.
- Grades on the A through F scale that correlate with a 100-point scale are mathematically incorrect and more prone to inaccurately reflecting student progress compared to other methods like a 4-point scale.
- The practice of equating missing assignments to zeros and associating anywhere between 0 and 50 points to an F create a compounding effect where it can be impossible for students to pass a course after a certain point, which can grow into more course failures and school dropouts for the most vulnerable student populations.
- Grades should be formative, informal, and internal communication to students and their families, but are often summative, formal, and external communication to measure students against each other.
- Grades as a form of punishment often do not work. Research suggests that students are more motivated to succeed when they are internally motivated and get clear and timely feedback, rather than when they are in fear of failure or know there are negative consequences to their failure.

\* O'Connor, K. (2011). *A repair kit for grading: 15 fixes for broken grades* (2nd. ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson ATI.

their overall well-being. Moreover, after grading decisions are made, schools will need to address the problem of lost learning for many students, particularly for those who have had limited learning access during the closures. This is the larger consequence of schools closing, and “incomplete” grades are but one manifestation of the learning time “debt” that is accruing for all school systems: K–12, higher education, and vocational, certificate, and professional programs. With students possibly being out of school for up to 6 months before classes start again in the fall (if they do), research based on summer learning loss suggests that students are likely to retain about 70% of this year’s gains in reading, compared with a typical school year, and less than 50% in math.<sup>14</sup> These losses, dubbed the “COVID slide,” are likely to be more pronounced for students who are already facing steep inequities.

## Conclusion

In a context that is constantly changing but requires rapid decisions, education leaders are selecting from a range of imperfect options related to grading policies. Educators make decisions that reflect their beliefs about what is best for students, but those beliefs may obscure the trade-offs and unintended consequences for any particular policy choice. Compounding learning loss during the closures is the threat to equity. “Do-no-harm” approaches to course grades reflect a commitment to the principle of fairness, yet educators and researchers know that the U.S. K–12 education system has never been fully equitable. At this paused pivot point in education, there may be a moral imperative to ask, what can we do to shift this current circumstance to transform a broken, inequitable system to an equitable, high quality education for all?





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## NOTES

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1. Feldman, J. (2020). To grade or not to grade? *An Educational Leadership special report. A new reality: Getting remote learning right*, 77, 43-46. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/summer20/vol77/num10/To-Grade-or-Not-to-Grade%C2%A2.aspx>
2. The authors compiled much of the information on approaches to grading during late March 2020 and information on California guidance in mid-April 2020.
3. See <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/gradegraduationfaq.asp>.
4. See <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/documents/jointk12highereducation.pdf>.
5. See <https://college.harvard.edu/about/news-announcements/special-message-high-school-juniors-applying-harvard>.
6. See <https://admission.stanford.edu/announcements/#future-applicants>.
7. See <http://www.egusd.net/covid-19-community-letters/april-17-2020/>.
8. Palo Alto adopted this policy on March 25, before guidance from either the California Department of Education or Santa Clara County Office of Education.
9. See [https://www.lcusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=1688868&type=d&pREC\\_ID=1845681](https://www.lcusd.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1688868&type=d&pREC_ID=1845681).
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12. See <https://www.isbe.net/Lists/News/NewsDisplay.aspx?ID=1319>.
13. For a more thorough description of the Garden Grove Unified School District transition to new grading practices, see pages 36–37 of Knudson, J. (2013). *You'll never be better than your teachers: The Garden Grove approach to human capital development*. San Mateo, CA: California Collaborative on District Reform. Retrieved from [https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA\\_Collaborative\\_Garden\\_Grove.pdf](https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA_Collaborative_Garden_Grove.pdf)
14. Kuhfeld, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2020). *The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement*. Portland, OR: NWEA. Retrieved from [https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/04/KAP5122-Collaborative-Brief-Covid19-Slide-APR20\\_FW.pdf](https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/04/KAP5122-Collaborative-Brief-Covid19-Slide-APR20_FW.pdf)





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