

April 13, 2020

Grading Policies and Practices Under COVID-19

Overview

Teaching and learning under COVID-19 has created many challenges for educators, students and our communities. Over the past three weeks, schools throughout the state have instituted remote learning plans and have transitioned to various forms of virtual and distance learning. Now, schools are grappling with the question of how to **equitably** institute grading policies and practices in this emergency and these unprecedented times.

There is no question that teaching and learning under COVID-19 is **not equivalent** to the level of education provided, and the impact achieved, by New Jersey's public schools at any other time. Teaching and learning under COVID-19 is not business as usual, and it is unethical to maintain traditional policies and practices as if it is. In these unprecedented times, instead of focusing on heavy accountability for our students, we must refocus our energies toward empathy, grace and understanding.

Current Context

Grading attempts under COVID-19 will be more a reflection of the family's level of privilege than a true reflection of student learning, progress or performance. Grading practices have various implications for students, ranging from GPA calculations and college admissions to scholarships and eligibility for various programming and opportunities.

Educators must be mindful of equity issues and the potential unintended consequences when considering grading policies and practices as we make our way through this uncharted territory. Issues may include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Students lack traditional access to their teachers and support personnel.
- Students may lack equal access to devices and/or reliable internet.
- Students may lack access to a quiet and supportive environment.
- Students may lack access to support and/or encouragement from adult(s) in the home.
- All districts and schools have implemented their own remote learning plans, ranging from virtual learning to paper-based packets. Disparities exist within schools and across districts.
 - Special education, 504, and English language learner accommodations and modifications in a virtual/remote environment cannot possibly replicate the full range of accommodations and modifications available and accessible in a face-to-face environment.
 - Students across our state are experiencing, and will continue to experience, varying degrees of trauma related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing research on the impact of natural disasters on student mental health and achievement indicates that students may experience higher levels of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder that will greatly influence their performance. (See appendix.)

NJEA **strongly recommends** that any discussion and decisions on grading policies and practices under COVID-19 include and value the voices of educators.

Grading Policies and Practices under COVID-19

Policies and Practices <i>These can, and in many cases should, be combined</i>	
<p>Elimination of Hard Deadlines and Late Penalties</p> <p>If students complete assignments beyond the deadline, they are not penalized. The goal is for students to complete the work to the best of their ability. Conversely, deadlines are removed and students are encouraged to submit assignments as they are able.</p>	
<p>Complete/In Progress/Incomplete</p> <p>As a replacement for letter/numerical grades on individual assignments, educators indicate whether or not assignments have been completed, attempted or not attempted by students.</p>	
<p>Feedback Focus</p> <p>Educators provide ongoing feedback to students on individual assignments. Feedback is specific and provides useful information about the student work in light of the goal of the specific task. No letter/numerical grades are given.</p>	
<p>Grade Freeze or Marking Period Adjustment</p> <p>Schools “freeze” the grades from the marking period (or at the point of school building closure) as a minimum final grade for the remaining marking periods. This can apply with or without participation requirements.</p> <p>Alternatively, schools/districts could adjust the marking period calendar so that the current marking period ends on the school building closure date, with the subsequent marking period encompassing the entirety of the school building closure.</p>	
<p>Pass/Fail</p> <p>Students complete assignments according to the district’s remote learning plan. Letter/number grades are not given on individual assignments or for the marking period as a whole. If students complete the assignments appropriately, meeting the basic level of minimum expectations, they pass the course. GPA calculations should not be altered by Pass/Fail courses.</p>	
<p>Flexible Practices</p> <p>Despite whatever grading policy/practices are implemented, students are able to make an appeal for Pass/Fail, grade modifications, and/or dropping GPA calculation if performance is inconsistent with the individual’s academic history or if a letter grade is requested by the student/guardian.</p>	

Appendix: Mental Health Implications for Our Students

While the circumstances before us with COVID-19 are unprecedented, we can look to the experience of students who have been displaced from their schools for extended periods of time, due to natural disasters. This allows for a deeper understanding of the heightened significance and dire need to carefully consider and modify grading practices across the state:

- Following Hurricane Katrina and student displacement from school, 60.5% of New Orleans school children from sites participating in the study **tested positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.**¹
- “Children who live through a disaster usually have **two life-changing experiences**. First, they endure the trauma itself, which might forever alter their sense of security and their ability to cope with life’s problems. Second, they face ongoing disorder and dishevelment in their day-to-day lives.”²
- For students experiencing a natural disaster, **the trauma begins prior to the disaster’s occurrence and resulting damage**, when communities are making preparations in response to warnings. This preparation can cause hypervigilance, anger, denial and withdrawal prior to the disaster’s occurrence.³
- **“The process-trauma in the wake of the disaster can last much longer than the event itself** as families try to deal with loss and rebuild their lives, and children often experience the aftermath right alongside the adults.”⁴
- “In their study of children affected by Hurricane Hugo, Shannon et al. (1994) further compared the performances of students who exhibited PTSD symptoms to those who did not. **They found that 51% of PTSD students experienced a performance decrease** compared to 28% who did not, and the **average decrease in performance for the former group was three times greater** than for the latter group.”⁵

¹ Jaycox, L. H., Cohen, J. A., Mannarino, A. P., Walker, D. W., Langley, A. K., Gegenheimer, K. L., ... Schonlau, M. (2010). Children’s mental health care following Hurricane Katrina: A field trial of trauma focused psychotherapies. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 23*(2), 223-231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20518>.

² Black, S. (2001). Disaster’s aftermath. *American School Board Journal, 188*(4).

³ Zenere, F. J., & Lazarus, P. J. (1999). Winds of terror: Children’s responses to hurricane and tornado Disasters. In A. S. Canter & S. A. Carroll (Eds.), *Crisis Prevention and Response: A Collection of NASP Resources* (pp. 223-229). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

⁴ Pane, John F., Daniel F. McCaffrey, Nidhi Kalra, and Annie Jie Zhou, (2008). Effects of Student Displacement in Louisiana During the First Academic Year After the Hurricanes of 2005. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1379.html>.

⁵ Pane, John F., Daniel F. McCaffrey, Nidhi Kalra, and Annie Jie Zhou, Effects of Student Displacement in Louisiana During the First Academic Year After the Hurricanes of 2005. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1379.html>.