



NOVATO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Superintendent

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Kris Cosca, Superintendent

DATE: May 5, 2020

RE: Discussion/Action: Secondary Grading - Spring 2020

Board Priority/Goal(s)

1. Student Success
2. Staff Support
3. Community Engagement
4. Fiscal Responsibility

Objective

To discuss a temporary change to grading protocols for Spring of 2020 as a result of COVID-19 and obtain Board approval for the recommendation from the Spring 2020 Grading Committee.

Background

On March 13, 2020, NUSD moved away from a traditional in classroom teaching model to a distance learning model. This was a foreign system to the vast majority of our teachers, students, parents and the rest of our system.

NUSD dove headlong into this model believing it would be in place for two weeks. It was later adjusted to three weeks and eventually the remainder of the year.

No school system was ready for this, but NUSD was more ready than most because of the support of Measure G in providing 1:1 devices for all students in grades 3-12 and our system-wide use of Google Classroom.

On April 14, 2020, after receiving input and guidance from many groups including: teachers, principals, education services staff, public and private university officials, Marin County districts serving high school students, other superintendents across the state and the Marin County Office of Education, NUSD made a decision to shift to a credit/no credit grading model for students in grades 6-12. This announcement was made on April 14, 2020.

In the weeks since April 14, 2020, this decision has received support and criticism. Due to the shelter in place order, these comments have come in the form of emails to myself and the Board, non-agenda public comments at our previous Board Meeting, letters to the editor of the Marin Independent Journal, and on social media.



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Members of the community have expressed an interest in this decision being revisited and addressed in the public forum of a Board meeting.

The NUSD Trustees agreed with this community interest and asked staff to develop a process to review this decision and to bring the results of that process to the Trustees at the May 5, 2020 Board Meeting. Additionally, the Trustees recommended that NUSD continue to research the pros and cons of the varying grading models available.

Staff developed a process that included a survey of students, certificated staff, and parents. Additionally, an ad hoc committee was organized to review research related to grading during challenging times, review survey data, and go through an interest-based problem solving process to make a recommendation to the Board regarding grading during the Spring of 2020.

The committee consisted of fourteen members including:

- Three student leaders representing our three high schools
- Three principals representing high schools and middle schools
- One assistant principal representing high schools
- Four teachers representing our high schools and middle schools
- One counselor representing our high schools
- One assistant superintendent
- And myself

Administrative representatives were selected by the school sites. Teacher and counselor representatives were selected by the Novato Federation of Teachers. Students were selected as a result of past leadership experience. I selected the assistant superintendent, Amie Carter, and myself to participate.

Based upon conversations and statements made during the presentation, I believe the majority of the committee members initially supported some sort of choice model, a few supported universal pass, and about a third supported credit/no credit. Committee members committed to look after their unique interests, while also making an effort to keep a global view on all problems.

The committee meeting started with members sharing how they visualize the learning environments of students who have the most resources and students with the most challenges during distance learning. Multiple committee members shared the challenges their children were facing during this difficult time. Others shared images of students caring for sick family members, struggling with mental health, or struggling with Wi-Fi access either due to a lack of connectivity or poor internet quality due to too many people on one access point.



We then reviewed our goal which was to determine the best model for grading during the spring of 2020 based upon NUSD’s North Star Documents including our Vision and Values, Equity Imperative, and District Goals which were shared.

Vision: NUSD will provide an innovative and personalized learning experience for every student in a caring and supportive environment to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful and productive citizens.

Values: Innovation, Equity, Caring, Inclusion, Collaboration

Equity Imperative: (the beginning was shared) including the two statements below:

Equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential.

Equity in Novato Unified School District means ensuring every student has access to educational opportunities that challenge, inspire and prepare him or her for a strong future. Equity also means that every student has the support, encouragement and assistance they need to succeed in school.

Committee members reviewed the survey data from the 2500 students, parents, and certificated staff members. A snapshot of that data can be seen here:

	Universal Pass		Choice			Credit/No Credit	
	All students receive letter grade A for the second semester	All students receive letter grade A for the final grading period averaged with the grade as of March 13th to determine the semester grade	Student can choose between March 13th grade or credit/no credit	Student can choose between March 13th grade or credit/no credit and grades of F can improve	Student can choose between March 13th grade or credit/no credit and all student grades can improve during remote learning	Credit/No Credit	Credit/No Credit including Credit with Distinction
Students	Percentage That Selected Universal Pass: 75.5%		Percentage that selected Choice=18.2%			Percentage that selected Credit/No Credit=6.2%	
	81.90%	18.10%	12.00%	14.80%	73.10%	82.40%	17.60%
Parents	Percentage That Selected Universal Pass: 32.3%		Percentage that selected Choice=50.4%			Percentage that selected Credit/No Credit=17.3%	
	42.60%	57.40%	17.10%	6.00%	86%	64.80%	35.20%
Staff	Percentage That Selected Universal Pass: 11.8%		Percentage that selected Choice=56.3%			Percentage that selected Credit/No Credit=32.0%	
	50.00%	50%	10.30%	3.40%	86.20%	54.50%	45.50%

In brief summary, the vast majority of students supported a universal pass with every student receiving an A for the second semester. About half of the parents supported a choice model with about a third supporting a universal pass model. A little more than half of the certificated staff members selected a choice model while about a third supported credit/no credit.



Committee members were walked through the interest-based problem solving process including:

- Reviewing and agreeing to basic tenets
- Reviewing and agreeing to a definition of consensus
- Reviewing and agreeing to brainstorming protocols
- Refining and agreeing to the question we were trying to answer
- Generating interests, defined as items (most of which need to be satisfied) if the conflict or dispute is to be resolved with the parties willing to participate in implementing the solution
- Generating options, defined as potential strategies or ideas we can generate to address the problem we are trying to answer.
- Refining the options to meet interests including eliminating options that do not meet sufficient interests, adding new options, and melding different options together
- Coming to consensus around a recommendation to bring to the Board

After generating interests and options, we moved to the most challenging phase of the problem solving process. There was a robust conversation as we compared the options to the interests to determine if any of them should be removed.

Much like San Francisco Unified learned in their research around a universal pass model, committee members shared what they have learned about potential negative impacts to students resulting from the grade inflation associated with a universal pass model. Additionally, we discussed how giving students A's that were not earned cheapens our grading system and will be hard to thoughtfully justify in our high school's school profiles. We discussed how grading has never been consistent from school to school and how this will be even more evident during this time. We acknowledged that colleges have always taken this into account when reviewing their school profiles to adjust algorithms.

After much discussion, committee members came to consensus to remove the universal pass model including an A for the second semester from consideration.

We then discussed the March 13, 2020 deadline as a hold harmless date for a choice model or universal pass model. We heard from students, certificated staff, and administrators that the March 13 deadline is not meant to be a final grade. It is meant to be a guidepost or an opportunity to check in on progress to date. There was an acknowledgement that, in many cases, students have had the opportunity to bring their grade up following March 13 and these opportunities are no longer available. Additionally, we were reminded by committee members that college admissions counselors have informed us that the more complex a school's profile is, the harder it is for them to accurately assess a student's application. For this reason, options that included giving a final grade based upon March 13 were excluded. This excluded a choice model where students' grades were fixed at the time of school closure and the universal pass



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model wherein students would receive an A for the portion of the semester after the shift to distance learning averaged with the grade earned prior to March 13, 2020.

Our discussion then shifted to grading during our evolving distance learning. Many challenges were discussed. These centered around the challenges many students were facing during distance learning, the challenges our teachers were facing, the impact of announcing a credit/no credit model and then shifting to another model on students and staff, and an acknowledgement that our traditional grading system loses some effectiveness during times of distance learning (due to cheating and plagiarism concerns, among others). Finally, we discussed the fact that we are not providing all of the required services that allow students to access learning and achieve at their full potential. We acknowledged that a grading system continuing during this period of distance learning presented too many challenges for students and staff members. Again, it was brought up that college admissions counselors have informed us that the more complex a school's profile is, the harder it is for them to accurately assess a student's application. The committee came to consensus to exclude remaining models that were based upon grading after March 13, 2020 including the remaining choice models.

We reviewed our options realizing very few were left and that those included: credit/no credit and a few other minor modifications of credit/no credit.

We then shifted into a discussion around the no credit part of credit/no credit. Committee members believed that a no credit equates to failure during a time when we may not have met a student's unique needs. The idea of shifting to credit/incomplete was brought up. We considered the impacts of an incomplete versus no credit, assuring that there would be no negative impacts to students as a result of making this change. In the end the committee decided to shift the option on the table to credit/incomplete as it was kinder and showed a commitment on the part of our system to support the students to the point where they earned credit.

I provided the committee with an incomplete list of other California school districts that had adopted a credit/no credit model. This list contains approximately 30 school districts including the fourth largest school district in California (Long Beach Unified) and the 6th largest (San Francisco Unified School District). We know there are additional districts that have made this shift, but that we have not tracked. The list contains very high performing school districts, very low performing school districts, and districts in northern, southern, eastern, and western parts of the state.

The committee returned to the survey data and acknowledged that the solution the committee was leaning towards was not aligned with any of the three group's choices. And in fact, the option we were leaning towards was the one that received the least support from students, parents, and certificated staff. We also acknowledged that we, as committee members, also had very strong and diverse opinions prior to the committee meeting and came to this



recommendation as a result of research, the process and discussion.

Not 100% sure how to proceed, we revisited our goal which was, to determine the best model for grading during the spring of 2020 based upon NUSD's North Star Documents including: Vision and Values, Equity Imperative, and District Goals.

We reviewed those documents and discussed what the Board of Trustees asked of me. I shared with them that the Board wanted our best thinking and that they would consider our recommendation and understand the courage and thoughtfulness that went into making it. I shared that they would also consider all of the information available to them.

The committee came to consensus that a credit/incomplete model was the option that met the most interests and should be the recommendation to the Board of Trustees. They acknowledged there is no perfect option to address this situation and that no solution would address every challenge presented. They put faith in the word of the college systems who have shared that students will not be harmed by school districts' decisions to move towards a credit/no credit model and that they are working feverishly to adjust their application processes for this unique time.

I appreciate the courage and leadership of each committee member who stepped up with an open mind to make a hard decision that would come with criticism. I will not share the names of the committee members. They are free to share their participation should they choose to do so.

Funding Source/Cost

N/A

Recommendation

The Superintendent and staff recommend approval of the recommendation from the Spring 2020 Grading Committee to move to a credit/incomplete grading model for the spring 2020 semester.

Supporting Document(s)

- Secondary Grading Spring 2020 Presentation
- Secondary Grading Spring 2020 Additional Resources