

Grading Students During the Coronavirus Crisis: What's the Right Call?

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As the nation's schools lurch into **an unprecedented experiment with distance learning**, with all of the hiccups and false starts that entails, teachers and administrators alike are starting to wrestle with a question deeply at the heart of the learning enterprise: How are they supposed to assign grades?

It's a tough call. Districts must balance what's fair for students, considering that many don't—or won't—have full access to their teachers. There's also an art to the messaging—they don't want to communicate that they're blowing off the rest of the school year.

The Mountain Empire district in California stretches more than 660 square miles, includes students from three Native American reservations, and serves a half dozen distinct communities. Internet access ranges from decent to nonexistent. The district will be offering instruction both online and, for families who lack sufficient access, photocopied work packets.

That hasn't stopped the district from trying to put together ambitious learning plans for its 1,700 students, like an interdisciplinary project for them to explore a topic of interest over several days.

But it does mean that students will have varying types and intensity of interaction with their teachers.

Given those disparities, the district plans to recommend that, as long as students participate, teachers should revert to their previous progress grades. Students could potentially improve those scores, but they wouldn't be penalized.

"I don't want to give everyone an A because we're just trying to be nice," said Patrick Keeley, the principal of the district's single high school. "But we don't want to ruin people's chances in the future, either," especially when it's due to factors outside of their control. Contrast Mountain Empire's context with that of the Salem City district in Virginia, near Roanoke.

The district serves a small, fairly compact city. Every student in grades 3 through 12 has a Chromebook through its one-to-one program. Salem has about 200 "hot spots" for WiFi

connectivity, and a cable company has agreed to provide free internet access for students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches.

So when its spring break ends on April 13, the district plans to make a legitimate go at covering the most essential of its remaining state standards via online learning—and to continue issuing letter grades for students' work.

"We realize that if we tell kids today, 'Hey, your grade can't be any lower than it is now,' or if we tell them we're not going to grade them for the rest of the year, we're going to have a big chunk of kids check out," said Curtis Hicks, the district's assistant superintendent. "And that's not healthy for them for the short run, and it's not healthy for the long term, if students are underprepared for what comes next."

Those two anecdotes outline the different tension points surrounding grading, but there's also potentially a larger conversation to be had.

Grading has been on the backburner as educators have focused on other measures of student progress, like graduation rates and standardized tests scores, but the coronavirus is prompting new questions about how it should work.

It comes down to this: What is the point of grading, anyway? And how might it need to evolve in the age of the coronavirus?

Cross Purposes?

In the United States, grading is almost exclusively a local prerogative, with rules set by its more than 14,000 school districts.

To try to give some shape to this far-flung, locally developed system, states and other public and private bodies have built a variety of policies around grades to force them, imperfectly, into a common currency.

Every state sets credit-hour requirements for graduation, for example. Grade point averages are used for college admissions, scholarship programs, and even **eligibility for participation in extracurricular activities and sports**.

Some states use grades to determine whether students are eligible for special programs, like magnets or gifted education; a handful use them as part of their 3rd-grade reading laws to determine whether students should progress to 4th grade.

The coronavirus pandemic is forcing states and districts to give some serious reconsideration to nearly all of those policies.

Most states are attending to the most pressing needs first—those of high school seniors set to graduate. To date, the states of Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Oregon, Mississippi, Virginia, and Wisconsin have all **waived various graduation requirements**, including certain mandated courses, end-of-course examinations, and minimum attendance

hours. Many of them are now allowing districts to decide whether students have met the requirements for graduation.

The broader question of grades, though, is complicated by the fact that the purpose of grading has become a bit of a muddle, said Jack Schneider, an assistant professor of education at the University of Massachusetts Lowell who is co-writing a book on the history of grading.

Sometimes grades are meant as motivation, to help spur students to do better. Sometimes they're supposed to communicate mastery of content to parents. And sometimes, in their most weighty function, they're used to compare students to one another, as when colleges and universities look at transcripts.

Most of the time, the A-to-F grading system is pressed into supporting all those goals even though some of them arguably work at cross-purposes, Schneider noted. And that effectively makes it harder for districts to tease out what to do with grades during an extraordinary disruption—like the school closures wrought by the coronavirus.

"People will begin to realize they do want feedback, for instance, from their student's teachers on how their kids are doing," he noted. "But unless the playing field is equal or they're getting the same type of supports they usually get, they don't want that kind of communicative effort to end up living forever on a student transcript."

Equity Concerns

Most of the districts interviewed by Education Week still want teachers to be providing lots of feedback to students on the assignments they complete. But they're less certain about the other functions of grades.

Many districts cite equity concerns for wanting to take a pause from traditional grading schemes, pointing to ways in which grades could penalize students who are low-income, lack access to a device and the internet, or who cannot rely on parents to help with home-based learning.

"Already our achievement scores are reflective of poverty in Ohio," noted Michelle Novak, a school board member for the 6,400-student Middletown City district, in Middletown, Ohio. Her district serves many students in poverty who come from single-parent households, and the opioid epidemic hit the area hard. It estimates that 1-in-5 students don't have access to both a device and the internet.

"If we want to give our kids grades during this time, we're really going to be grading what their home life looks like," she said. "And I don't think it's fair to do that to anyone."

The Mountain Empire district, for now, says it wants teachers to focus their feedback on students' progress towards standards, rather than assessing simply to build a grade. As for

the end of the term, “If they have an A and are participating, then they’ll have grade maintenance. ... If there are kids sitting there that want to try to improve their grade, we’ll allow for them to try to build that grade up,” Keeley said.

Part of the decision, he added, is because admissions to the University of California and California State University systems are based on “A-G” subject requirements, and it’s not clear how the new distance learning will impact that structured sequence, he said. (Other states, like Texas, have similar college-entrance systems that depend on students’ GPAs or class rankings, which means that any decisions about grading will have to be squared with those systems.)

For their part, many colleges nationwide appear to be favoring a pass-fail, or pass-no credit system for work completed this quarter or semester, and some K-12 districts are inclined to follow them.

The Highline school district, in Burien, Wash., will assign scores of pass or no credit for work completed during its period of remote learning—the idea being that those students who don’t initially earn credit could get opportunities to do so later in the summer or beyond. “I think the whole grading issue is one where we’ve just got to wait and see,” said Susan Enfield, the superintendent of Highline who also sits on the board of the nonprofit that publishes Education Week.

One of her rationales behind the temporary grade freeze is that there are over 100 languages spoken in her district. While the district has done a swift job translating learning materials into the top five mostly widely spoken, serving English-learners who speak other native languages will be much more challenging in a distance-learning environment.

A Question of Pedagogy

Teachers who have made the often-rocky leap to distance learning are advocating for a cautious approach, too.

Bobson Wong, a math teacher at a Queens high school in New York City, has noticed that his lessons are taking longer to deliver remotely. Partly that’s because it is much more difficult to check for students’ understanding and make teaching adjustments in an asynchronous learning environment.

He’s focused on trying to get students through the remainder of the curriculum before the system’s spring break, which begins April 9, and wants students to be motivated to finish—not frustrated.

“I feel like the most important thing I want to accomplish right now is to establish a routine in this environment and a sense of order and progress that we are actually moving forward,

and this is not just 13 days of busywork," he said. "I have no idea how you could give a numerical grade for anything here."

But at the same time, Wong said there's some value in determining which students appear to have mastered the content, and which students will need more help in the future.

"You need something to differentiate a kid who is clearly doing a lot of work and walks away with some kind of knowledge, and a kid for whatever reason just hasn't— their parents may be sick, or they may lack internet access," he said. "Grades aren't a judgment of character."

And he agrees that a larger conversation about grading could ultimately benefit students.

"Perhaps we emphasize them too much, or we use them in ways we shouldn't be using them," he said. "Maybe we should look at why we give grades in the first place, and what we should be doing with them."

Students are getting in on the action, too. In Georgia, more than 70,000 had [signed a petition on Change.org](#) calling on the state to void fourth-quarter GPAs.

"Without the proper help from teachers or having the ability to actively question teachers and receiving rapid responses, students are not truly learning, but rather grabbing the information temporarily," its organizer, Ellison Gonzalez, wrote.

'You're Going to Make Mistakes'

As a testament to how fraught the issue of grading is, the nation's two largest school districts, both of which have begun their remote-learning plans, are keeping things open on how they'll determine grades.

The guidelines in the Los Angeles district say teachers should "continue to grade and give timely feedback to students," with opportunities for those who cannot access instruction to make up missed assignments. But it doesn't say what will ultimately appear on students' transcripts. A spokeswoman declined an interview, saying the district would issue more guidance in future weeks.

New York City expects that teachers should continue to assign and grade remote work, but says it will give them the flexibility to adapt if students don't have the same access to devices or outside learning supports.

Some states are offering guidance where they can, though they are aware that districts must make the final calls on their own.

In Virginia, the second state to close school buildings and in-person instruction for the remainder of the school year, the Virginia School Boards Association and Virginia Association of School Superintendents recommended some practices for districts to consider if they move to pass-fail systems. They might choose to institute pass-fail only for certain courses rather than instituting a blanket policy, for example.

Though the Salem City, Va., district is holding to traditional grades for now, it wants to give students a fair shot. Teachers will stagger the days they're instructing so students aren't slammed with assignments for seven courses every day. They're being told to boil down the state standards to the most essential ones.

The district also plans to establish safeguards: If at the end of the school year students feel that their grade is not consistent with their academic history, or negatively impacted them, they could lobby to have that grade counted as pass-fail and drop it from their GPA calculation.

The flexibility is intentional, Hicks said.

"If you try to make decisions too fast, you make mistakes. If you try to make decisions that are projecting well into the future, you're going to make mistakes," he said. "We don't want to paint ourselves into the corner."

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