

The GAF Podcast Episode 2: Navigating to a Pass/Fail Grading System



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Making the Transition to a Pass/Fail Grading System

- Many school districts have opted to move to a *pass/fail* or *credit/no credit* grading system for the 2nd semester
- This is because of difficulties in providing students w/ the same quality & equitable educational experience through distance learning that they experienced before school closures
 - If education is less effective during school closures, then employing a traditional A-F grading system would likely produce inaccurate and inequitable grades.



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Once districts take the significant step of changing their reporting system, the real work of transitioning to the new system begins.



Collective Decision Making

- If the new grading system is to produce grades with real meaning, decisions should be made collectively by a team composed of multiple school stakeholders.
- Without multiple perspectives, including those of students, teachers, parents, and administrators, the new system is unlikely to fulfill the needs of the primary parties involved in the process.
- Leaving out teachers, in particular, may lead to low teacher buy-in to the new system and teacher tendencies to use the system to meet their own perceived needs.
- Leaving students and parents out of the process may make it more challenging to communicate the new grading system to them and less likely for them to embrace the changes.



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The Incomplete Option

- Before moving ahead w/ the *pass/fail* or *credit/no credit* system, I suggest strongly considering an *incomplete* option in place of the *fail* or *no credit* option.



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The Incomplete Option (*cont.*)

- There are some significant problems w/ assigning a student a *fail* or *no credit* in distance learning. One is that assigning a finite *fail* or *no credit* sends the message that the opportunity for learning has ended and the student has missed out on this opportunity.
- Considering the fact that students from lower income households are at a significant disadvantage when learning from home, this is clearly an educational equity issue.



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The Incomplete Option (*cont.*)

- Another related problem w/ assigning a student a *fail* or *incomplete* in distance learning. is the great number of very understandable reasons for a student to be unable to learn priority standards from home.
- If our true intent is *to teach with grace and understanding* during this trying time, as many rightfully say it is, then assigning a *fail* or *no credit* may violate these principles.



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The Incomplete Option (*cont.*)

- Here are just a handful of potential reasons that a student may be unable to adequately learn during school closures:
 - personal or family sickness, high stress levels, work, inconsistent or no access to a computer or device, inconsistent or no access to the internet, difficulties learning online, challenges with technology, inadequate instruction, various disturbances at home, learning disabilities, various special needs, difficulty sleeping, caring for siblings, a lack of food, a lack of shelter . . . The list could go on, but clearly, we must give all students the benefit of the doubt.



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The Purpose of the New Grading System

After deciding on *the incomplete option*, the team should start by clearly defining the purpose of the new system and explaining how long the system is intended to remain in place.

I recommend this to be to communicate *whether or not* student learning of prioritized standards reaches a minimum level of academic performance. The timeline is likely to last for the entirety of school closures.



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The *Pass* or *Credit* Definition

- A definition of the *pass* or *credit* level should likely indicate that a student's learning is *exceeding proficiency*, *at proficiency*, or *approaching proficiency*. In traditional grading systems, these performance levels are often translated as A, B, and C.
- However, I do not recommend communicating this type of translation to teachers and students because too often, letter grades mean many different things to different teachers. Like translating languages, lots of meaning can be lost in attempting to translate from the traditional grading system to the new system.



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The *Fail* or *No Credit* Definition

Conversely, students who display a *beginning level of learning*, *no learning*, or *no evidence of learning* would fall into the *fail* or *no credit* level. In traditional grading systems, these performance levels are often translated as D or F.



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The *Incomplete* Definition

- A definition of the *incomplete* level could mean the same as the *fail* or *no credit* level (the student displays a beginning level of learning, no learning, or no evidence of learning), OR it could simply mean that a student has not *yet* displayed learning that is at least *approaching proficiency*.
- The latter definition can help to support a growth mindset in students and teachers and support policies that allow students to continue to learn and show evidence of their learning of the semester priority standards long after the semester has concluded.



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Semester Grade Calculations

One of the most challenging parts of navigating this new grading system may be in calculating semester grades, as it requires combining the traditional A-F system with the new system.



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Semester Grade Calculations (*cont.*)

- To do so, teachers should consider the learning targets/standards that they are reporting on for the semester. I recommend that teachers only report on those targets/standards that they taught before school closures. Doing so will help to reduce the effects of inequitable implications of school closures on grades.
- Then, teachers can consider the grades and evidence of learning from before school closures along with the evidence of learning since closures to assign the appropriate category at the end of the semester.



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Final Thoughts

- Schools have important decisions to make when navigating to a pass/fail (or similar) grading system.
- Students, parents, & teachers are truly relying on them to make prudent decisions, as these decisions have many important implications for students' lives.



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In the face of the politics, emotions, and confusion that can complicate the decision making process, they should let equity, grace, and student learning be their guide.

THANKS!

Questions?

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