



Washington Office of Superintendent of  
**PUBLIC INSTRUCTION**

# *Student Learning and Grading Guidance*

# STUDENT LEARNING AND GRADING GUIDANCE

**2020**

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# LETTER FROM SUPERINTENDENT REYKDAL

Every aspect of our American experience has been impacted by the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Around the world, 1.6 billion students are out of “traditional” school, including 53 million U.S. students; 1.1 million of whom are Washington state public school students. We are not alone, and we are not losing ground to other nations or other states—the entire planet is facing this crisis.

As the impacts of the virus have unfolded, we have provided guidance to school districts and policymakers. We have grounded our work in three core principles: compassion, communication, and common sense. We have focused our system on continuous learning with a deep understanding that distance learning models often exacerbate existing inequities. We value deeply our state’s long history of local control, but we acknowledge that in some areas of education and fiscal policy, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is granted explicit legal authority to create statewide consistency and statewide accountability. Policy related to the awarding of high school credit is one of the areas OSPI has significant legal authority.

As the learning continues, K–12 system leaders, educators, parents/guardians, and students have asked OSPI to provide more detailed guidance related to student grading policies—most specifically for high school level, credit-bearing courses. An examination of grading practices uncovers deeply held, decades old debates around what constitutes student learning.

Is learning:

- A test score on a statewide assessment?
- A 10-point vocabulary quiz?
- Students learning from each other, independent of direct supervision of a teacher?
- Students creating a better understanding through project-based learning?
- Student report cards which reflect marks of 4-3-2-1 or A, B, C, D, or F?

In high schools, our students face post-secondary consequences that are the difference between gaining access to good paying jobs and health benefits or not. Grading implicates hundreds of millions of dollars in scholarship opportunities. Grading systems can impact military recruiting, college athletics, access to college majors, and more. But grading systems also shine a spotlight on the inequities of an education system that despite real progress, still functions in high correlation to family income and access to enrichment activities.

To put it simply, we have built a national education system at the high school level around seat time and grades, even as the experts have challenged us to think more critically about deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem solving. It is why Washington state has been moving away from tasks, worksheets, and voluminous assignments and instead toward more focus on powerful learning standards. What students should know and be able to do is a far more

important question than how many assignments they turn in on time. Now is a moment for learning standards!

In this global crisis, teachers are overwhelmed, parents and guardians are overwhelmed, and many of our students are overwhelmed. Getting through all the chapters and all the assignments is not our priority right now. Checking in with students and families and offering continuous learning against a handful of critical standards is our need. Together, we have eight weeks to ensure that all our students have the most essential building blocks in place to achieve success in their next class, their next grade, and in their next pursuit.

For these reasons and after much thoughtful counsel from education stakeholders, I have made the decision to eliminate the pass/fail grading option as a matter of state policy. It is neither equitable, informative of student learning, nor is there a guarantee that it won't harm students in future educational pursuits.

**This guidance and subsequent rule adoption will focus on the following framework:**

1. Students in grades K–8 will be challenged to demonstrate effort and success in learning standards established by their teachers. Students will move on to the next grade, unless by mutual agreement between parents/guardians and teachers they agree to repeat a grade or a portion of learning missed. Districts will retain complete decision-making on middle school grading practices for students not taking high school credit-bearing courses.
2. Grades 9–12 and middle school students taking credit-bearing high school level work will be graded using the following principles:
  - a. Do no harm!
  - b. Every student will get an opportunity to improve their grade with their March 17 status as a baseline.
  - c. No student will receive a “pass,” “fail,” or “no credit” grade for any course.
  - d. Teachers will assign grades or assign an “incomplete” for students that cannot engage in an equitable way.
  - e. Every class taken during the closure period will be given a statewide designator on the high school transcript to demote the unique environment in which the course was taken.
  - f. Students assigned an “incomplete” for a course will be given opportunities to re-engage in the learning standards based on local school district decisions in consultation with the student/parents/guardians, including but not limited to:
    - i. Summer school,
    - ii. Courses in the following term or year,
    - iii. Independent study,

- iv. Competency-based courses,
  - v. Online courses, or
  - vi. Backfilling the incomplete grade with the letter grade obtained in the next course taken in that subject area.
- g. All students will be given an opportunity to engage in continuous learning to maintain or improve their mastery of essential standards.

This statewide framework will create more consistency across the state, but districts will still decide which letter grade system to use. However, "F's" will not be an option. This is a very complex problem, and I am incredibly grateful to the parents, students, and educators across the state who offered their ideas and input.

Sincerely,

Chris Reykdal  
State Superintendent  
of Public Instruction

# OSPI VISION, MISSION, VALUES, AND EQUITY

## Vision

All students prepared for post-secondary pathways, careers, and civic engagement.

## Mission

Transform K–12 education to a system that is centered on closing opportunity gaps and is characterized by high expectations for all students and educators. We achieve this by developing equity-based policies and supports that empower educators, families, and communities.

## Values

- Ensuring Equity
- Collaboration and Service
- Achieving Excellence through Continuous Improvement
- Focus on the Whole Child

## Equity Statement

Each student, family, and community possess strengths and cultural knowledge that benefits their peers, educators, and schools. Ensuring educational equity:

- Goes beyond equality; it requires education leaders to examine the ways current policies and practices result in disparate outcomes for our students of color, students living in poverty, students receiving special education and English Learner services, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and highly mobile student populations.
- Requires education leaders to develop an understanding of historical contexts; engage students, families, and community representatives as partners in decision making; and actively dismantle systemic barriers, replacing them with policies and practices that ensure all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools.

# BACKGROUND

Governor Inslee ordered schools to be closed from providing traditional in-person instruction by March 17, 2020. In the following days, school districts began serving meals to students and providing limited child care services for the children of essential employees. As of March 30, 2020, all Washington school districts are engaged in continuous learning for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year. With stakeholder input, OSPI developed the [Continuous Learning 2020](#) resource to guide and support school districts.

Continuous learning requires educators to think about the enduring concepts of content; learning being for learning's sake, without the expectation of covering a specific content or subject area; developmentally appropriate tasks or projects that provide opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in content through different ways; and providing feedback to students in a variety of ways. Students are introduced to concepts and explore content while applying their learning and self-assessing in a way that demonstrates learning and progression in grade level standards as established by Washington State Learning Standards.

Instruction and student assignments, as is done when school is in session in school facilities, will not occur in the same way or at the same pace. Specific information about student learning time can be found on page 46 of the Continuous Learning 2020 publication. Consistent with those student learning times, districts, teachers and school principals determine which Washington State Student Learning content standards, skills, and knowledge are most essential for success in the next course, content, or grade level.

For the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, learning will be different, and content will have to be pared back and adjusted. Without a vaccine, continuous learning at a distance may extend into the next school year in some form. Grading practices during this time should cause no harm to students. Grades should be based on the principles of equity, fairness, and accuracy.

## Student Learning and Grading Stakeholders

A small stakeholder group of practitioners and education leaders were engaged by OSPI to provide recommendations and feedback. Many of these stakeholders participated in a similar meeting at the end of March to inform OSPI's Continuous Learning 2020 resource. The foremost concern of workgroup participants and OSPI was equity for students and families. Though there were topics discussed that found broad agreement with the stakeholders, there were also topics discussed in which workgroup members had varying opinions. Workgroup members provided rich conversation and differing perspectives.

Participants met virtually on Tuesday, April 14. The timing of the workgroup was driven by two factors; first, school districts have communicated an immediate need for guidance on grading to establish more uniformity across the state in these unprecedented times; the second was an agency commitment to be judicious with the amount of time this workgroup would require these educators to be away from their jobs and their families.



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# EMERGENCY RULEMAKING

The Superintendent of Public Instruction will adopt emergency rules that will require school districts to continue using grades to assess student learning for the purpose of high school credit-bearing courses for the last semester or trimester of the 2019–20 school year. **The rules prohibit a binary pass/no-credit system, and they prohibit failing grades from being issued to students.**

Several state statutes authorize OSPI to adopt the emergency rules, including RCW 28A.150.290(2) (OSPI can set the terms and conditions for allowing a school district to receive state basic education moneys when school facilities are closed due to an epidemic), RCW 28A.230.100 (OSPI may grant temporary exemptions from and special alterations to course requirements), and RCW 28A.230.125 (OSPI must develop a standardized high school transcript for the use of all public school districts).

As part of a school district's continuous learning efforts, school districts should proceed in a manner which causes no harm to students in terms of grading. Throughout the school facility closure, OSPI has committed to three primary principles: compassion, communication, and common sense. These decisions and guidance for student learning and grading are grounded in equity, fairness, and accuracy.

## **Local determinations must be consistent with the following principles:**

- Do no harm. Student grades will not be negatively impacted as a result of the March 17 building closures or of continuous learning through the end of the 2019–20 school year.
- Districts will continue using grades as a means of communicating student progress and determining high school credit (RCW 28A.150.240). However, no student will receive a failing grade for any class during the COVID-19 closure period.
- Districts are obligated to provide students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their proficiency in order to earn a passing grade. Districts can consider awarding an Incomplete (I) to students not on track for course completion or not yet proficient during the period of March 17 through the end of the 2019–20 school year. In such instances, a plan for course completion should be developed and followed.
- Attendance will not be a factor when determining student grades (RCW 28A.600.030). Districts will be expected to take attendance consistent with their continuous learning plan; however, attendance will not be a factor when determining student grades or as a condition of receiving apportionment.
- Districts, teachers, and principals determine which Washington State Student Learning Standards, skills, and knowledge are most essential for success in the next course,

content, or grade level for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year. Learning will be different, and content will have to be pared back and adjusted.

- Teachers will continue with their responsibility to evaluate and communicate student educational growth and progress to families and to administrators on a periodic basis (RCW 28A.150.240).
- All transcripts for a grading term, semester, quarter, or trimester that included closure days in the 2019–20 school year due to the COVID-19 emergency will have a COVID-19 designation.
- School districts should not hold students and families accountable for truancy rules through the end of the 2019–20 school year.
- Competency-based credit as adopted by school boards are not affected by this emergency rule.
- Any determinations that rely on the professional judgment of the building principal or designee in determining whether or not a credit meets the district's standards for recognition and acceptance of a credit must be consistent with the principles above.

Required by Emergency Rule	Local Flexibility
Districts must identify essential standards, skills, and knowledge for success in the next course content or grade level.	Districts determine which essential standards are needed for the next grade level or course and the process through which those standards are identified
Must use a locally determined letter grade or numerical standards-based (1–4) grading system which will not include “F”	Districts may determine the letter grades or numerical decision (e.g., A, B, C, Incomplete; or A, B, Incomplete; or 4, 3, 2, Incomplete, etc.)
Must provide feedback from teachers for students to improve their proficiency and grades	Identify Incomplete or Not Proficient to determine whether a student needs more support before moving to the next grade level or course
Implement Individualized Education Program (IEP) and 504 accommodations	Determine how spring 2020 student learning and grading will impact grade level and course placement for the upcoming 2020–21 school year.
	Districts determine how non-credit-bearing K–8 courses will be graded

# SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

The stakeholder group was presented with various research articles and reports on student learning and grading. Questions on these topics have emerged through school district superintendents and school directors. In addition, Dr. Douglas Reeves of Creative Leadership Solutions joined the workgroup as a special participant, contributor, and expert on the relationship between state learning standards and student learning. Stakeholder group members discussed the immense complexity of the topics addressed through this guidance; members shared a collective desire to provide advice to OSPI that would serve Washington schools, families, and communities well.

The stakeholder group reviewed the draft documents thoroughly, considering its content based on their experiences as practitioners and education leaders. They provided feedback and engaged in discussions to provide recommendations to Superintendent Reykdal.

The foremost concern of workgroup participants and OSPI was equity for students and families. Though there were topics discussed that found broad agreement with the stakeholders, there were also topics that were discussed in which workgroup members had varying opinions. Workgroup members provided rich conversation and differing perspectives.

A description of themes that were woven throughout the feedback and advice provided by the stakeholder group is below.

## Equity is First

Education policies, practices, and decisions impact students. Washington's decisions on student learning and grading should lessen, not ignore or worsen, disparities. A lack of uniformity (on student learning and grading) will harm historically underserved students and families. Students and families do not have universal access to technology and supports. Students and families are experiencing an unprecedented pandemic, which may impact their mental, physical, and emotional health and create trauma. School buildings act as a leveling factor for many students. School districts are responsible for monitoring the impact of decisions on individual student groups.

## Communication is Key

Student learning and grading necessarily involves families whether school facilities are open or closed. Decisions need to be transparent and communicated effectively to families as partners in student success. Avoid jargon and focus instead on describing recommended practices and behaviors.

## **All are Learning**

For the remainder of the 2019–20 school year, students, families, and educators will all be learning together. Grades communicate student progress on content standards and how students are acquiring the skills and knowledge that are most essential for success in the next course, content area, grade level, or pursuit.

# GUIDANCE ON GRADING IN CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Assessing student learning is at the core of our K–12 education system. “Evaluating each student’s educational growth and development and making periodic reports thereon to parents, guardians, or custodians and to school administrators” is one of the fundamental responsibilities of certificated classroom teachers ([RCW 28A.150.240](#)).

There are a variety of considerations for school districts to weigh as they review their grading policies during this period of continuous learning during school facility closures. Districts should view their existing policies and practices with the lens of equity and doing no harm to students. To promote consistency for students and families statewide, Superintendent Reykdal will enact his rulemaking authority for determination of high school credits. The remainder of this document offers school districts questions to consider and examples of various ways to implement the rules outlined above.

## Considerations about Student Learning and Grading during Continuous Learning

### Overarching K–12 Questions for Districts and School Leaders

- How are schools and teachers using established connections to support the social-emotional well-being of students and educators?
- How are schools communicating about student learning progress and supporting relationships with families during continuous learning?
- How are districts and schools supporting the educators in the identification of key learning standards for grade levels and courses?
- How are districts and schools supporting teachers to provide meaningful feedback to students to allow for multiple opportunities for success in demonstrating their learning?
- How are districts and schools supporting teachers connecting with each student?
- How are districts and schools supporting teachers to provide multiple opportunities for students to master a standard(s) through practice before they receive a grade?
- How are districts and schools supporting teachers in determining the key activities and deliverables students will use to demonstrate knowledge and proficiency of a standard?

## **Washington State Learning Standards and Grading**

Standards-based grading is one approach that districts may use for both credit and for non-credit-bearing courses. This approach to assessing student learning has been well documented as a valid alternative to traditional grading practices and is correlated to higher academic achievement. Standards-based grading requires careful planning and training for educators. Communication with families about the transition from a traditional grading system to a standards-based approach must be a priority and will take some time. Districts might consider this work over the summer and into the fall.

Districts that have not engaged in the preparation, training, and communication for a meaningful implementation of standards-based grading may find value in using some best practices, which include:

- Grade on student progress toward standard separate from non-academic influences.
- Teachers can separately communicate a student's progress on behavior or other non-academic influences on students.
- Grade on standards that were deemed essential by the teacher for the remainder of the year.
- Teachers provide ongoing feedback to students.

More best practice suggestions can be found in the articles referenced in the bibliography and can be constructed using the questions below.

## **Considerations about Washington State Learning Standards during Continuous Learning**

### **Overarching K–12 Questions for Educators**

- How will teachers and principals determine which standards are considered essential for each grade/course?
- How will standards progress/proficiency be assessed?
- How will educators provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding? What platforms, student packets (print-based materials), and media will students be able to utilize?
- In what ways will teachers assess student learning? Will the assessment include multiple metrics and formative opportunities (like a portfolio composed of a collection of student work)?



- How will teachers incorporate student choice and voice in how they demonstrate their learning?
- How will teachers provide the necessary instruction and guidance for students to make progress in the identified essential standards?
- How will interventions be used for students who struggle to meet the essential standards?
- How will IEP and 504 Plan accommodations be implemented?
- How will teachers communicate assignment expectations and due dates to students and families? How will teachers collect student work?
- How will schools support student learning and growth of each specific student group included on OSPI's Report Card?
- How will teachers make decisions about which standards they need to revisit and how they will provide stretch opportunities?
- How will teachers encourage students to engage with peers to work collaboratively to strengthen individual learning?

In addition to key planning questions, the stakeholder group recommended that OSPI provide various examples from around the state. Some of the following examples are similar and demonstrate various approaches to communication in response to local needs and interests for that particular district and community.

The goals of each of the following examples are:

- Empower professionals in our system to determine the necessary student learning standards, skills, and knowledge for the remainder of the year.
- Provide clarity and consistency for families, keeping in mind families that have multiple students engaged in learning across the district.
- Mitigate loss of learning by providing opportunity to practice key skills and knowledge.
- Ensure teacher feedback and communication about student learning progress.
- Provide opportunity to gain proficiency on standards taught prior to school facilities closure.
- Prepare for transitions from one grade level or one course to another.

Below are three actual implementation examples from Washington state districts that are focused on "do no harm" while giving student grade improvement options.

### *Example #1*

Teachers will use the grade at the time of the school facility closure (March 17) and give students a specific time-bound period (i.e., 2–3 weeks) to make up any previous missing work from the beginning of the grading period (beginning of semester or trimester). Teachers will plan their remaining instruction based on the questions above and provide all students with the option to maintain their grade at that level or increase it with additional coursework. This provides a “do no harm” approach to learning for the remainder of the year.

Districts will establish a date after which no work can be considered in improving a grade. For example:

- K–8 and 9–11 grade students have until June 11 to submit work to improve grade.
- High school seniors can submit completed work with the intent to increase a grade up to June 3.
- Districts may choose to determine senior awards based on 1st semester cumulated GPA.

### *Example #2*

Grade carry forward: The student’s 3rd quarter secondary grade or 2nd trimester elementary grade will carry forward to the final grading period. For example, if a student had a “B” grade for 3rd quarter, the 4th quarter grade will also be a “B.” Students will continue to be introduced to new learning around essential skills and knowledge for the remainder of the year in order to maintain their “carry forward” grade.

Grade improvement: The student may choose to complete work to improve their final grade. Students choosing to complete work to improve their grade should contact their teacher(s). Teachers will determine work to assign and, upon completion, assess whether the student completed the work at a satisfactory level to improve the final grade. Teachers are not required to assign individual letter grades for each individual assignment but provide feedback for grade improvement purposes.

### *Example #3 (For systems already engaged in standards-based grading)*

Previously taught standards: Students and teachers will work collaboratively to identify and review previously taught (prior to March 17 closure) skills for proficiency. These skills will be graded and reflected in the gradebook or report card. This provides all students with the option to maintain their grade at that level or to increase it with additional coursework. This provides a “do no harm” approach to learning for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year.

New learning: During remote learning, students will be introduced to new learning and self-assessing in a way that demonstrates progression of learning. This is for practice only and will not be graded or count toward the final grade. Teachers will provide feedback as appropriate.

Final grades/credits: At the end of the semester, report cards will be provided to families. The grade is based on partial standards and up to a point in time (up to March 17). Credit will be awarded based on final grades.

Use the report card to communicate, at a certain point in time, student progress. Student progress includes two distinct types of information: achievement of academic standards and behaviors that promote learning. When communicating grades, these two factors should be separated.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is a time of learning and transition for educators, for families, and for the 1.1 million public school students across our state. We are facing unprecedented challenges, identifying solutions, and engaging flexibly as the uncertainty around the pandemic continues. When making these decisions, the agency has considered both the immediate and the long-term implications for instruction and for learning statewide.

Finally, we appreciate those individuals both inside and outside of the agency who have contributed to this guidance. Your leadership and experiences have supported our continued focus on compassion, communication, and common sense.

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*All students prepared for post-secondary pathways,  
careers, and civic engagement.*



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