

Grading Principles in Pandemic-Era Learning: Recommendations and Implications for Secondary School Leaders

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ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in K-12 education, school leaders quickly pivoted from prioritizing continuous instruction and technology access to the output: grades. In response to these unprecedented times, secondary schools utilized “do no harm” grading methods, such as freezing previous grades and replacing letter grades with pass-fail. The purpose of this essay is to describe grading principles that secondary school leaders should consider during future pandemic era learning and to suggest implications based upon previous literature.

Keywords: COVID-19, educational leadership, grading, remote learning, standards-based grading

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many bricks-and-mortar secondary schools across the United States transitioned to emergency remote learning (Cahapay, 2020; Schwartz, 2020). Rather than moving from one classroom to the next based upon a bell schedule within a physical setting, students bounced from one Zoom meeting to the next or spent their time at home sifting through menus of teacher-created learning options. Some of these schools quickly pivoted to required synchronous digital learning; others communicated asynchronous digital learning

plans, while still other schools opted for paper-and-pencil packets (Malkus et al., 2020). Regardless of the teaching medium, teachers and students found themselves in a new educational environment without so much as a dress rehearsal to tease out any potential ramifications.

School leaders spent a tremendous amount of time in the initial weeks of the pandemic prioritizing technology access and continuous learning input in order to replace face-to-face instruction (Malkus et al., 2020). As the pandemic-influenced academic year came to a close, one issue in need of immediate resolution was communicating the output: grading students. Grades are important, in particular for high school students, because they often serve as a gatekeeper for post-secondary admissions, scholarships, and financial aid. Results from previous research suggest teachers in typical classroom settings determine grades based upon a combination of assignments, effort, participation, and achievement (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan, 2019). During emergency remote learning, students were likely provided less supervised teacher contact time, if any at all. In addition, teachers were aware of their students' less-than-ideal and often-interrupted learning conditions, such as teenagers providing primary care for their younger siblings. As such, educators were unable to rely upon point-producing artifacts, such as daily homework assignments and classroom participation, in order to determine a course letter grade.

In response to these unprecedented times, secondary schools utilized "do no harm" grading methods, such as freezing the previous grades, replacing letter grades with pass-fail, and providing students' choice among the aforementioned methods (Doyne & Gonchar, 2020; Goldstein, 2020). Looking ahead to future semesters in which remote and hybrid learning is a distinct possibility (Hubler et al., 2020; Meckler, 2020), a clear playbook for grading is needed for school leaders. The purpose of this essay is to describe grading principles that secondary school leaders should consider during future pandemic-era learning and to suggest the ensuing implications.

GRADING PRINCIPLES IN PANDEMIC ERA LEARNING

As secondary schools consider the next phase of uncertain remote and hybrid learning influenced by the pandemic, leaders should consider three grading principles. First, letter grades should be based upon the level at which students have learned a prioritized set of course objectives or standards (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019). Too often in the past, teachers have based grades upon activities, rather than learning goals (O'Connor, 2017). For example, a culminating English assessment may be reported as "Unit 5 Test" in the grade book, which limits demonstration of learning to a single assessment medium. In hybrid or remote learning environments, secondary teachers might more

appropriately provide students with options to demonstrate their progress toward a learning goal, such as *supporting claims using textual evidence*. In response to potential hardships at home and learner preferences, some students might choose to video-record a verbal explanation, while others may opt to write an essay. Regardless of the assessment medium, learning should be reported in the grade book based upon the understanding of the learning goal. Thus, using a 1-4 integer scale, Suzy might receive a “4” in the grade book for *supporting claims using textual evidence*, which reflects her proficiency of this learning goal.

Second, schools should report non-cognitive behaviors, such as homework completion and participation separately, if at all. While a number of authors strongly advocate this principle (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Reeves et al., 2017), honestly assessing these behaviors within flexible delivery models may be a challenge. As such, it is much more important to separate or omit non-cognitive behaviors in order to accurately communicate what a student has learned in flexible delivery settings. When non-cognitive behaviors and academic learning is inappropriately combined, the result is “hodgepodge grading” in which the meaning of grades is obfuscated (Brookhart, 1991).

Third, school leaders should create a grading system emphasizing *what* students have learned over *when* they have learned it (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Reeves et al., 2017). Interruptions to learning in remote settings should be expected; therefore, educators will need to be flexible in their deadlines for learning to be submitted. Furthermore, when students have not yet demonstrated learning by the deadline, schools should consider utilizing lenient reassessment procedures, as documented by Wormeli (2011).

Over one hundred years of grading research suggests schools have not properly communicated student learning (Brookhart et al., 2016). With temporary grading changes implemented in the recent months, now is the time for schools to overhaul their grading practices on a more permanent basis. These three grading principles are often packaged together as *standards-based grading* (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Townsley, 2018). While they are not new and unique to remote learning, they do serve as guideposts for school leaders seeking to communicate learning in the “new normal.” Previous research suggests that implementing standards-based grading (SBG) requires an intentional plan spanned across multiple years involving two-way communication with educational stakeholders (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Townsley & Knight, 2020), recommendations that may not be possible or may require compromises during expeditious planning for pandemic-era learning. While not all of these grading principles may be feasible to implement with fidelity in the midst of finite time considerations, perfection should not become the enemy of progress.

CONCLUSIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

Due to the immediacy of pandemic-era learning, school leaders may find themselves at odds in relation to some SBG implementation research. Several implications, including utilizing an expedited implementation timeline and addressing potential parent resistance, are important to proactively consider.

School leaders may have been given the benefit of the doubt regarding a one-time grading decision during the previous pandemic-influenced academic year. However, looking ahead, any interim changes to communicating pandemic-era learning will require an expedited implementation timeline. Previous school leader perspectives highlight the need for a multiple-year process when transitioning from points and percentages to SBG (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Townsley et al., 2019); however, these grading principles will need to be implemented more expeditiously due to the ongoing pandemic. School leaders might initially lean on willing teachers with fewer years of experience who are more likely to agree with SBG compared to their more seasoned colleagues (Hany et al., 2016). In addition, school leaders should keep in mind that teachers frequently report struggling with consistent classroom implementation (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley & Knight, 2020), which can result in a systematic implementation dip (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). To counteract these implementation timeline concerns, adept school leaders will include teacher voices in their planning efforts (Urich, 2012; Weaver, 2018) and be prepared to provide ongoing, just-in-time professional learning (Townsley & Knight, 2020).

Some parents have previously expressed resistance to changing grading systems in secondary schools (Frankin et al., 2016; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Yost, 2015). Today's parents have expressed a confidence in their past educational experiences, which included points and percentages (Frankin et al., 2016). Therefore, it will be important to ensure they understand both the "why" and "how" of any new grading system. In what may be a silver lining for schools previously considering a transition to SBG, the pandemic may help stakeholders better understand "why" SBG will better communicate student learning separate from non-cognitive behaviors.

Guskey and Link (2019) suggest grading reform is a forgotten element of instructional leadership. It took over one hundred years, but a public health crisis has caused many schools to temporarily change their grading practices. The current pandemic-era of learning provides school leaders with an opportunity to reclaim the purpose of grades to communicate student learning, whether the "new norm" is here to stay or schools eventually return to primarily face-to-face instruction.

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