



The Education Trust–West

EQUITY ALERT



EDUCATION EQUITY IN CRISIS:

HOW TO ADDRESS LEARNING, PROMOTIONS, TRANSITIONS AND GRADES IN LIGHT OF SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CLOSURES

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented education equity crisis in California. Since mid-March, almost all [California schools](#) and colleges have closed in response to the pandemic, requiring education leaders and administrators to stretch their resources to create or improve distance learning plans, support students' basic needs, and maintain other essential services for students and families. We understand that education leaders are inundated with unanticipated responsibilities and are doing their best to support their communities in these uncertain times.

Parents, families, and students deserve to know about instructional supports and resources that are available during this uncertain time of school closures, as well as, when schools and colleges reopen. High school seniors deserve to know the status of their diplomas and that their university eligibility will not be negatively affected.

Higher education leaders are working swiftly to transition courses online so that students can continue on their path to transfer and to graduate. During this pandemic, all colleges and universities in the state are urged to move forward with thoughtful and flexible policies that center equity with student success and ensure gaps in transfer and degree attainment are not exacerbated during this time—and once campuses reopen.

This Equity Alert calls attention to several key issues that school and college leaders will encounter in the coming days, weeks, and months. We provide recommendations to help leaders move forward with an equity lens so that this crisis does not accelerate opportunity gaps that already existed for students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities.

MEETING P-12 STUDENTS' LEARNING NEEDS

Context: State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond recommends local education agencies (LEAs) provide distance learning through the end of the academic year. The California Department of Education issued guidance to LEAs on providing distance learning to students and families, including a focus on English learner students and students with disabilities.

Core Equity Principle: Parents and families deserve to know their students will continue to receive instructional supports and resources during school closures and when schools reopen.

Equity Actions for State Policymakers:

- **Direct school districts to make distance learning plans** publicly available via an easily accessible, user-friendly, multi-lingual platform.
- **Adopt emergency regulations** that describe how schools should measure student learning during this crisis and how this information should be used to allocate district- and school-level resources and tailor supports to help students catch up on missed material.
- **Require that federal and state coronavirus response funds be used by school districts** to achieve these purposes.

Equity Actions for District and School Leaders:

- **In students' home language, articulate how the learning needs of all students will be determined** now and when schools reopen, with specific attention to the needs of underserved groups of students including students who are low-income, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities.
- **Create systems that grant all students the opportunity to access grade level content** in ways that ensure the most marginalized students have access; do not solely rely on online learning. This should incorporate clear direction, criteria, and resources for students to meet course requirements and demonstrate readiness, including through written work packets and project-based learning.
- **Allocate resources—staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time** during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support. These students should also have opportunities to catch up and advance academically.

“[We need to] really double down on making sure we can help the students who are most vulnerable and who were already behind before this crisis occurred.”

– *Dr. Elisha Smith Arrillaga*
Executive Director
The Education Trust–West

K-12 GRADE LEVEL PROMOTION

Context: School districts may not have enough information to determine whether students should progress to the next grade. For students who were otherwise on track before school closure mandates were enacted, retention should be avoided, except in cases where there is clear evidence that the students would not be able to succeed if they progressed.

Core Equity Principles: Retention decisions should not disproportionately impact students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities. Students should be promoted to the next grade level in the Fall even if there is uncertainty about their level of readiness. Instead of retention, schools should be required to provide intensive support now as well as when school resumes to students who are not yet demonstrating that they meet grade-level standards through traditional, non-traditional and emerging assessment methods. If educators and families agree on retaining students, retention must be paired with intensive support and extended learning opportunities.

Equity Actions for State Policymakers:

- **Adopt emergency regulations** that establish the presumption that school districts will not retain students who could have been on track for promotion prior to the pandemic.
- **Require the creation of intensive personalized academic and non-academic support plans** to enable students who are not yet demonstrating readiness for the next grade to receive the support necessary to succeed through extended learning time during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and when schools reopen.
- **Require that state and federal coronavirus response funds be used by school districts to create these plans** and provide the necessary support to students who might have been retained, including extended learning time.
- **Commit to publicly release annual disaggregated cohort graduation rate and outcome data**, including College/Career Indicator data for current students, in order to determine how students impacted by the pandemic fare compared to prior cohorts and to identify additional interventions and supports if needed.

Equity Actions for District and School Leaders:

- **Institute pass/no pass grading policies for the remainder of the school year**, with the understanding that students who were otherwise on track before the pandemic will receive a passing grade. Generate a note on all students' transcripts that explains pass/no pass grade is a result of COVID-19 related school closures.
- **Allocate resources—staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time** during the summer (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support. These students should also have opportunities to catch up and advance academically.
- **Communicate each student's individualized learning plan**—and the resources that will be provided to meet it—to their families using the home language.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION

Context: Due to school closures, high school seniors will not have the opportunity to complete all required course credits for high school graduation and demonstrate college and career readiness by meeting College/Career Readiness Indicator requirements. State high school graduation requirements and individual district and school graduation requirements generally differ, which can exacerbate inequities during school closures. California's public universities require students to complete the a-g fifteen course sequence to be minimally eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU).

Core Equity Principles: All high school graduates should be given more flexibility to meet high school graduation and UC/CSU eligibility requirements. Students who are low-income, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities will have less access to a-g courses and rigorous college preparatory coursework as a result of school closures. Students deserve equitable access to college preparatory coursework, to know that they will be able to earn their high school diplomas, and that their public university eligibility will not be negatively affected by school closures.

Equity Actions for State Policymakers:

- **Enact emergency regulations to provide more flexibility for students** in the Class of 2020 to meet high school graduation requirements and be a-g eligible with necessary ongoing support. This year's high school seniors should be able to meet graduation requirements and UC/CSU eligibility in ways that do not solely rely on online distance learning. This should incorporate clear direction, criteria, and resources for students to meet course requirements and demonstrate readiness, including through written work packets, project-based learning, dual enrollment opportunities, and nationally recognized assessments like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams.
- **Commit to publicly release annual disaggregated "to and through" data** on the postsecondary pathways of current students, including college matriculation, persistence, and completion, and wage and employment data, in order to determine

how students impacted by the pandemic fare compared to prior cohorts and to identify additional interventions and supports if needed.

- **Hold high schools accountable for providing specific outreach, resources, and support** to students with disabilities, English learners, and students in temporary housing.
- **Require that state and federal coronavirus response funds be used by school districts to achieve these purposes** and that higher education invest coronavirus response funds in improving support for incoming students, addressing academic needs without traditional remediation, expanding access to evidence-based student success programs, and providing wraparound services—including access to food and child care—to support students.

Equity Actions for District and School Leaders:

- **Provide instructional support for all high school seniors** from their core subject teachers in lieu of fulfilling the 180-day instruction requirement, using written communication, telephone, video chat, and distance learning when available. This should include extended learning time in the summer if schools are able to reopen.
- **Extend access to already a-g approved online learning opportunities** such as Apex Learning and Edgenuity to every high school student in the district/school. Offer students the option to participate in fully online self-paced programs and/or in blended programs which are supported online by subject area credentialed teachers. Offer priority access to English learners and students with disabilities to the blended programs should space be limited.
- **For the Class of 2020, pass a resolution to recognize California's high school graduation requirements** in lieu of individual LEA graduation requirements. This includes a waiver for the Spring 2020 semester for students in the Class of 2021, 22, and 23 if they are unable to complete the required semesters units of study as a result of school closures.
- **Provide personalized virtual support from school counselors and other school staff**, including to complete the FAFSA and other college and career plans.
- **Postpone, rather than cancel, important milestone events such as prom and graduation** to the summer (if possible due to the pandemic).
- **Allocate resources—staff, time, and materials—for extended learning time during the summer** (if possible due to the pandemic) and for the 2020-21 school year based on student need, ensuring that the most vulnerable students are prioritized for instructional and socio-emotional support. These students should also have opportunities to catch up and advance academically.

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITIES – COURSE GRADING FLEXIBILITY & SUPPORTS

Context: Colleges and universities across California are working to transition courses online and train faculty to provide online instruction. These shifts will impact students' ability to access and retain course content, leaving students with fewer, high-quality opportunities to demonstrate learning. These changes present challenges for grading with implications that will influence students' future academic plans, including transfer, graduation, and graduate school.

Core Equity Principles: Grading decisions should be flexible and recognize students and instructors are coping with numerous external stressors that impact course delivery and performance. Colleges and universities should provide extra support to retain students with the least resources - students of color and students from low-income families - by outlining course plans and giving students the option to decide what evaluation method is best for them.

Equity Actions for State Policymakers:

- **Direct public colleges and university systems to make distance learning plans publicly available** via an easily accessible, user-friendly, multi-lingual platform.
- **Require that federal coronavirus response funds be used by colleges to ensure students that are supported with emergency grants to meet basic needs** and to ensure low-income students of color have access to learning materials to continue their coursework such as computers, software, Wi-Fi and books.

Equity Actions for College and University Leaders:

- **Institute flexible grading policies** that allow currently enrolled students to determine their preferred grade notation (i.e., letter grade or pass/not pass), at the end of the term. The flexibility should be extended across all colleges and universities in the state. Implement a notation on all students' transcripts that explain course grades were impacted by coronavirus.
- **Maintain and expand student support services** that allow students to access tutoring and supplemental learning materials during campus closures and after campuses reopen.

COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES – STUDENT TRANSITIONS AND PROGRESS

Context: Many colleges and universities have increased flexibility to receive “pass/no pass” for completed coursework for the current term and stated those decisions will not impact incoming freshman and transfer admissions. Still, several universities limit the number of pass/no pass courses a student can take to fulfill transfer eligibility requirements as well as major coursework, which could impact time-to-degree or graduation if those classes aren’t accepted.

Core Equity Principles: Student performance in a course (i.e., grades and enrollment status) should not adversely affect grade point average or academic standing in the midst of institutional responses to COVID-19. To that end, should students exercise grading flexibility, they deserve to know that choosing a “pass/no pass” will not impact time-to-degree, transfer eligibility, or graduation later in their college careers.

Equity Actions for State Policymakers:

- **Allow institutions to exclude terms impacted by COVID-19** in the calculation of a student's Satisfactory Academic Progress or ongoing Cal Grant eligibility.

Equity Actions for College and University Leaders:

- **Private colleges and universities should follow the California State University and the University of California’s decision to temporarily accept transfer units** taken as “pass/no pass” for undergraduate admission.
- **For community college transfer applicants, relax GPA and course requirements for Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) and Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG)** during COVID-impacted terms.
- **Exempt the number of pass/no pass units** taken during COVID-19 impacted terms from the total number of “pass/no pass” units students can take during their undergraduate career to be eligible for graduation. This should extend to graduating seniors (i.e., Class of 2020) and the Classes of 2021, 2022, and 2023.
- **Remove the restriction to fulfill major specific courses for a letter grade.** Students should have the flexibility to take courses that complete their major course requirements and not have to retake coursework for which they received a “pass” to complete.
- **Probation and academic dismissal procedures associated with a student receiving no pass in a course should be suspended** for current college students who attempt to persist in the course. Similar approaches should be taken for circumstances in which students elect to withdraw from a course during the current academic year. The California Community College system has already issued such guidance; the University of California, California State University, and private colleges and universities in the state should do the same.

For up-to-date information on COVID-19 education equity resources and responses, visit www.edtrustwest.org/covid19.