



The Education Trust–West

EQUITY ALERT



EDUCATION EQUITY IN CRISIS: FOLLOWING UP ON GRADING POLICIES ROOTED IN EQUITY

On March 4, 2020, the Governor declared a COVID-19 state of emergency prompting school and campus building closures. To support equitable decision making during an unprecedented time, The Education Trust–West released an Equity Alert titled “[Equity in Crisis: How to Address Learning, Promotions, Transitions and Grades in Light of School and College Closures](#).” This first Equity Alert recognized the difficulties K-12 and higher education leaders faced as they worked to support students, families, and communities during a global pandemic. The Equity Alert also offered recommendations for state policymakers, K-12 district and school leaders, and college and university leaders to help move forward with an equity lens and prevent accelerating the opportunity gaps that already existed for students of color, students from low-income communities, emergent bilingual students, and students with disabilities. Included among those recommendations was an emphasis on enacting and recognizing Pass/No Pass grading policies for COVID-19 impacted semesters (across all institutions) and allowing “pass” grades to serve toward graduation, admission, promotion, and transfer policies.

Since the release of our initial Equity Alert, K-12 and higher education systems have swiftly [coordinated guidance](#) to address grading for the Spring 2020 semester and for Fall admissions. As the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning continue, guidance for the 2020-21 academic year and admission cycle has been slower, resulting in [disconnected grading policies](#) – some of which have yielded disproportionate [failing grades](#) for students from low-income communities and communities of color.

The state of emergency has yet to be lifted, and in the last year we’ve seen all institutions (California State University, University of California, California Community Colleges, and K-12 school systems) request financial support and flexibility with state and federal mandated requirements, under the recognition that they are operating within the constraints of a global pandemic. The same recognition and grace should be afforded to the students and families these institutions serve, including enacting grading policies that prevent further disadvantaging students who are most vulnerable and hardest hit by the pandemic.

K-12 SYSTEM

The California Department of Education (CDE) has [maintained](#) that during the pandemic, grading policies and practices are local decisions that should be made in consultation with educators and with the understanding that any policy should hold students harmless. [Recently released guidance](#) recommends local education agencies (LEAs) take time to reflect on how student progress is measured and how to transition to a more equitable grading system. Additionally, the recommendations include an emphasis on the quality of student work, flexibility with assignment due dates, and multiple measures for assessing and reporting student grades.

Considering the varied grading policies that local leaders have enacted across the state, and the disparate impacts these have had on students, we recommend the Legislature:

- Require LEAs to provide a letter grade and a Pass/No Pass grade to students, with the option to select between the two measures within a specified time frame (such as two weeks after grades have been posted);

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- If students (or parents/guardians, for students under 18) do not make a choice within this time frame, the default grade for any grade C or higher should be the letter grade; the default for a D grade should be a Pass; and the default for an F should be a No Pass or Incomplete;
- Require LEAs to offer incompletes to students who request them along with additional time to complete coursework for a letter grade or Pass;
- Require a Pass to be weighed as a 2.0 for GPA calculation purposes;
- Require LEAs to conduct an analysis of final grades to assess the disproportionate impact of grading policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of California system has conducted such analyses; LEA leaders should do the same.
 - If a disproportionate impact is identified, require LEAs to retroactively adjust grading policies to correct for disproportionate impact and shift grading policies in the subsequent terms.

We recommend the CDE:

- Directly provide LEAs with multilingual communication about grading options that can be distributed to families and students via multiple platforms to ensure they understand their options;
- Conduct an analysis of final grades to assess the disproportionate impact of grading policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of California system has conducted such analyses; the CDE should do the same for the K-12 system.

If the Legislature and CDE do not take action on this issue, we recommend LEA leaders:

- Provide students with a letter grade and a Pass/No Pass grade, with the option to select their choice within a specified time frame (such as two weeks after grades have been posted);
 - If students (or parent/guardian, for students under 18) do not choose within this time frame, the default grade for any grade C or better should be the letter grade; the default for a D grade should be a Pass; and the default for an F should be a No Pass or Incomplete;
- Offer Incompletes to students who request them, along with additional time to complete coursework for a letter grade or Pass;
- Weigh a Pass as a 2.0 for GPA calculation purposes;
- Provide families and students with timely and multilingual communication about their grading options;
- Conduct an analysis of final grades to assess the disproportionate impact of grading policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of California system has conducted such analyses; LEA leaders should do the same.
 - If a disproportionate impact is identified, LEA leaders should retroactively adjust grading policies to correct for disproportionate impact and shift grading policies in the subsequent terms.

These recommendations recognize the complexity of assigning grades during a time of crisis and also afford students and families with the opportunity to make informed decisions on an issue that has significant implications for students' academic futures.

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Instruction remains online for the present academic term, but an uptick in vaccinations and decrease in infection rates have public higher education system leaders hopeful for a [fall reopening](#). Each higher education segment has differed in its decisions to extend aspects of its former guidance, as well as decisions on which student population to extend it for (i.e., incoming freshman, transfer students, current enrollees). We are glad to see some of our recommendations adopted, but a continuation of grading guardrails remains necessary. The following are the most up-to-date grading considerations addressed at each public segment:

The California Community College Chancellor's Office issued [Executive Order 2021-01](#) to continue the suspension of grading policies which would punitively impact students' progress through the remaining 2021 academic terms. The Executive Order reflects the system's equity-minded approach by recognizing that "students who are adversely impacted by the transition to new instructional methods should not be prejudiced by them since they were implemented for reasons beyond

the students' control," and by noting that we remain in a state of emergency. Among the extended policies is flexibility in the deadline to elect a Pass/No Pass course grade and the suspension of probation and dismissal procedures associated with not passing a course.

The California State University Chancellor's Office extended its former guidance on fall 2021 [freshman admissions](#) to current high school seniors and also communicated additional information to juniors and students in grades 8-10. The office recently addressed the sunset on grading policies for currently enrolled students as outlined in [Executive Order 1037](#) which was issued in spring 2020. While the new [memorandum](#) doesn't continue the suspension of all former policies covered, it does grant an additional semester to protect students from having their fall 2020 course withdrawals counted towards the total limits allowed. Notably, the guidance is retroactively effective and has been granted with the goal of facilitating student progress toward degree completion.

The University of California recently updated its [admissions website](#) to inform prospective applicants of grading policies related to fall 2021 admissions. It reflects an extension of the grade-related modifications it provided last year, and asserts an intention "to ensure that high school and transfer students are not penalized by any COVID-related disruptions to their academic record or application."

In our previous equity alert, we recommended colleges and universities conduct disproportionate impact studies to identify inequitable academic outcomes associated with the absence or implementation of grading policy changes. In September 2020, The UC Office of the President released a report called [Planning and Evaluation of COVID-19 Academic and Student Impacts](#). The study was produced in response to questions raised by the UC Board of Regents about impacts to equity earlier in the year. The report analyzes data collected in the spring of 2020 on student enrollment, grades, and student perspectives during the initial phase of remote instruction. The findings showed differences in outcomes between student groups and across campuses, which reflect the result of local decisions. Importantly, campuses such as UC Riverside and UC Los Angeles saw a complete elimination in the overall percentage of students who withdrew from at least one course in the spring (including Pell recipients, first-generation, Black, and Latinx students). Institutional leaders used learnings to inform fall 2020 planning, and subsequent studies will inform campus and systemwide planning in the forthcoming terms. It is unclear whether campuses will make any retroactive adjustments where grading policies inequitably impacted particular student groups.

Individual systems have made great strides to support students during the pandemic, particularly in addressing first-time admissions. However, better uniformity in grading approaches across systems would serve students more equitably. System leaders must also continue centering equity in their grading policies. For the duration of this pandemic, we recommend institutional leaders do the following to continue supporting current college students to succeed:

- Clearly communicate system-and- campus-wide grading policies to students and faculty.
- Encourage faculty to implement the best practices in grading and instruction offered by their campus resource hubs.
- Implement grading policies that demonstrate the best outcomes for underrepresented student groups.
- Conduct an analysis of final grades to assess the impact of grading policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University of California system has conducted such analyses; the California Community Colleges, California State University, and private colleges and universities in the state should do the same.
 - If a disproportionate impact is identified, retroactively adjust grading policies to correct previous inequities, and shift grading policies in the subsequent terms. For example, the California State University has done this for course withdrawals. The California Community Colleges, University of California system and private colleges and universities in the state should do similarly.

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