



The Education Trust–West

EQUITY ALERT



EDUCATION EQUITY IN CRISIS: GRADING POLICIES ROOTED IN EQUITY

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented education equity crisis in California. K-12 schools continue to remain closed and it is yet [unclear if they will reopen in the fall](#). Similarly, the [University of California and California's Community Colleges have not yet announced a systemwide decision](#), but the California State University's 23-campuses [will resume online](#) for fall. These decisions will continue to require 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. Continued school closures also leave a number of unanswered questions for students and families, including how distance learning will impact grading.

The California Department of Education has [issued guidance](#) maintaining that during the pandemic, grading policies and practices are a local decision that should be made in consultation with educators and with the understanding that any policy should hold students harmless. As a result, districts and schools across the state have issued differing grading policies that have equity implications for students. The California Collaborative on District Reform recently published a [brief](#) that describes grading policies in districts and schools across the nation, including some in California. Elk Grove Unified School District, for example, requires educators to continue to award letter grades, while Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE)--an equity lead in the state's system of supports-- has issued guidance recommending all districts and schools implement a pass/no pass grading policy. Palo Alto Unified and San Jose Unified, both part of SCCOE have adopted the county's recommendation. Other school districts, such as Novato Unified, considered a credit/incomplete grading policy at the onset; however, [faced with public pressure from the community](#), has now instituted a student choice grading policy that allows students to opt-in to receive a letter grade (*for district demographic information, see Table 1*).

There have also been calls to [award all students an 'A' grade](#) for the spring semester, arguing that doing so guarantees equity is preserved. In our [Education in Crisis Equity Alert](#) we recommend Local Education Agencies (LEAs) 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. Considering the varied grading policies that have been enacted across the state, we have amended our recommendation for state policymakers, K-12 school leaders, and college and university leaders:

- **Equity Actions for State Policymakers:** Direct CDE to require guidance for all LEAs to implement a uniform “pass/no pass” grading policy for all COVID-19 impacted terms with the understanding that students who were otherwise on track before the pandemic will receive a passing grade.
- **Equity Actions for K-12 Education Leaders:** For grade point average (GPA) calculation purposes, weigh a “passing” grade as equivalent to an “A” grade. Ensure that students' academic transcripts reflect this calculation.
- **Equity Actions for College and University Leaders:** Weigh a high school “passing” grade equivalent to an “A” for Covid-19 impacted terms.

“[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

Table 1: School District Demographics

	% Low Income	% White	% Asian	% Latinx	% Black	Grading Policy
Elk Grove Unified	54%	19%	24%	27%	11%	Award Letter Grades
Palo Alto Unified	10%	37%	36%	13%	2%	Pass/No Pass
San Jose Unified	44%	24%	14%	51%	3%	Pass/No Pass
Novato Unified	39%	45%	6%	38%	2%	Pass/Incomplete with option to opt-in for a letter grade

Source: California Department of Education, California School Dashboard, Accessed May 13, 2020

Question: How is this recommendation impacting local control?

Answer: Local control is important in that it allows LEAs to make decisions addressing the specific needs of their students and communities. The balance between maintaining local control and not wanting to create unnecessary burdens is important to keep; however, during times of crisis, equity must be at the forefront and should not be compromised. Maintaining that LEAs should institute their own grading policies will exacerbate disparities in that well-resourced families and communities with substantive social and cultural capital will advocate for their students, while those who do not share the same privileges cannot. This inequity will result in some students being academically disadvantaged as a result of the pandemic.

Question: Why is a uniform grading policy necessary?

Answer: The inconsistency in grading policies and practices exacerbate pre-existing inequities that disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color. A uniformed grading policy ensures that equity is prioritized and guarantees students are held harmless regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic status, or access to technology.

Question: Why should higher education systems weigh a “pass” as an “A”?

Answer: Pass/No Pass course grades are not calculated into a GPA, as a result, students' GPA does not receive a boost or decline. However, some educators and families are deterred from favoring this grading policy as electing to maintain a letter grade provides students the opportunity to increase GPA for competitiveness in higher education admissions. Accepting a “pass” and permitting it to hold the same weight as an “A” would remove the impetus to continue a grading practice that fuels an inequitable academic environment during the pandemic.

Question: Grades provide incentives and motivation, won’t this policy negatively affect learning?

Answer: Research shows that quantitative grades (numbers and letters) negatively affect students’ mental health, lowers self-esteem, and decreases students’ interest in learning. During times of crisis we must prioritize students’ social and emotional wellness. As they face the pandemic, many students and families are already feeling stressed and anxious about having their basic needs met, our educational system should not add to these stressors.

Question: What is an equitable way to implement a pass/no pass grading policy?

Answer: Middle and high schools should implement a pass/no pass policy that best positions students to succeed in passing the course. A student's grade at the onset of the school closures should be used as a floor to which students can only improve their grade. Doing so will help to mitigate the compounded [academic, technology, and health challenges facing families of low-income students and students of color](#).

Question: How can schools ensure COVID related grading policies do not disadvantage some groups over others?

Answer: At the conclusion of the term, schools and universities should complete an analysis of final grades to assess the disproportionate impact of grading policies implemented during COVID-19. If disproportionate impact is identified, school and district leaders should retroactively adjust the policy to correct for harm and shift grading policies in the forthcoming terms. In institutions of higher education, leaders should also assess changes in the number of students facing punitive measures related to grading policies, such as academic probation and suspension. An active approach to assessing inequity is necessary to ensure students are not pushed out of college and penalized due to external circumstances outside of their control.

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