

Creating Equitable Grading Systems during COVID-19

P20 Educational Partnership – **Draft Guidance**

Ad hoc Work Group #1: Guiding Principles

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Purpose and Context

Minnesota's E-12 public education system and Minnesota's institutions of higher education have moved to a system of distance learning to prevent community spread of the Coronavirus that leads to COVID-19. This unprecedented moment in public education has created stress, anxiety, and uncertainty for educators, families, and students. In this moment, educators will need to design new assessment and grading systems that cause no harm and minimize long term impact for students.

Some students will thrive in distance learning models while others will likely be overwhelmed and need a lot of support. COVID-19 is magnifying inequities that were always present and too often overlooked. During distance learning, students will not have uniform access to support systems and technology. In addition, educators and leaders must acknowledge that student learning will be interrupted by the absence of services public schools provide students on a daily basis, such as breakfast, lunch, mental health supports, occupational and physical therapy, creative outlets, and social interaction.

A truly equitable assessment and grading system created for distance learning must account for the complex and multifaceted ways the closure of physical school buildings will be a bigger obstacle for some students than others. Many educators likely view the creation of new assessment and grading systems as a daunting task. However, this can also be an opportunity to examine past-practices and design new ways of evaluating student growth and performance.

In what follows, we offer **equity-based guiding principles** for district and institutional leaders and educators to reference while creating their local guidance on grading during distance learning. School districts and institutions of higher education are very capable of designing systems that fit their particular needs. We simply hope to help decision-makers avoid pitfalls that can lead to unforeseen consequences. The current assessment and grading systems used in schools and universities have led to incredible inequities, and the new models created during distance learning must work to prevent the growth of these disparities or the creation of new inequities.

In particular, we hope all decision-makers consider the following questions:

1. What can be done to promote equity and fairness in grading across systems and institutions?
District leaders and educators need to build an awareness of both internal inequities at the site and district levels as well as the inequities that exist across all districts and institutions.
2. How can education institutions create grading systems that allow for the flexibility to meet the needs of their unique student populations? This means considering both long and short term flexibility as we cannot predict how this virus will continue to alter public life.
3. How can decisions about grading be made in both a timely and thoughtful manner?
4. How should assessment and grading considerations be expanded in this moment?

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5. How can stakeholders be meaningfully involved in decisions about assessment and grading?
6. How will assessment and grading policies and practices be communicated to students, families, and communities? How will leaders ensure that students, families, and communities understand the potential impacts of these decisions and policies?

The Minnesota Department of Education has also provided educators and leaders with questions that help evaluate the degree to which equity is embedded within a distance learning plan. These questions can also be used to start building an equitable grading and assessment system for an institution or district.

The questions are as follows:

- Who are the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other marginalized groups that are affected by the distance learning plan? What are the potential impacts on these groups?
- Does the distance learning plan ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences? Who does the distance learning plan benefit?
- How have we intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by the distance learning plan? How have stakeholders and community members validated or invalidated our conclusions to questions 1 and 2?
- List all the potential barriers (structural, human, financial, community, etc.) to more equitable outcomes related to the distance learning plan.
- How will we mitigate the negative impacts and address the barriers identified above?
- Once the distance learning plan has been implemented, how will we gather and use the input from those impacted?
- What qualitative and quantitative evidence will we gather and analyze to determine the effects of the distance learning plan? (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020)¹

Districts and Institutions should also remember:

- Many educators are not trained in online instruction and assessment, and they will be building entirely new systems as they make this transition. Educators will need guidance and time from district and institutional leaders.
- Many students will be facing new environmental distractions, and many will not have access to the same tools as their peers. There are public and private programs that help students gain access to technology, but these will not completely solve the technology-divide during distance learning.
- Both students and educators could potentially become ill, or they could become the primary caretaker for a loved one who contracts the virus.
- Academic dishonesty may show up in new ways in online learning, and educators need the tools to respond if this happens.

We consider the following principles to be “living guidance.” We learn new information on a daily basis, and these principles will need to be adjusted accordingly. We build these principles with a mindset of nimbleness and flexibility while recognizing that we might need to change and edit this guidance as we encounter unforeseen problems. We hope that all locally created grading systems will embrace this same flexibility. In the end, district leaders, university officials, and educators need to design assessment systems that are rooted in values that reflect the needs of students.

¹ Minnesota Department of Education. (2020, March 26). Distance Learning Plan Template. Retrieved from <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/>

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Equity-Based Principles for Grading during Distance Learning

- I. **Decision-makers must approach the creation of new assessment and grading systems with an equity mindset. The new systems must reflect an effort to confront and eradicate known inequities in the current system.**

Minnesota has some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation. Distance learning presents new barriers that can cause these discrepancies to grow. Remember, not all students have equal access to equipment and information. Work and learning environments will be radically different for many students. New grading systems must reflect an awareness of these realities and account for these differences.

- II. **Equitable assessment systems will start with a clear definition of what is being assessed.** Traditionally, assessment systems have been based primarily on academic performance. In this moment, students and educators are under tremendous stress and are experiencing high levels of anxiety. **This is a time to consider allowing educators to not only assess academic performance but also to support the social-emotional learning and well-being of students.**
- III. **Distance learning presents an opportunity to create new systems rather than simply relying on past methods. Educators can now reframe what is actually being assessed.**

The traditional A-F system has been the standard assessment process in education, but it may not fit this period of distance learning. This is a time to reflect on what needs to be assessed and how that assessment will be used in the future. There is a difference between mastery and excellence. Decision-makers can consider proficiency-style grading systems, credit/no credit systems, and systems that capture letter grades for later revision of a student record. Some educators are using check-lists as a way to capture student mastery of standards. Finally, this is a moment to consider the prohibition of punitive terms like “failure” and “unsatisfactory.” Students would benefit from educators using growth-based terminology. Students should not be deemed a failure and given an F during this unprecedented moment.

- IV. **New assessment models must embed flexibility and adaptability.**

New models must build in flexible procedures and policies that allow educators and institutions to adapt to unforeseen situations that may develop as we move through this pandemic. No one can predict how COVID-19 will continue to challenge traditional learning models. Educators and institutional leaders must embrace continuous change and adaptation. Truly equitable assessment and grading systems will always grow to meet new demands and challenges that arise.

- V. **New assessment models must meet the needs of each unique, local population of students.**

Educators and institution leaders know the needs of their unique student populations. Districts follow different calendars and grading periods, and they will ultimately need to design systems that mirror their previous timelines. In addition, some students will need letter grades to prove proficiency for future applications and program admissions. Flexibility will be key to meet the needs of all students. **Finally, decision-makers should work to**

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create the ideal assessment system for their students while also considering the need for some alignment with national and statewide trends.

- VI. New assessment models must provide choice for educators, students, and guardians while also realizing that all choices are not equal and all choices come with consequences.**

Guardians, students, and educators must be given choices in assessment. The system must set clear deadlines for making choices, and students and guardians must understand the consequences of each choice. In addition, a student may want to choose an A-F grading scheme but may be unable to make that choice because of situational factors. Systems must have the flexibility to adapt to future changes requested by students.

- VII. New assessment models must consider the unique needs of special classes of students, for example students in special education, students on 504 plans, English language learners, and students in career and technical programs.**

Students on an IEP may have goals tied to achieving specific grades. The same can be true for other protected classes of students. In addition, students in career and technical programs that follow a strict linear course path may have unique grading needs. Again, an equity-mindset and flexibility will help decision-makers account for these realities in their new systems.

- VIII. All stakeholders must be part of the planning process.**

School districts and institutions must include all voices in the creation of any new assessment and grading system. This will help decision-makers design a more equitable system. Parents, community leaders, educators, students, and leadership should all have equal input in the creation of any new grading and assessment system.

- IX. Communication must be robust, equitable, and multi-modal.**

A truly equitable assessment system will be promoted with an equally equitable communication plan. Districts and institutions must announce deadlines and the ramifications for missing deadlines in multiple languages and through multiple modes of communication. Students and their guardians cannot make appropriate decisions without the appropriate information. **Districts and institutions must make sure students and guardians understand the impact of decisions. There is a difference between receiving and comprehending a message.**

Decision-makers and districts and universities should assume good intent and use this as a moment to advocate for more equitable approaches to assessments and grading. All universities, colleges, schools, and graduate programs are facing these same questions. This moment requires flexibility and understanding from all stakeholders.

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Ad hoc Work Group #2: K-12 RAMIFICATIONS

Participants: Donnie Thompson, Vicki Turner, Paula Palmer, Kelly Benson, Mary Barrie, Doug Paulson, Deb Henton*

Considerations:

- **Elementary and Middle School Students**

- How might the level of rigor in elementary distance learning environments be compared to the rigor in typical classroom environments in charter schools and school districts?
- Do elementary schools use a different grading system other than P/F, P/I, P/N,** A-F, or some version of letter grades?
- Should middle school students be considered with high school students or elementary students? Middle schools may have a grade range of 5-8, 6-8 or 7-9 or any other similar variation.
- Should K-6 and K-8 schools be considered with elementary or middle schools and charter schools?
- How will the eighth grade students who matriculate to the high school level in the Fall of 2020 be affected by changes to grading systems in school districts and charter schools?
- How would advanced courses be affected under a P/F, P/I, P/N system?
- If a P/F, P/I, P/N system is used, when will students be allowed to makeup the work needed to move to a P or letter grade?
- How will English Learners and Special Education students be affected by any changes to their current grading systems in their charter schools and school districts?
- How will students who are retained be affected by any changes to the grading system adopted by their charter school or school district?

- **High School Students (9-12)**

- How will GPAs be affected by a P/F, P/I, P/N system in school districts and charter schools?***
- How will possible admissions to Higher Ed institutions be affected if GPAs are impacted?
- How might the mental health of students who have worked hard to maintain their GPAs be affected by any change to the grading system they have been working on this year and previously?
- What notation might be made on student transcripts to account for this unprecedented time and delivery of learning?
- How might the NCAA view student eligibility if a P/F, P/I, P/N system is used?
- How would a P/F, P/I, P/N system work with weighted courses?
- How would a P/F, P/I, P/N system work with determining students graduating with honors?
- How would class ranking be affected for seniors and students in lower grade levels?
- Might students drop a course rather than choosing one grading system over the other if there is a choice?
- If only a P/F, P/I, P/N system is used by a charter school or school district where none previously existed, might students be allowed to drop a course before a grade is issued and/or after they see the effects of the P/F, P/I, P/N on their transcripts?
- If a P/F, P/I, P/N system is used, when will students be allowed to makeup the work needed to move to a P?

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- How will English Learners and Special Education students be affected by any changes to their current grading systems?
- Will any grading changes implemented now be accepted by Higher Ed institutions in years to come?
- **Post-Secondary Education Options, PSEO and Concurrent Enrollment Eligibility**
 - If the courses taken by PSEO and Concurrent Enrollment (including College in the Schools - CIS) students have different grading systems should the local school district and charter school be responsible for determining how the transfer grades will be shown on the transcript?
 - How will the Post-Secondary institution grade impact students?
 - If a student receives a no credit or an incomplete in a PSEO class, who will treat that?
- **Alternative Learning Centers , ALCs, & Alternative Learning Programs, ALPs, Students & Credit Recovery**
 - How might student engagement be affected by the implementation of a P/F, P/I, P/N system?
 - In what ways are grading systems enabling students to be eligible for credit recovery programs?
 - Should school districts have the same grading systems for their Alternative Learning Centers, ALCs, or Alternative Learning Programs, ALPs?
 - In what ways will credit recovery programs be affected by any change to a school district's and charter school's grading system/s?
- **Specialized Programs**
 - In what ways are the Career and Technical Education, CTE, student participant and concentrator hours reported for the purposes of federal Perkins grant reporting and revenue?
 - In what ways do the exams in the advanced programs affect the final grade, i.e. is there a relationship between the grade and the summative exam results?
 - How are final exams given by International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP) and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs changing during this time?
- **Recognized Credentials, IRC, and Technical Skills Assessments, TSAs for Career and Technical Education students**
 - How will IRC and TSA's assessments and tests be provided and results reported and acknowledged for participating students in CTE programs?

General Considerations:

- Equity must be considered and provided for all students.
- Student handbooks are adopted by School Boards annually. A change in grading practice would need to be approved by School Boards.
- Current grading systems in school districts are different with some offering weighted grades, and others not offering that possibility.
- Grading reporting systems vary from quarters to trimesters to semesters and anywhere between throughout school districts and charter schools.
- Some school districts and charter schools have already selected grading methods and communicated that information to families.
- Additional work for teachers might be caused by adding dual grading systems where only one was previously used.
- Will the implementation of P/F, P/I, P/N grading systems where only letter grade systems or a combination of both were used lead to lesser student engagement and effort?

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- How will post-secondary certificate programs and technical education programs accept P/F, P/I, P/N grading systems?
- Should grading be similar for summer programming?
- Is rigor similar in distance learning environments when compared to typical classroom settings?
- The transition to any new grading system must be communicated well to families, students, teachers/all school staff, school boards, the community, and all stakeholders.
- School districts and school boards generally prefer local control.
- Might grading be suspended entirely during this time period and teachers find another way to give feedback?
- How is culturally relevant teaching implemented in distant learning?
- How do informal assessments play a role?
- How can teachers be certain in a distance learning environment if it is the student doing the work and not the parent, sibling, or peer?
- Another unknown is how the final product is presented to a teacher. Might a parent, for example, first review his/her student's work, ask the student to correct his/her errors and then submit the work with no errors?
- How might academic dishonesty with other students be dealt with during this time?
- Progress reports for students with IEPs-some special education teachers are upset that they are expected to do progress reports while others in different charter schools or school districts have more lenient grading expectations.
- Some teachers, particularly in CTE, who are issuing certificates in progressive programs are not able to start up the next level in the fall when their students have not received the actual hands-on training necessary to move up to the next level.
- Access to digital devices and internet service varies for students from school district to school district and across the state.
- Some students are having to take on additional responsibilities such as watching their siblings while their parents are working, or students may have to work themselves.
- Some students are stressed with all of the changes they are experiencing in their lives and changing the grading system they are used to may bring added stress.
- How might changes to typical grading systems in Minnesota's schools be perceived by Higher Ed institutions across our borders? Will other states accept P/F, P/I, P/N grading systems and hold students harmless?
- How has the added stress of distance learning and the pandemic affected academic achievement?
- Children of essential workers may not have parents at home to assist them in distance learning.
- Many teachers have had little training in distance learning, yet have been expected in a remarkably short time to replicate what might have happened in the typical classroom experience.
- What type of grading systems are currently being used? P/I, P/N, P/F, A-F, A-C & Pass and No Credit appear to be most common, yet there are other systems not mentioned here given the vast number of combinations of systems.
- Will school district and charter school software programs be ready to handle any change to report cards at this point in the year?

Recommendations:

1. Hold all students harmless.
 - a. Stress may impact a student's performance during this time and must be taken into consideration when determining a final grade.
 - b. Inequities may have been exasperated under distance learning.
 - c. Responsibilities may have been changed for students during these uncertain times creating difficulty for focusing on distance learning.

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2. Annotate the same message on transcripts both at the High School and Higher Ed levels indicating this is an unprecedented time and students should be held harmless for grades displayed on transcripts during the spring semester/trimester of 2020.
3. Allow school districts discretion regarding which grading system/s to use and flexible deadlines for families and students if any grading options within a school district are provided.
4. Reach agreement with Higher Ed to formally state students will be held harmless whether enrolling into Higher Ed institutions or transferring between institutions beginning now through 2025.

Please note the difficulty that may occur for students enrolling to Higher Ed institutions located out of state.

5. Require School Boards to formally pass a resolution supporting any changes to grading systems that will now appear in their student handbooks.
6. Suggest to school districts using an A-F, or P/F, P/I, P/N system that the grades are temporary and provide students opportunities at a later date to learn the content and improve the grade if necessary.
7. School districts and charter schools should determine how to transfer grades earned through PSEO, AP, or CIS onto high school transcripts.
8. School districts and charter schools should use the same grading system/s for the students in their ALCs or ALPs.

*Lead

**P/F refers to Pass/Fail, P/I refers to Pass/Incomplete, P/N refers to Pass/No Credit.

***Note: At first glance it appears GPAs would not be affected; however, if a student has been working on adding to his/her GPA by getting an “A,” for example, a P/F, P/I, P/N system would not add to the student’s GPA thereby having a lowering effect on the overall GPA the student was working toward.

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Ad hoc Work Group #3: Post-secondary Ramifications of Grading Options

Participants: Ron Anderson, Bob McMaster, Marguerite Ohrtman, and Doug Paulson

High school grading impacts on students enrolled in post-secondary coursework

- How will spring 2020 “pass/no pass” grades in high school coursework impact future eligibility of students to qualify for PSEO and concurrent enrollment coursework?
- How will the availability of proctored placement testing services impact high school student’s ability to place into PSEO and concurrent enrollment coursework?
- How will spring 2020 “pass/no pass” grades earned in PSEO or concurrent enrollment courses impact secondary satisfactory academic progress?
- How will spring 2020 “pass/no pass” grades earned in PSEO or concurrent enrollment courses impact Post-secondary satisfactory academic progress?

Post-secondary matriculation impacts

- How will the availability of proctored placement testing services impact graduating senior’s ability to place into college-level coursework at Minnesota State institutions?
- How will post-secondary institutions view IB and AP test scores from spring 2020?
- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact the acceptance of CTE articulated credits?

Post-secondary Admissions

- How is COVID-19 impacting post-secondary fall 2020 application and student decision deadlines?
 - [UMN application deadlines have passed, but the deadline for students to confirm their acceptance has been extended on 4 UMN campuses](#)
 - [Minnesota State college and university application deadlines remain unchanged, and for most campuses fall in mid-August.](#)
 - [Minnesota private colleges...](#)
- How will spring 2020 high school grades and ACT/SAT scores impact future year college and university admissions?

Scholarships and Financial Aid impacts

- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact post-secondary scholarships?
- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact athletic scholarships, and athletic eligibility?
- How will COVID-19 impact FAFSA completion, and how will changes in individual and family financial changes impact financial aid packaging for the 2020-2021 academic year?

Post-secondary Approach to Grading

- What grading options have postsecondary institutions adopted for spring 2020?
 - [The UMN system using making the S/N option available to all spring 2020 students through April 30, 2020. The S/N option will be available to all summer 2020 students at XX of the system’s universities.](#)
 - [The Minnesota State system has encouraged all of its colleges and universities to expand the availability of P/F grading choice, but decisions to do so will be made at the institutional level.](#)
 - [Minnesota private colleges...](#)

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- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact transfer among colleges and universities?
- How will spring 2020 grades be noted on postsecondary transcripts?
- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact programmatic accreditation?
- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact career licensure?
- How will “pass/no pass” grades impact graduate school applications?

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Ad hoc Work Group #4: Messaging

Participants: Jennifer Dugan, Tanis Henderson, Deb Henton, and David Law