

## Creating Equitable Grading Systems During COVID-19

On May 1, 2020, the Minnesota Department of Education and the [P-20 partnership](#) issued [guidance](#) for school districts to consider as they design assessment and grading systems during distance learning.

The P-20 partnership is a committee of education advocacy groups, state agencies, higher education institutions and legislators that advise the state government on matters related to education policy in Minnesota. [State statute](#) describes this group as a partnership created to establish “a seamless system of education that maximizes achievements of all students, from early childhood through elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, while promoting the efficient use of financial and human resources. The partnership shall consist of major statewide educational groups or constituencies or noneducational statewide organizations with a stated interest in P-20 education.” Currently, the partnership is comprised of representatives from 16 organizations. The remaining four spots are for members of the Legislature from both the majority and minority parties in the Minnesota House of Representatives and the Minnesota Senate.

This document provides a brief summary of that guidance. Much of this summary is comprised of direct quotations from the MDE document.

Education Minnesota, as an active member of the P-20, endorses MDE’s recommendation that district leaders “approach the creation of new assessment and grading systems with an equity mindset. The new systems must reflect an effort to confront and eradicate known inequities in the current system.”

Districts should adopt a “do no harm” approach to grading and assessment. Students should not be penalized for factors beyond their control. In addition, all students do not have access to the same information, resources and technology and grading and assessment systems must reflect that reality.

### **Guiding Principles**

- Educators must be part of the planning process. They will also need guidance from leadership and time to create equitable grading systems.
- Students and educators could potentially become ill, or they could become the primary caretaker for a loved one who contracts the virus. New grading and assessment systems must reflect this reality.
- This is a moment to confront and eradicate known inequities in the current grading and assessment systems. Start with a clear definition of what is being assessed, and design systems that meet the needs of each unique, local population of students.
- New reporting and assessment models must provide choice for educators, students and guardians. District leaders and educators must also embrace the reality that all choices are not equal for all students and all choices come with consequences.
- Districts must use robust, equitable and multi-modal communication methods to inform students and their guardians about new grading and assessment systems.

### **Initial Planning**

Educators and district leaders should start by collecting as much information as possible and looking at all data through an equity frame. MDE recommends districts and educators start with these questions:

1. What can be done to promote equity and fairness in grading across systems and institutions? District leaders and educators need to build an awareness of both internal inequities at the site and district levels as well as the inequities that exist across all districts and institutions.

2. How can education institutions create grading systems that allow for the flexibility to meet the needs of their unique student populations? This means considering both long and short term flexibility as we cannot predict how this virus will continue to alter public life.
3. How can decisions about grading be made in both a timely and thoughtful manner?
4. How should assessment and grading considerations be expanded in this moment?
5. How can stakeholders be meaningfully involved in decisions about assessment and grading?
6. How will assessment and grading policies and practices be communicated to students, families and communities? How will leaders ensure that students, families and communities understand the potential impacts of these decisions and policies?

The Minnesota Department of Education has also provided educators and leaders with a [Distance Learning Template](#) that includes questions to evaluate the degree to which equity is embedded within a distance learning plan. We also recommend using those to collect and analyze the appropriate information needed to build an equitable grading system.

### **Student Retention Concerns**

MDE reminds districts that “there are many adverse effects of retention. Research says that students are more negatively impacted by grade retention than they are positively affected by it. The inequities of distance...are disproportionately impacting traditionally underserved groups of students. For these reasons, it is the **strong recommendation that schools and districts not retain students in their current grade levels for next school year** due to distance learning and interruptions in some students’ education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning.”

Instead, one or more of the following strategies might be considered by districts to support students who were in danger of being retained:

- Provide students with counseling to reengage them and get them going in the right direction.
- Provide alternative or extended learning opportunities for students to attend and make improvements in the areas in which they struggle.
- Place students on individual plans of study that include objectives, actions the students must take and supports. A plan of study provides a student with specific objectives that they must meet over the course of the plan. It also provides assistance and increased accountability for a student.

### **Student Transcripts, Records and Report Cards**

MDE recommends districts and schools include the following text on all student transcripts, records and report cards:

*Grades that are documented during the time period of March 16 through June 30 of 2020 reflect the distance learning period resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Future use of these grades for academic placement, admission, acceleration or remediation is discouraged and should only be used with caution after balancing the information against student performance in other grading periods.*

### **Options for Grading**

MDE’s [grading and assessment guidance](#) contains specific recommendations based on grade level. MDE asks districts and educators to consider options beyond the A through F scale and consider using “‘P/F’ (Pass/Fail), ‘P/I’ (Pass/Incomplete), ‘P/N’ (Pass/No Credit) or ‘A-C and P/NP’ (A, B, C and Pass/No Pass).” Districts and educators should also “understand these options have both benefits and drawbacks for certain populations of students (ALC and ALP students, college bound students, dual enrollment students, student athletes, etc.).”