



Globes sit in a classroom at Telluride Intermediate School. (William Woody, Special to the Colorado Sun)

EDUCATION

Online learning is harder for some students, so Colorado schools are protecting grades with new policies

As Colorado school districts have replaced in-person instruction with remote learning, some are also easing up on grading policies.

APR 6, 2020 5:05AM MDT



Erica Breunlin

ven after coping with tremendous disruption to his school days, Andrew Busch may end his sophomore year at George Washington High School with a

E clean lineup of A's.

That's one of his goals, at least — a goal he is two classes away from reaching as he tries to elevate his A- in advanced math and his B in Advanced Placement physics.

He's already achieved A's in the rest of his classes and is likely to hold onto those grades, thanks in part to a change in his school's approach to grading. George Washington High School, part of Denver Public Schools, says it is adjusting its grading policy: No student's grade will drop from where it was before schools closed to guard against the spread of the new coronavirus.

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Other schools and districts across Colorado are making similar tweaks to grading policies, cutting students some slack at a time they're transitioning to online learning and contending with additional family stress brought on by the new coronavirus.

"We recognize the extraordinary circumstances we are living and learning in today and we believe that, while we adjust to this new manner of education, penalizing students for turning in work that would negatively impact their grade is neither equitable nor compassionate," said an email George Washington High School sent to families last week.

Many of Colorado's 178 school districts have already moved to remote learning or are in the process of doing so to slow the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. And while [Gov. Jared Polis has closed all Colorado schools to in-person instruction until at least April 30](#), a growing

number of districts have made their own decisions [to continue remote learning for the rest of the school year](#).



Denver Public Schools Superintendent Susana Cordova announced that DPS schools will not re-open to in-person classes for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year due to the COVID-19 crisis at a new conference at DPS headquarters on April 3, 2020. Remote learning will start April 6th or 7th (depending on each school's calendar) after an extended spring break. (Pool photo by Andy Cross/The Denver Post)

Next come decisions around grading.

Colorado Education Association President Amie Baca-Oehlert said some districts are implementing a pass/fail system and others are in line with George Washington High School, sparing their students punitive measures that could lower their grades.

For some districts, she said, changes to grading depend on the grade level. For example, elementary school students might be evaluated with a pass/fail system, while middle and high school students might only be able to improve their grade.

The changes are necessary to keep students from falling through the cracks or being penalized in a situation that's beyond their control, Baca-Oehlert said.

It's important that children aren't penalized because of having to shift to what she describes as "very drastic circumstances to ensure that teaching and learning continue while we're in a remote environment."

The pivot to remote instruction has really highlighted inequities among students, she noted. With students who can't access technology, who don't have access to the internet or whose parents are not at home during the day to support them as they do their coursework independently.



Colorado Education Association President
Amie Baca-Oehlert. (Handout)

A release of academic pressure

With Colorado's emphasis on local control, school districts determine their own grading policies. That means Colorado could potentially have 178 different approaches in terms of how grading plays out in the remote environment, Baca-Oehlert said.

Denver Public Schools, which starts remote learning on Tuesday, is working on guidelines for assignments and for grading that will center on pass/fail options rather than letter grades, Superintendent Susana Cordova said during a news conference on Friday.

“Nobody owns the responsibility for being in the situation that we’re in and we want to make sure that we’re not taking any kind of punitive measures against any of our community,” Cordova said. “That’s our teachers. That’s our school leaders. That’s our students and their families.”



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Cordova said the district is trying to make sure students have the technological tools to complete their schoolwork from home. In the last two weeks, DPS has distributed 37,000 devices — mostly Chromebooks — to students and another 10,000 will be delivered over the next couple of weeks. The district, which serves about 92,000 students, has also ordered thousands of hotspots and is working to connect families with affordable internet options, such as Comcast's Internet Essentials.

Still, she acknowledged it will be tough for students to engage in learning in the same way they'd be able to inside their school buildings.

For senior students nearing graduation, Cordova said the district will have “more concrete information” this week about helping ensure they cross the finish line.

The district is looking at how it can establish “guidance that is meaningful, that recognizes the unusual circumstances that students will be learning in but that does not penalize them or deny them the opportunity to earn the credit that they need to be able to graduate,” Cordova said.



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Andrew, the George Washington student, anticipates that remote learning will be harder than in-person instruction. He’s not particularly concerned about his own academic standing but said online classes will put students who rely on more engagement with teachers and visual elements at a disadvantage.

And it could be tougher to focus at home. School, he said, “it’s kind of a designated environment for focusing on your work.”

As his school’s approach to grading changes, Andrew said for students who have an A in a class, it essentially makes doing any work “pointless.”

But he also sees the new grading policy as one that lightens pressure for the rest of the year. “It definitely lays off some of the stress of everything that’s happening right now,” Andrew said.

He believes it’s the “moral” step to take with all the stress people are undergoing.

His classmate, Avery Hudson, said she is relieved the new grading system won’t harm students’ grades or grade point averages, particularly if they struggle to understand learning material or if they don’t have the ability to consult a teacher more in depth.

“It takes the anxiety off that part of it,” Avery said.

Custer County Schools, which abides by a traditional scale of letter grades, also plans to hold students harmless for the rest of the academic year, Superintendent Mike McFalls said.



Custer County Schools Superintendent and Assistant Principal Mike McFalls at the school's entrance Feb. 13, 2020. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Unless a student doesn't put in any effort at all, even after the district reaches out to engage that student, the district is advising teachers that student grades can improve but will not drop and students will not be given zeros.

McFalls said the district has established parameters on how much work can be expected from students, curbing the hours of work they put into studying, as families' stress levels jump and as parents have to step into the role of the teacher.

The superintendent now sees his district's role pushing beyond academics into one of central support for the community.

For those students who may struggle with remote learning, the district is tasking its teachers with reaching out and ensuring they're getting the support they need, McFalls said.



The entrance to Custer County School Feb. 13, 2020 in Westcliffe. The building is home to the elementary, middle-, and high schools. (Mike Sweeney, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Lake County High School in Leadville may switch to a similar new grading system, though school administrators and teachers are considering a few options, Principal Ben Cairns said. While the school could put measures in place to prevent students' grades from dropping, its staff are also contemplating rolling out a pass/fail system or changing the weights of categories that factor into grades.

Remote instruction began last week and has gone smoothly, but Cairns said it doesn't compare to face-to-face instruction.

The school, which also operates with a traditional scale of letter grades, will assess how online learning goes over the course of two weeks. Cairns said the school wants to still hold kids accountable with grades and award them credit in a meaningful way, but his staff recognizes that there are clear differences between online learning and learning in school.

His mantra to his students is simple.

“At this point I'm saying, just do your best, try your hardest. We know that this is not ideal. Some kids might have a hard time with it.”



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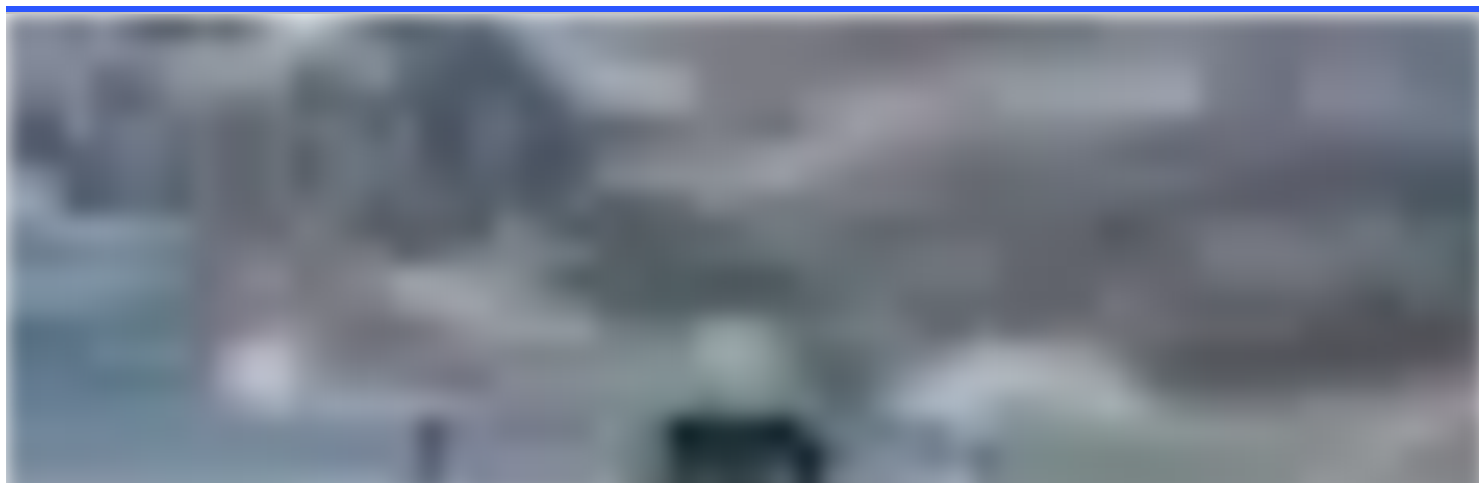
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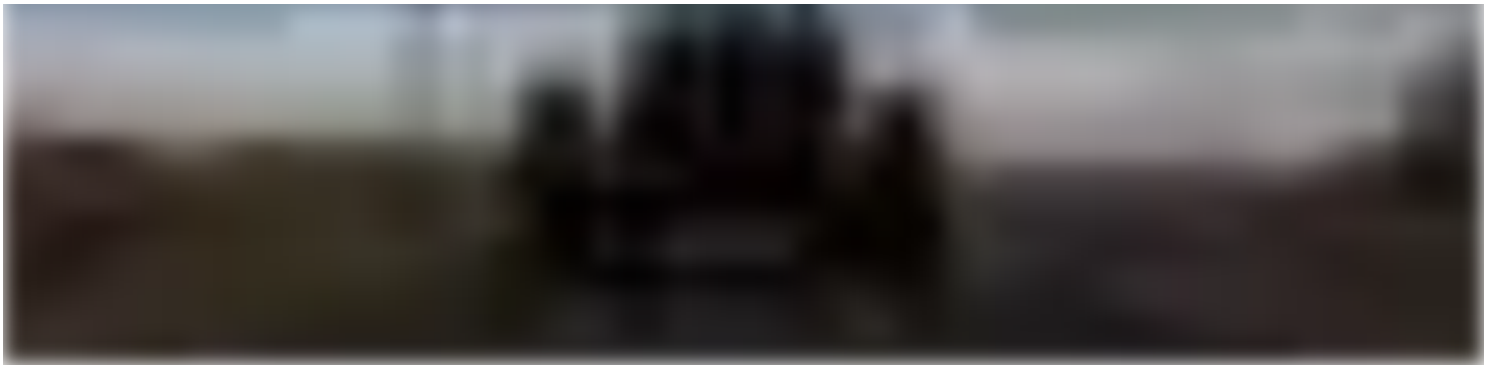
Bernie Sanders drops 2020 bid after winning Colorado primary, leaving Joe Biden as likely nominee

Sanders won the most delegates and the popular vote in Colorado's March 3 primary. Biden came in second.

AP The Associated Press

APR 8, 2020 9:50AM MDT



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Nancy Lofholm

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Sandra Fish

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