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Equitable Grading in a Challenging Time

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By Joe Feldman

School closures through the end of the school year because of COVID-19 pose many challenges, few of which we were prepared for. Among the many complicated issues with which school leaders are wrestling, grading is one of the more complex, not only because it has such major implications for students, but because it is a topic that was difficult to tackle *before* our current crisis. Schools often struggle to develop consistent grading policies—how a grade should be calculated and what elements of a student’s performance should, and should not, be included, in a grade.

Families expect that their children will be successful in school, and the grades students earn are the most concrete expression of a student’s academic achievement and a school’s effectiveness in educating them. How do we award grades with integrity during a global pandemic—and how can we ensure that we maintain equity in the process? As a former teacher and school administrator, I now partner with schools to help them improve the accuracy and equity of their grading practices, and there are several important factors school leaders should consider in the decision-making process about whether to grade and how.

Consider the Unique Context

Stress negatively impacts student academic performance. When students experience stress and anxiety, their cognitive capacity decreases, making it harder for them to learn and perform higher-demand tasks like critical thinking and being creative. The psychological impact of the global pandemic affects every student, particularly those who have family members who have contracted the virus and become ill. And as the economic impact of this crisis becomes more severe, with more people out of work and requiring financial assistance, stress and anxiety within families will increase, creating additional adverse consequences; research has directly linked parents’ job losses to lower student performance. Students in lower-income families, who are more vulnerable to economic

downturns and more likely to experience food and housing insecurity, will be even more vulnerable to health- and economic-related stress. And although schools often provide some form of mental health services, many students now are not able to access them.

What does this all mean for a student's academic performance? With students experiencing this increased stress (and for many, trauma), they will not be able to process new material or demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of course content. Their performance on quizzes, tests, or other assessments will be compromised and will not accurately reflect their learning. Lower-income students and those with special needs will feel this impact more acutely.

Academic performance during school closures is more likely to reflect racial, economic, and resource differences. Schools have shifted to remote instruction, and never in the history of our country has a student's learning been so dependent on home technological resources—a situation that has exposed glaring inequities. Many students do not have sufficient access to technology because of a lack of computers or internet access and bandwidth in their homes. Families with several school-age children may require multiple computers and higher bandwidth.

Parents who have a higher education background or who have more resources are able to provide more academic supports for their children. During school closures, parents have been asked to assume more responsibilities to support and even teach their children, which means that the capacity of parents to support remote instruction will now have a greater influence on students' learning. And there is another complicating dynamic: Parents who are in the health or medical professions or who provide other “essential” products or services—including hourly employees in public transit, sanitation, grocery stores, and pharmacies—are less available to their children than parents in other professions during this time.

Schools always strive to provide sufficient supports to students to compensate for differences in family resources. But in this new context, no school is able to do that as effectively, thereby exacerbating the disparities. The inequitable result is that students' academic performance will reflect their home environments more closely than ever.

Teachers aren't fully prepared to provide high-quality remote instruction. Even among the most dedicated teachers, many haven't received adequate preparation to provide remote or distance learning instruction. Effective online learning requires carefully tailored instructional design and planning that uses a specialized model for design and development. It's more than using online learning applications (which, for some teachers, pose a very steep learning curve); it's not simply having students progress through their school schedule in virtual classes all day long; and it's not just posting worksheets and reading assignments on a website. Yet these rudimentary translations of in-class teaching may be the best that most teachers can do, given that they themselves are also likely grappling with the significant stress and anxiety of physical distancing and the health and safety of their families. We should recognize that the quality of our instruction has been compromised, with less differentiation and support for students who struggle.

Guidance for Grading

Educators are working hard each day to do the best for their students and provide learning in adaptive ways. But in the current context, the only way schools can act in the best interests of children and still preserve the integrity and accuracy of their grading, while not weakening equity, is to not evaluate and assign letter grades for remote learning during the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. Below are some alternative grading options.

Use only pass/incomplete grades.

If grades need to be awarded—in the high school and postsecondary levels—the only grades for the second semester of the school year should be “pass” or “incomplete.” Schools use 0–100 percentages and A–F letter grades primarily to distinguish among students and suggest precise distinctions of course content knowledge, but this specificity is impossible when such significant doubts exist about the integrity or fairness of student performance data.

Letter and percentage grades can be a source of stress and anxiety for students in general, and pass/incomplete grades would give students some relief during this time. A student should receive a pass for second semester if, at the time her school was closed, she was meeting minimum standards in a course. Any student who was not meeting minimum standards in the course up to that point should have the opportunity to fulfill the requirements remotely and receive a “pass” for the course. If students are not able to meet the requirements for whatever reason, they should receive an incomplete for the course, and when schools reopen, be provided sufficient opportunity to fulfill requirements. Yearlong courses in which semester grades are normally combined should be bifurcated into two separate reports—a letter grade for first semester and a pass/incomplete for second semester.

If grades are necessary, make them temporary.

If the school context requires that an A–F letter grade must be assigned, schools should explicitly frame the grade as a temporary description of what a student has demonstrated based on incomplete information. Once schools reopen, students should have the opportunity to learn the course content and improve the grade assigned during the school closure period.

Resist offering students the option of receiving a letter grade.

Many schools, feeling the pressure to award grades, have decided to offer students and families a choice: a pass grade or, if the student continues to perform highly, a letter grade. While this may seem a reasonable compromise that can only help—not hurt—students, this policy exacerbates achievement disparities and is inequitable. The students who have the most resources and therefore are most able to withstand the impact of COVID-19 will be able to earn high grades, while the students who have fewest resources and, without the school supports, are most impacted, will not be able to. The letter grade option is an option only available to the students with the most supports; the school is offering an opportunity only students with sufficient resources can exercise—a policy that perpetuates inequities.

Have students sign an integrity agreement.

With students doing all of their work outside the classroom, it is impossible for teachers to ensure that submitted work is entirely the student’s; it could be the performance of an older sibling, a parent,

or even a peer. Schools should ask students to sign a “remote academic integrity agreement,” in which they promise that all work submitted was completed without any additional assistance, unless specified by the teacher. This agreement helps schools reaffirm expectations for students and increases students’ investment in their learning. It also builds teachers’ confidence that the work students submit is their own; educators should use these agreements not as “gotcha” traps to disqualify student work but rather as a tool to foster responsibility and build trusting relationships.

Continue providing feedback on performance.

Teacher feedback could be communicated through online meetings or web-based applications, and it will give students valuable insight into their understanding, guidance on how to improve, and motivation to learn and grow. Nongraded feedback can help students focus on learning rather than performance, and when the psychological and intellectual “load” on students and their families is so significant, it is important that schools lean on the side of support and learning rather than competition and high-stakes performance.

Students—Not Grades—First

Once schools have decided on a grading policy, school leaders must reach out to families to explain the policy and how it aligns with their overarching beliefs about learning, equity, and children. And it’s key to keep in mind that if parents and others are concerned about whether awarding traditional grades will make their children less competitive or eligible for opportunities (e.g., scholarships and college admission), the many institutions that make decisions based on grades—such as colleges and the National Collegiate Athletic Association—have already begun to release statements affirming that students who receive pass grades will not be disadvantaged. These organizations, like schools, recognize that the foremost concern is students’ health and well-being during this incredibly challenging time.

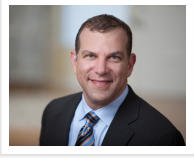
Schools must affirm that all grades are accurate, that they must be equitable, and most of all, that they support learning. Even if schools have previously published grading policies for this spring, as the effects of COVID-19 expand to affect more of our students and families in more profound ways, they can revisit and modify earlier policies.

As we look for silver linings in the midst of this pandemic, perhaps we now have a more critical eye and greater license to examine our traditional grading practices and improve them to more tightly align with research, our beliefs, and our commitment to equity.

A similar version of this article appeared as “To Grade or Not to Grade” in the April 2020 special issue of Educational Leadership.

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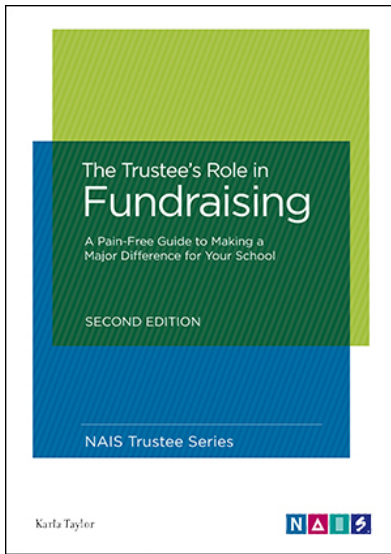


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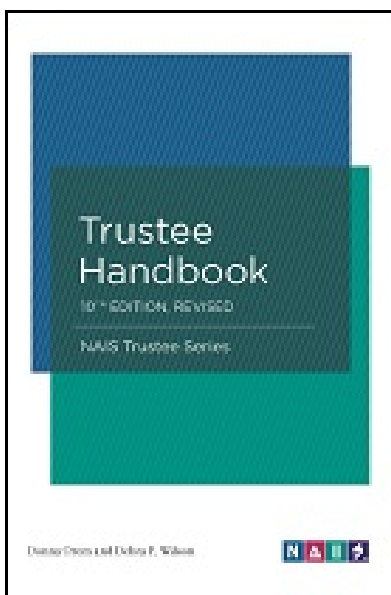
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