

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## ➔ State Boards Wrestle with Graduation Policy during Pandemic

By Valerie Norville

One of the first challenges state boards of education faced this spring was what to do for the roughly 3.5 million high school seniors whose graduations were derailed by the coronavirus. Most state policymakers across the country readily suspended end-of-year assessments and granted diplomas to those who were on track to graduate.<sup>1</sup>

A few states issued early, detailed guidance that fleshed out what “on track” meant, delved into the options for those who were off track, looked ahead at K-11 grade advancement, and addressed the equity challenges of each.

Many state boards and education agencies reached out to others to inform this work. To help smooth the path for college-bound seniors, states such as North Carolina solicited feedback from local superintendents and university admission directors before issuing guidance. To craft guidance on continued learning, Kansas and Illinois quickly assembled groups of educators, superintendents, and others—a critical step for informing the monumental task of simultaneously ensuring student safety, readiness for college and careers, and equity across schools and districts.

### ON TRACK

Most state boards opted to retain minimum course credit requirements while maximizing flexibility for districts on testing, hours, and days in classroom seats. **Kansas** waived its requirement that seniors attend at least 1,086 hours during the 2019–20 school year, while affirming that students must complete 21 credits of required and elective courses. It lets local boards amend gradua-

tion requirements they have set that exceed that minimum.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, North Carolina seniors can pursue additional credits, but districts cannot require them.

The **Mississippi** state board likewise affirmed its required diploma credits, which it tallies in Carnegie units. “In no circumstance shall a student be allowed to graduate with less than the minimum number of Carnegie units set forth by the State Board of Education,” say its revised rules. However, the board suspended for 2019–20 a requirement that 140 hours of instruction accompany each Carnegie unit and gave districts flexibility in determining how to grant students credit for courses they had not completed.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Tennessee’s board waived two of its 22 credit hours for 2019–20.<sup>4</sup>

In late March, the **North Carolina** board extended fall GPAs for seniors in their full-year courses while dropping traditional letter grades for spring courses. Instead, seniors will receive a pandemic-specific passing grade (PC19) or a withdrawal (WC19)—as opposed to a failing or incomplete grade—for these courses. In its board recommendation, the Department of Public Instruction’s working group wrote, “It is paramount to remember the unprecedented condition students are learning in and to focus on engagement more than evaluation.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the **Illinois** board’s Remote Learning Advisory Group recommended that local districts adopt grading models of pass or incomplete across K-12 that “embrace the principle of ‘no educational harm to any child,’ ” given the inequities in access to online platforms and opportunities to learn remotely.<sup>6</sup>

Many state boards and their advisory groups waived graduation requirements beyond suc-

cessful course completion and end-of-year course assessments—including passing civics tests and completing community service hours, hours of work for career and technical education (CTE) courses, CPR, PE, and financial literacy courses. **Washington State** urged districts to assess whether CTE course standards are similar enough to those of a non-CTE course to meet two graduation requirements. It also suggests districts waive up to two noncore credit requirements.<sup>7</sup>

Most states have put a pin in guidance on dual enrollment, other than to suggest that districts and higher education need to collaborate to ensure that students who were about to complete high school classes for college credit can still get credits. They also will continue to wrestle with how students can demonstrate skills around career pathways and college readiness, as the pandemic muddied calculation of GPAs and access to college entrance exams.

### OFF TRACK

Perhaps the greatest urgency over graduation is how best to help those who already were at risk of not graduating. In a rule on local waivers it approved April 8, the Washington board required districts to demonstrate “good faith efforts” in helping students who were not on track.<sup>8</sup> North Carolina’s board spelled out ways districts and schools can help students pass required courses: participation in remote learning, enrollment in the NC Virtual Public School, participation in credit recovery aligned to topics covered before schools closed, or a locally developed portfolio, interview, project, test, or other performance-based measure.

**Alabama** urged districts that are submitting continuity of learning plans to provide extra help for seniors who lack credits or were not passing required courses when schools shuttered. “Seniors who were not on track must be given the opportunity for credit recovery immediately, rather than waiting until summer programs,” the department wrote.<sup>9</sup>

The **Tennessee** board passed a rule

April 9 that says seniors cannot receive a spring semester grade lower than the one they were earning before school closure. “However, LEAs and public charter schools may provide remote learning opportunities to students as an opportunity to improve the student’s grade,” the rule said. The same provision applies to other students taking courses for high school credit.<sup>10</sup>

## EQUITY IMPLICATIONS BEYOND SPRING 2020

Given that students’ access to quality remote learning and their engagement with available instruction vary so widely, equity considerations are at the forefront of many boards’ deliberations.<sup>11</sup> The Washington board required districts to certify in their applications for waivers that they had considered equity. “This may include, but is not limited to, an equity analysis, community outreach, or other means to assess and mitigate potential disparate impacts of this waiver,” its rule said.

North Carolina’s guidance acknowledged potential inequities and lists five factors for effective remote learning:

- is accessible by all students for which the learning is intended and is responsive to diverse learning groups;
- maintains consistent communication between instructional staff and students;
- addresses the curricular and instructional needs associated with appropriate standards;
- includes evidence of student learning; and
- considers the whole child as well as the home learning environment.<sup>12</sup>

If these factors are met, North Carolina public schools can evaluate students using traditional grades for K-11, according to the guidance. But it said that the board would provide more guidance to ensure equitable treatment for all students if schools remained closed after May 15. The Tennessee board’s April 9 rule lets districts take attendance during remote learning, but they cannot assign unexcused absences or report students as truant.<sup>13</sup>

A few boards have also focused on K-11

advancement. In its revised rules, the Mississippi board paid attention to credit attainment for students in grades 7-11, as well as its seniors and juniors fast tracked for graduation. It exempted many now enrolled in required courses in algebra, biology, English, and U.S. history from taking corresponding end-of-year tests. The board also waived a requirement for third graders to take a reading assessment that was a prerequisite for promotion to grade 4.<sup>14</sup> The guidance lets local school boards amend their policies for promoting and retaining students.

Some state boards underscored the need to engage students in continued learning. Kansas’s task force wrote, “Much time and communication need to be spent locally determining the critical outcomes that are needed to be met before the end of the school year. ‘Less is more’ and focus on what is critical for advancement to the next grade level or graduation.”<sup>15</sup>

The Illinois board echoed the call to mitigate harmful educational impacts of the pandemic while also engaging students: “ISBE recommends that a student who is not able to be engaged, or who chooses to disengage, in remote learning should receive an incomplete or no grade. Document every attempt made to engage the student; it is very possible the student is experiencing circumstances out of their control.”<sup>16</sup>

For seniors, the process of graduation marks a milestone beyond the accumulation of credits, which they expected to celebrate at school and social gatherings of teachers, students, and family. Recognizing their sense of loss, Washington’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction posted resources for seniors’ emotional well-being. The Arizona board considered students’ suggestions for alternative celebrations at a March meeting.

The coronavirus may intensify seniors’ perennial temptation to slack off on studies in the last weeks before graduation. Shelby Dean, senior student representative on the Mississippi state board, urged her peers to persevere: “For all of the seniors graduating and planning on attending college next year,” she wrote, “we can’t take six months off of learning new material and then expect to

excel in college-level courses. Let’s finish out this school year strong.”<sup>17</sup>

*Valerie Norville is NASBE’s editorial director.*

## NOTES

1 “Data: How Is Coronavirus Changing States’ Graduation Requirements?” *Education Week* (April 8, 2020).

2 Kansas State Department of Education, “Continuous Learning Task Force Guidance,” March 2020, <https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Communications/Publications/Continuous%20Learning%20Task%20Force%20Guidance.pdf?ver=2020-03-18-230653-693>.

3 Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Chief Accountability Officer, “Summary of State Board of Education Agenda Items,” March 26, 2020, [https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/MBE/MDE-2020\(3\)/v3/tab-01-accreditation\\_waivers\\_sbe-final\\_combined.pdf](https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/MBE/MDE-2020(3)/v3/tab-01-accreditation_waivers_sbe-final_combined.pdf).

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5 Public Schools of North Carolina, “LEA/Charter School Guidance for Remote Learning, Evaluation of Student Progress, and Graduating Seniors,” March 27, 2020, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y13uBxdSp8sukVC\\_skf2dk9U8Fjn18bR/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y13uBxdSp8sukVC_skf2dk9U8Fjn18bR/view).

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9 Alabama State Department of Education, “Alabama State Department of Education 2019-2020 Local Education Agency Academic Continuity Plan,” March 27, 2020.

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13 Tennessee State Board of Education, Chapter 0520-01-02, Administrative Rules and Regulations, April 9, 2020.

14 Mississippi Department of Education, “Updates and Information in Response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus),” web page.

15 Kansas, “Continuous Learning Task Force.”

16 ISBE, “Remote Learning.”

17 Shelby Dean, “State Board of Education Student Member Shelby Dean: Seniors, Let’s Finish Strong,” news release, Mississippi Department of Education, March 31, 2020.

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