m1 DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Assessing Learning Guidance for the 2020-21 School Year

Guiding Principles

Purpose and Context

Equitable assessment and grading practices should have a profoundly positive impact on a student's learning and success. In addition, they should result in quality evidence of learning that accurately reflects where the student is along the path toward meeting standards. Implementing a balanced assessment system endeavors to ensure learning and promote improved instructional practices. Effective embedded formative assessment and a practice of continuously adjusting instruction places the emphasis on feedback and aids the process of learning to increase student proficiency and growth. Locally developed, balanced assessment systems must support all educators and students and provide families quality feedback on what the student knows and can do.

Minnesota's E–12 public education system will be delivering instruction in the 2020-21 school year via distance learning, face-to-face instruction, or a hybrid of the two. This unprecedented moment in public education has created stress, anxiety, and uncertainty for educators, families, and students. In this moment, educators will need to design new assessment and grading systems that cause no harm and minimize long term impacts for students. This is particularly true for students that have been historically and disproportionately disadvantaged, including Black, Indigenous, students of color, LGBTQ+, special education, English learners, immigrants, students experiencing housing insecurity, and students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Additionally, the systems being designed must be able to adjust during the fluid situation and allow seamless transitions between the different delivery models. This document will be updated as necessary.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) acknowledges the authority and importance of designing an assessment and grading system at the local level. Utilizing research, data, and best evidence in conjunction with principles of equity and the local context to inform the decision making process is critical.

Different students will thrive in different models, and some students will likely be overwhelmed and need support. COVID-19 is magnifying inequities that were always present and too often overlooked. During distance learning or a hybrid model, students will not have uniform access to support systems and technology. In addition, educators and leaders must acknowledge that student learning may be interrupted in some models by the absence of services public schools provide students on a daily basis, such as breakfast, lunch, mental health supports, occupational and physical therapy, creative outlets, and social interaction.

A truly equitable assessment and grading system created for distance learning, face-to-face instruction, or a hybrid of the two must account for the complex and multifaceted ways the closure of physical school buildings will be a bigger obstacle for some students than others. Many educators likely view the creation of new

assessment and grading systems as a daunting task. However, this can also be an opportunity to examine past practices and design new ways of evaluating and reporting student growth and performance.

In what follows, we offer *equity-based guiding principles* for district and institutional leaders and educators to reference while creating their local policies and practices on assessment and grading during distance learning, face-to-face instruction, or a hybrid of the two. School districts are very capable of designing systems that fit their communities' particular needs. We hope to help decision-makers avoid pitfalls that can lead to unforeseen consequences. The current assessment and grading systems used in schools have led to incredible inequities, and the new models created during distance learning, face-to-face instruction, or a hybrid of the two must work to prevent the growth of these disparities, prevent the creation of new inequities and hopefully ultimately minimize the disparities.

In particular, we hope all decision-makers consider the following questions:

1. What can be done to promote equity and fairness in grading across systems? District leaders and educators need to build an awareness of both internal inequities at the site and district levels as well as inequities that exist across all districts and charter schools.
2. How can education charter schools create assessment and 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 pandemic will continue to alter public life.
3. How can decisions about assessment and 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 (including parents) 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?

MDE has also provided educators and leaders with questions that help evaluate the degree to which equity is embedded in their plans for the 2020-21 school year. These questions can also be considered to start building an equitable grading and assessment system for an institution or district. The questions are as follows:

- Who are the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other marginalized groups that are affected by the plans? What are the potential impacts on these groups?
- Do the plans ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences? Who do the plans benefit?
- How have we intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by the plans? How have stakeholders and community members validated or invalidated our conclusions to questions 1 and 2?
- List all the potential barriers (structural, human, financial, community, etc.) to more equitable outcomes related to the plans.
- How will we mitigate the negative impacts and address the barriers identified above?
- Once the fall reopening plan has been implemented, how will we gather and use the input from those impacted?
- What qualitative and quantitative evidence will we gather and analyze to determine the effects of the fall reopening plan?

Districts and charter schools should also remember:

- Many educators are not trained in online instruction and assessment, and they could be building entirely new systems in distance learning and hybrid models. Educators will need guidance and time from district and institutional leaders who are able to provide, at a minimum, expertise in assessment, data literacy, and measurement.
- Not all learning happens within the cognitive domain. Some content, specifically technical skills using industry-grade technology with the psychomotor domain of learning, cannot be easily adapted, or adapted at all, to a distance or virtual environment. Educators may need to prioritize such instruction within hybrid models.
- Many students could be facing new environmental distractions in distance learning or hybrid models, and many will not have access to the same tools as their peers. There are public and private programs that help students gain access to technology, but these will not completely solve the technology-divide during distance learning or hybrid models.
- Both students and educators could potentially become ill, or they could become the primary caretaker for loved ones who contracts the virus.
- Academic dishonesty may show up in new ways in some models, and educators need the tools to respond if this happens.

We consider the following principles to be "living guidance." We learn new information on a daily basis, and these principles will need to be adjusted accordingly. We build these principles with a mindset of nimbleness and flexibility while recognizing that we might need to change and edit this guidance as we encounter unforeseen problems. We hope that all locally-created assessment and grading systems will embrace this same flexibility. In the end, district leaders and educators need to design assessment and grading systems that are rooted in values that reflect the needs of students.

Equity-Based Principles for Assessment and Grading during Distance Learning, In-Person Learning, and Hybrid Learning

Decision-makers must 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.

Minnesota has some of the worst achievement gaps in the nation. Distance learning, in-person learning, and hybrid learning can present new barriers that can cause these discrepancies to grow. Remember, not all students have equal access to equipment and information. Work and learning environments will be radically different for many students. New assessment and grading systems must reflect an awareness of these realities and account for these differences.

This is a moment to seriously consider the prohibition of punitive terms like "failure" and "unsatisfactory." Students would benefit from educators using growth-based terminology. *Every day, and especially during this time when students are experiencing so much uncertainty and so many situations over which they have no control, students benefit from educators using growth-based terminology in every possible situation.*

All stakeholders must be part of the process.

School districts and charter schools must include all voices in the creation of any new assessment and grading system, especially those most impacted by the change. This will help decision-makers design more equitable systems that will actively engage all students. Families, community leaders, educators (including paraprofessionals, support staff, and their bargaining units), industry advisory committees, students, and leadership should participate in the design of the assessment and grading system and have a good understanding of how success is defined. This will allow districts to co-create new assessment and grading systems that not only meet the needs of their students but also ensure readiness for the next level.

Communications must be robust, equitable, and multi-modal.

A truly equitable assessment and grading system will be promoted with an equally equitable communication plan. Districts, charter schools, and educators must communicate assessment and grading policies and practices in multiple languages and through multiple modes of communication to fit the needs of the community. Students and their families cannot make appropriate decisions without appropriate information. *Districts and charter schools must make sure students and families understand the impact of decisions. There is a difference between receiving and comprehending a message.*

Decision-makers should assume good intent and use this as a moment to advocate for more equitable approaches to assessments and grading. All districts and charter schools are facing these same questions. This moment requires flexibility and understanding from all stakeholders.

Equitable assessment systems address why we are assessing, provide clarity around what is being assessed, and clearly articulate how best to assess while communicating transparently along the way.

Traditionally, assessment and grading systems have been based on academic performance and often include perceptions of effort, attendance, completeness/compliance, etc. This is a time to consider allowing educators to embed social emotional learning tasks into academics and to determine readiness to assess to better support the social-emotional learning and well-being of students. The research is clear that by taking these steps first, students will be situated to perform at their best when attempting academic assessments.

Distance learning, in-person learning, and hybrid learning can present opportunities to create new systems rather than simply relying on past methods. Educators can now reframe what is actually being assessed.

The traditional A–F grading system has been the standard assessment process in education, but this period of distance learning, in-person learning, and hybrid learning require us to rethink current practices. This is a time to reflect on what needs to be assessed and how that assessment will be used in the future. We acknowledge there is a difference between mastery and excellence or even average. Some educators are using checklists and rubrics as a way to capture student mastery of standards. Decision-makers can consider proficiency-style grading systems, credit/no credit systems, and systems that capture letter grades for later revision of a student record.

New assessment and grading models must embed flexibility and adaptability while maintaining high expectations for all.

New models must build in flexible procedures and policies that allow educators to adapt to unforeseen situations that may develop as we move through this pandemic and as schools potentially have to move between distance learning, in-person learning, and hybrid learning over the course of the school year. Educators and institutional leaders must embrace continuous change and adaptation. Truly equitable assessment and grading systems will always grow to meet new demands and challenges that arise.

New assessment and grading models must provide choices for educators, students, and families while also recognizing that all choices are not equal and that all choices come with consequences.

During this time of COVID-19 and beyond, families, students, and educators must be given choices in assessment and grading. The system must set clear deadlines for making choices, and students and families must understand the consequences of each choice. Systems must have the flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of families, given these unique circumstances. Regardless of the grading model, if a student requires a letter grade for purposes of college admission or scholarship application, districts and charters need to provide this flexibility and adaptation in their grading system. If a school district or charter school is implementing a pass/fail model, it is recommended to also give students and families the opportunity to choose a letter grade option. If a school district or charter school is implementing a letter-grade model, it is recommended to also give students and families the opportunity to choose a P/F option.

New assessment and grading models must consider the unique needs of special classes of students, such as students in special education, students on 504 plans, English learners, and students in career and technical programs.

Students on IEPs may have goals tied to achieving specific grades. The same can be true for other protected classes of students. In addition, students in career and technical programs that follow a strict linear course path may have unique grading needs. Again, a mindset of equity and flexibility will help decision-makers account for these realities in their systems.

Skills or Proficiency Attainment

As community public health situations change throughout the school year, educators should be prepared to consider a variety of assessment methods to ensure students are mastering the necessary and specific skills. These assessment methods may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Consider compressing or accelerating hands-on instruction related to industry-recognized credentials. Begin by conducting formative assessments at the beginning of the school year to determine students' skill levels and use this information to compress or accelerate skill development.
- Develop clear competency lists at the start of the semester. These lists may allow for an easier transition if a program needs a long-term substitute teacher or if a student is able to learn skills in a work-based learning setting.

- Work with business and industry partners to identify alternative methods for students to demonstrate technical skill proficiency when and where in-person performance and assessment are not possible.
- Provide students with access to technical simulations (e.g., aviation, welding) when available so the time needed in the laboratory can be decreased. If simulations are not available, asking students to assess video recordings of similar work may also be helpful. School districts and charter schools utilizing onsite learning laboratory spaces must also ensure they are adhering to MDH guidelines for use of school buildings.
- Award credit for Prior Learning (credit awarded to a student who demonstrates learning outcomes that have been achieved through experiential learning settings in non-credit settings).

During the assessment process, educators should be answering the following questions:

1. What do we want our students to know or be able to do?
2. How will we know if students know it or are able to do it?
3. What will we do if students do not know it or are not able to do it?
4. What will we do if students already know it or are already able to do it?

For additional recommendations in a particular career field, visit the CTE links on MDE's Student Instruction COVID-19 Resources.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) and Concurrent Enrollment Students

PSEO and Concurrent Enrollment courses provide both high school and postsecondary credits. PSEO courses are taught by college faculty who assess the students and provide them with a grade. Concurrent Enrollment courses are most often taught by high school teachers under the guidance of college faulty.

Students enrolled in PSEO and Concurrent Enrollment courses are generating both secondary and postsecondary credit for the courses they are enrolled in. Thus, these courses will be reported on the high school transcript as well as on their college transcript. School districts and charter schools will determine how grades in PSEO or Concurrent Enrollment courses will be recorded on the high school transcript.

Due to school districts, charter schools, and higher education institutions using one or more of the learning models for the 2020-21 school year (i.e., distance learning, in-person learning and hybrid learning) and the variability across the E–12 and postsecondary systems, communication between the student, high school, and postsecondary institution is especially critical to ensure all parties understand the short- and long-term implications of all grading options for the individual student.

To stay up-to-date on guidance from Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, visit COVID-19 Information for Minnesota State Students, Faculty, and Staff.

For updated information from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities campus, visit COVID-19 UMTC PSEO Impact.

For information from other Minnesota postsecondary institutions, reach out directly to each campus by accessing the list of participating postsecondary institutions.

Additional Considerations

The transition to distance learning in spring 2020 caused an abrupt shift in learning and, in turn, to assessment and grading. In planning for the 2020-21 school year, schools can now step back to reexamine the impact of those shifts. Many districts used a "do no harm" philosophy in considering both assessment and grading and, in doing so, found that the inequities of the "normal" system were heightened. As stated earlier, a truly equitable assessment system will be modified and change to meet new demands and challenges as well to address previous inequities. Listening to teachers, students, and families in their feedback of the alternative approaches to assessment and grading as well as learning from higher education and programs like Advanced Placement will be key to building an equitable assessment system.

What did we learn?

- Grading practices used for purposes of placement, recognition, and either motivation or punishment creates a competitive system rather than a system of improvement and learning.
- High-quality assessments aligned to rigorous standards are needed to provide an optimal picture of student learning.
- Assigning points for behavior, effort, and attendance reflect compliance rather than learning.
- Providing zeros for missing assignments create circumstances where passing a course becomes impossible, and providing extended time allows students to demonstrate an understanding and leads to greater course completion.

How do we apply what we learned?

- Enhance the assessment system to provide a larger context of student learning, including more information. Rather than focusing on a single snapshot, use a variety of pictures over time in a photo album (McTighe, 2020).
- Grades should not be the only feedback students and families receive. Ongoing formative feedback should be provided through regular communications (O'Connor, 2011).
- Identify what knowledge and skills students need to demonstrate intended learning and how students may demonstrate the intended learning, and develop a personalized learning plan for each student. This is not an insignificant task and requires time. However, the populations that will benefit most from this hard work are the students that have experienced historical educational inequities.
- Provide additional time, if needed, for students to demonstrate learning.