Creating Equitable Grading Systems during COVID-19

Developed with the P20 Educational Partnership

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Guiding Principles

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.

Even though this document includes a thorough list of considerations and options, it is our recommendation that a student should not be reported as a failure and retained or given an F during this unprecedented situation.

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 detrimental impacts 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 and reporting 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?
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

considered 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?

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.

Equity-Based Principles for Grading during Distance Learning

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.

This is a moment to seriously consider the prohibition of punitive terms like “failure” and “unsatisfactory.” Students would benefit from educators using growth-based terminology. ***Every day, and especially during this time when students are experiencing so much uncertainty and so many situations over which they have no control, students benefit from educators using growth-based terminology in every possible situation. A student should not be reported as a failure and retained or given an F during this unprecedented situation.*** Districts and schools should consider reporting an “in progress” for students who have not demonstrated mastery, and give students additional time during and after distance learning to demonstrate mastery and complete content.

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.*

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.

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 adaption. Truly equitable assessment and grading systems will always grow to meet new demands and challenges that arise.

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

New reporting and 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 reporting and 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.

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 IEPs 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.

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.

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.

Retention of Students

There are many adverse effects of retention. Research says that students are more negatively impacted by grade retention than they are positively affected by it. The inequities of distance learning have been previously discussed in this guidance and are disproportionately impacting traditionally underserved groups of students.

For these reasons, it is the ***strong recommendation that schools and districts not retain students in their current grade levels for next school year*** due to distance learning and interruptions in some students' education as a result of the COVD-19 pandemic and distance learning.

Instead, districts should develop systems for students who might have been retained to make up content at the conclusion of distance learning. At the conclusion of distance learning, one or more of the following strategies might be considered by districts to support students who were in danger of being retained:

- Provide students with counseling to reengage them and get them going in the right direction.
- Provide alternative or extended learning opportunities for students to attend and make improvements in the areas in which they struggle.
- Place students on individual plans of study that include objectives, actions the students must take, and supports. A plan of study provides a student with specific objectives that they must meet over the course of the plan. It also provides assistance and increased accountability for a student.

Grading Considerations

Before deciding to choose a grading option, districts and governing bodies should discuss it broadly and work with stakeholders, including students, to ensure there are no unforeseen consequences of switching to "P/F" (Pass/Fail), "P/I" (Pass/Incomplete), "P/N" (Pass/No Credit) or "A-C and P/NP" (A, B, C and Pass/No Pass), grades as well as policies for withdrawal.

Please note there may be other considerations not listed below. Please work with your local community to identify a comprehensive list of grading change considerations that fit your district's grading policies and practices.

- ***Districts are recommended to create systems and policies that hold all students harmless.***
    - Stress may impact a student's performance during this time and must be taken into consideration when determining a final grade.
    - Inequities may have been exasperated under distance learning.
    - Responsibilities may have been changed for students during these uncertain times creating difficulty for focusing on distance learning.
- 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.
- Grade reporting terms vary from quarters to trimesters to semesters and anywhere in between throughout school districts and charter schools.
- 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.
- 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.

As stated in the Guiding Principles, this is a moment to seriously consider the prohibition of punitive terms like "failure" and "unsatisfactory." ***Even though the Grading Considerations and Grading Options include a thorough list of considerations and options, it is our recommendation that a student should not be reported as a failure and retained or given an F during this unprecedented situation.*** Districts and schools should consider reporting an "in progress" for students who have not demonstrated mastery, and give students additional time during and after distance learning to demonstrate mastery and complete content.

Once a decision is made, 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. It is critical for students and families to thoroughly understand the implications of any given 'choice'. The school and district must consider how students and families will fully understand the complete picture in a short amount of time. It is important for robust materials to be provided so students and families understand the transition and situation, including unintended and inequitable consequences for students. Additionally, the communication should provide sufficient time for educators, students and families to have the necessary conversations to make an informed decisions and planning.

Options for Grading Available to Schools

Most classes within Minnesota's public, non-public, and tribal K12 education are graded with a letter grade (e.g. A, B, C, D, or F). During your consideration to expand your grading options to students from A through F to "P/F" (Pass/Fail), "P/I" (Pass/Incomplete), "P/N" (Pass/No Credit) or "A-C and P/NP" (A, B, C and Pass/No Pass), understand these options have both benefits and drawbacks for certain populations of students (ALC and ALP students, college bound students, dual enrollment students, student athletes, etc.).

Grade Level	Grading Options	Benefits	Considerations
Pre-K/Elementary	1-4	Currently used 1-4 grades are universally recognized and more transferable.	Currently used grading may exacerbate current inequities and may not signal a full understanding of the situation.
Pre-K/Elementary	E = Exceeding S = Satisfactory P = Progressing N = Not Progressing	Currently used 1-4 grades are universally recognized and more transferable.	Currently used grading may exacerbate current inequities and may not signal a full understanding of the situation.
Middle/Secondary	A-F *It is our recommendation that a student should not be reported as a failure or given an F during this unprecedented situation.*	1. Traditional A-F grades are universally recognized and ensure transferability to other districts and systems. **2.** The traditional grading scale allows for direct comparison from one student to another within a specific class. **3.** Traditional A-F grades document the success of high performers.	1. Traditional grading may exacerbate current inequities. Not all students have equal access to equipment and information. Work and learning environments will be radically different for many students. 2. Traditional A-F grading may reinforce a deficit mindset during an already difficult. Students would benefit growth-based terminology.
Middle/Secondary	P/F = Pass/Fail P/I = Pass/Incomplete P/N = Pass/No Credit *It is our recommendation that a student should not be reported as a failure during this unprecedented situation.*	1. P/F, P/I, P/N grades are not included in the calculation of students' grade point average (GPA). If students encounter personal or unexpected challenges adapting to an online learning environment that negatively impact a student's grade they would otherwise earn, this will protect the student's cumulative GPA.	1. While a P or S grade does not negatively impact a student's GPA, it also will not positively impact a student's GPA. 2. Some students may have unforeseen consequences by selecting P/F, P/I, or P/N grading. Students should be strongly encouraged to seek advisement from their high school counselors before requesting grade changes. 3. Some colleges and universities may not accept courses that are graded as P/F, P/I, or P/N.

Middle/Secondary	A, B, C, Pass, No Pass *It is our recommendation that a student should not be reported as a failure or given a No Pass during this unprecedented situation.*	1. A-C and P/NP grading incorporates high performance in students' grade point average (GPA) while minimizing any negative impacts.	1. Some students may have unforeseen consequences by selecting P/NP grading. Students should be strongly encouraged to seek advisement from their high school counselors before requesting grade changes. 2. Some colleges and universities may not accept courses that are graded as P/NP.
PSEO/Concurrent	Pass = P Satisfactory = S	1. P or S grades do not impact GPA, the P/NC or S/NC grade method will offer students protection against being suspended as part of the qualitative Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) process. 2. P or S grades do not impact GPA, the P/NC or S/NC grade method will offer students protection against being suspended as part of the qualitative Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) process. 3. Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC) grade requirements Policy/Procedure 3.21.1, Part 6, Subp.E: *Receiving colleges and universities shall accept MnTC courses with passing grades (A – D) earned at the sending system or non-system college or university, regardless of the grading requirements of the receiving college or university or the cumulative grade point average (GPA) the student earned at the sending college or university.*	1. While a P or S grade does not negatively impact a student's GPA, it also will not positively impact a student's GPA. 2. Many transfer institutions and graduate schools do not accept courses that are graded as P or S. 3. Some students may have unforeseen consequences by selecting P/NC, P/F, S/NC or S/U grading. Students should be strongly encouraged to seek advisement from their academic advisors before making grade changes.

PSEO/Concurrent	No Credit = NC	1. NC grades typically reduce a student's completion rate (# of credits earned vs. attempted). The federal government is expanding options for institutions to omit NC grades from the completion rate during terms impacted by COVID-19 (at least for some students. 2. A grade of NC is not a failure; however, the student is not eligible to retake the course through PSEO.	1. Some students may have unforeseen consequences by selecting P/NC, P/F, S/NC or S/U grading. Students should be strongly encouraged to seek advisement from their academic advisors before making grade changes.
PSEO/Concurrent	I = Incomplete IP = In Progress	1. Personal circumstances related to COVID- 19 could prevent an individual student from completing their work. In semesters impacted by COVID-19, the federal government has expanded options for individual students to take a leave of absence while maintaining their financial aid. The use of "I" or "IP" grades could give an individual more time to complete the course. 2. In some classes, there may be face-to-face activities necessary for students to achieve the course's essential learning outcomes or contact hour requirements but COVID-19 is making such face-to-face activities impossible. The use of "I" grades could give an entire class more time to complete the course. 3. Some courses – such as internships, field experiences, clinicals and practica – require students to learn at external sites that may no longer be open to or reliably safe for students. An "I" or "IP" grade may be appropriate in these cases.	1. Data suggests that a vast majority of students who receive "I" or "IP" grades never complete the late work converting the "I" or "IP" grade to an F grade. 2. Some students may struggle with the additional course work from completing the work in their current semester in addition to completing the work for the course for which they received the "I" or "IP" grade. Students should be strongly encouraged to meet with their academic advisors before making a grading change. For some students, the best option may be to continue the course through the end of the semester with a P/NC or S/NC grade method instead of opting for an Incomplete.

PSEO/Concurrent	W = Withdrawal	1. Minnesota State has extended the withdrawal deadline to 90% of the course. Compared with the earlier withdrawal deadline, this will give students additional time to determine whether their new learning environment and/or personal circumstances provide an environment in which they can academically succeed in the current term	1. Currently a Withdrawal (W) grade has the same impact on SAP completion rate as the "NC" grade. Students should be strongly encouraged to seek advisement from their academic advisor before withdrawing from a course.

Postsecondary institutions may have expanded grading options for the Spring 2020 semester, including offering students a Pass/No Credit grading options. Students can select if they would prefer this grading method.

PSEO Students

For high school students, electing a Pass/No Credit grade instead of a letter grade may cause issues for their high school completion requirements. High school counselors should work directly with PSEO students and college or university staff to determine how grading alternatives may impact their high school transcript. Postsecondary institutions will have varying deadlines for students to make these grading decisions.

For further clarification please see the Options for Grading Available to Schools chart above.

Concurrent Enrollment Students

Concurrent enrollment courses usually result in a student earning a grade for the high school transcript as well as the grade provided on the college transcript. A concurrent enrollment student may choose Pass/No Credit option offered by the college or university, while the high school may offer different options. It would be allowable for a student to have one grading method on their high school transcript and another grading method on their college transcript for the same concurrent enrollment course. High school counselors should work closely with these students and the college or university to makes sure the student understand the implications of each grading option as mentioned above.

These will continue to be the options available for schools and may be modified during the COVID-19 pandemic as needed to ensure students are not negatively impacted by distance learning.

Understanding the Implications of Selecting Specific Grading Options

For preschool and elementary school students, the potential implications for changing grading systems is primarily the risk of misinterpretation by future reviewers of the information. This could include potential

placement into remediation, support, or accelerated programming, as well as access to criteria driven opportunities within a school system.

For middle school and high school, changes in grading systems could have impacts that extend into post-secondary schooling. Many middle schools offer high school credit earning opportunities that will impact a student's high school transcript, grade point average, and transcript. In turn, the grades associated with these experiences could play a part in many future educational opportunities including criteria driven courses, college admission based on high school academic performance, financial assistance based on academic performance, and more.

To ensure regulatory and compliance considerations are included in the decision making process, students should consult with school counselors, deans, administration, etc. before un-enrolling in any courses, to assure that there are no unintended implications, (ie: fulfilling an IB sequence of courses to earn the IB Diploma, CTE courses to complete a credential, certification or technical skill assessment, completing courses adequate enough to earn a bi-lingual seal, etc.).

Report Cards/Transcripts Message

In an effort to communicate effectively to students, families, institutions of higher education, and employers the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the grades during the pandemic situation while mitigating the risk of misinterpretation by future reviewers of the information, ***schools and districts should include the text below on report cards and transcripts***:

> Grades that are documented during the time period of March 16 through June 30 of 2020 reflect the distance learning period resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Future use of these grades for academic placement, admission, acceleration, or remediation is discouraged and should only be used with caution after balancing the information against student performance in other grading periods.