

The Most Equitable Grading Policy: Giving Students a Choice Between Grades or Credit/No Credit

Authored by: A Group of Concerned SDUHSD Community Members

Students have been significantly impacted by the shelter in place order and subsequent closing of our schools. In addition to missing out on traditional school activities, they have been forced into an isolated, fluid situation over which they have little control. Even so, our students have shown remarkable resilience, adjusting to distance learning and focusing their efforts on one of the only factors under their control...their grades. However, in the midst of these stressful circumstances, our district is mandating EVERY student be forced to accept Credit/No Credit (C/NC) for their second semester/fourth quarter efforts at all four district high schools, responsible for educating 13,300 students. This policy of "one size fits all" for student grades denies individual achievement and ignores our students' strong commitments to academic excellence. Students deserve a voice in their futures and are therefore requesting a policy change to give them a CHOICE between recording a traditional letter grade for all courses (with GPA weight) or receiving a Credit/No Credit (with no impact on GPA) on their permanent school records.

On April 21, 2020, twenty-seven students and parents spoke via zoom at the SDUHSD's regular board meeting in support of this change. The student comments were the most eloquent and heartfelt. There are many arguments in favor of this change to a more equitable grading policy. This is a brief summary of points covered:

- A 'Credit' effectively penalizes students working hard this semester/quarter to improve their GPAs, while a letter grade honors students who worked hard to maintain high grades prior to school closures and continue to do so.
- The current policy reduces the competitiveness of SDUHSD students when their incomplete GPAs are compared with other high achieving U.S. and international students. Offering A, B, and C letter grades allows them the opportunity to contribute to their GPAs for university admission purposes as was true prior to school closures.
- Recording a 'Credit' on the transcript instead of a 'D' ensures no students will be disadvantaged in the college admissions process as this option is comparable to students from other districts using a C/NC model.
- Under the current policy, inequities exist within our own district. The academy schools have recorded grades for three-fourths of this year while the semester schools have only been allowed to record grades for half the year.
- The option to choose GPA or C/NC does not play favorites and is defensible from all perspectives.
- The current grading policy creates even more anxiety for students whose hard work will now be ignored.
- Many students choose AP classes because they are a high risk/high reward challenge. Taking away GPA weighting in these classes means no discernable difference exists between an AP class schedule and a non-weighted one, even though the AP student has been immersed in a college level curriculum.
- Our district has thousands of high achieving AP and IB students who have worked many years to earn a GPA that accurately reflects their dedication and diligence. It is unreasonable to require these students to accept a 'Credit' for their efforts.
- Precedents have already been established for the GPA or C/NC choice policy in California and across the nation.
- Our neighboring school districts, San Marcos USD and San Diego USD are giving their students the choice between receiving letter grades and C/NC. Furthermore, after listening to their community, Carlsbad USD overturned their previous C/NC policy with a school board vote on April 22, 2020, voting in favor of offering a choice between GPA and C/NC after reviewing constructive input from many students, parents and teachers.
- The fact that UCs, CSUs and some other colleges will ACCEPT a C/NC grade will be irrelevant when those universities receive thousands of applications from students in other school districts and states where grades WERE recorded and GPAs reflect that boost. Given the sheer volume of college applications they receive, admissions counselors must make quick judgements regarding which applications deserve more careful review. Without accurate GPAs, our students may not survive the first-round cuts at many universities.
- With admission to UCs and certain CSUs being increasingly hard to achieve, many students will need to look to private schools and out of state schools where they will be uncompetitive due to our current policy.
- Incomplete data exists on which colleges in the U.S. will be accepting C/NC designations on student transcripts. Without required SAT/ACT test scores to examine, GPAs are even more crucial for college applications. Without consistent nationwide grading guidelines, our district should protect our students' best interests and offer grades.
- A recent school board decision to overturn the C/NC policy in Highland Park ISD, Dallas, TX in favor of grades, cited the many unknowns regarding how college administrators will be treating Spring 2020 grades. The board determined a hybrid decision offering grades or C/NC "...provides for a numerically clean transcript which...leaves nothing to chance from a college admissions perspective."
- By denying students a choice, SDUHSD is actually making it harder for its own college bound students to gain acceptance to the top colleges and universities of their choice, negatively impacting our district's reputation.
- A C/NC only policy sends the message that distance learning is not a viable/valuable form of education because grades will not even be recorded on transcripts. The solution to any distance learning issues the district is experiencing is NOT to change the grading system to the detriment of their students.
- Dr. Haley sent a response to many families' emails regarding their disagreement with the current C/NC policy. In his correspondence, he states, "We cannot replicate a comprehensive school program with the time and limitations that are currently available, therefore we have no clear way to grade all students in the traditional

manner based on existing syllabi.” This statement is contradictory to the SDUHSD’s value statement on their website, “The Board shall adopt a long-range vision for district programs and activities that focuses on the achievement and well-being of all students and reflects the importance of preparing students for the future academically, professionally, and personally.”

- Since the teachers are still giving assignments, evaluating students and recording actual letter grades in Aeries (which will not accept C/NC entries), the district can easily offer the option to record these grades on the transcripts, instead of replacing the students’ actual letter grades at year end with a C or NC designation. Furthermore, teachers who have voiced an opinion have unanimously agreed they would support students having the choice to take the grades they are still providing.
- The decision to adopt a C/NC policy was made by the SDUHSD superintendent without ANY input from students, parents, teachers or board members. Our community elects the school board. They work for us and are responsible to represent our interests. Our superintendent, Dr. Haley, works for the BOARD, and thus for all of US. A decision this important cannot be dictated by one person. Input MUST be allowed from those most impacted in our community. During the board meeting, Dr. Haley said his decision was made to “maintain flexibility” in our grading policy, yet C/NC is the most inflexible, disadvantageous policy available. Giving students equal ‘Credit’ for their grades is inherently unequal and inflexible, with only two choices: Credit or No Credit.
- Adopting a C/NC policy sets a dangerous precedent if distance learning extends into next fall. Continuing C/NC only grading in the fall will disadvantage three graduating classes. Current juniors, sophomores and freshmen will lose an entire year (or three quarters at academies) of grades and GPA weighting on their transcripts.
- Denying students the option to record actual GPAs impacts where applications will be sent, college acceptances, scholarships, merit money and much more. It has life-changing implications for many students and their families.
- This issue is so important in our community that parents have already started pulling their students out of our district schools and enrolling them in local private schools where grades are still awarded in an effort to protect them from the repercussions of the C/NC policy.
- We must be cognizant of the repercussions the district’s current decision, however straightforward it may have initially appeared, will have on students’ futures. We cannot define our students by this transient event, however serious, nor should we dictate their futures by this short-sighted decision. Giving students the autonomy to make their own unique decisions regarding their academic evaluation is the most empowering and equitable choice we can afford them.

Disallowing our students the choice to receive a letter grade limits the options of our best and brightest, and limited options can lead to a limited future. During this pandemic, many colleges will not be weighing standardized tests (SATs and ACTs) in the admissions process, heightening the importance of letter grades. Students’ efforts to build their GPAs have been multi-year challenges with endless hours of work dedicated to the goal of being optimally equipped to pursue the colleges of their choice. So, let’s not undermine their efforts by making a short-sighted decision. Precedents for offering grades exist in our local area and board decisions are being overturned across the nation in favor of allowing students the choice to report grades on their Spring 2020 transcripts. As more schools choose to allow grades, our students become progressively disadvantaged in the college admissions competition. Maintaining our current course with a C/NC only policy will impact even more students if distance learning continues next fall. Honestly, who actually benefits from a C/NC decision? Are we settling for uniformity, and thus mediocrity, thereby placing the future leaders of our community at a competitive disadvantage? At a time when a four-year college education can cost in excess of \$200,000 and unemployment is approaching Great Depression levels, it is imperative our students are permitted every chance to excel. Do not let the events of the past few weeks define our students’ futures. A hybrid grading policy offers the most flexibility, allowing students to decide whether recording grades towards their GPAs or selecting the C/NC option is the best approach for their individual situations.

The SDUHSD Board has made frequent comparisons to our “sister district” Palo Alto Union School District (PAUSD) and has modeled our COVID-19 grading policy based on theirs. Unfortunately, this is not a fair comparison since the (PAUSD) serves K-12 students. Both of their high schools are on the semester system (creating an equitable grading policy within their district) and their students (especially K-8) are less impacted by a C/NC policy. Palo Alto’s superintendent, Don Austin, noted in his correspondence to his families, “the shift to credit/no credit grading in the face of a national pandemic will be described and accepted without penalty. The move is temporary and will be discontinued when students and staff return to school in the fall.” This policy provides no contingency plan if schools are forced to continue with distance learning in the fall. He also stated, “we are alone in our belief that the shift would protect students and teachers heading into uncharted waters. We now expect every school district in the nation will consider the approach and many will join us,” yet we have proof that many districts in California and across the nation are NOT following their lead. In fact, California’s three largest school districts, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno have adopted policies offering grades instead of just C/NC. The SDUHSD policy should be based on input from the community it serves. While there may be no perfect solution, there is a solution for our community that meets our specific needs.

In Dr. Haley's correspondence with our students and parents (in response to emails challenging the C/NC policy), he attached a recommendation from Crescendo Education Group, an outside consulting group lead by Joe Feldman, that included three major points to support a Credit/No Credit decision. Here are the points and our rebuttals:

1. The stress from the Covid-19 situation will negatively impact student academic performance.
Response: The stress in our current environment is high for **everyone**. However, with the majority of our student population sheltering in place, they have the time to focus on their studies. What they may lack is the motivation to do so since our current C/NC policy gives them no incentive to apply themselves to distance learning. Arguably, our current C/NC policy results in additional anxiety for our high achieving students as they are now also concerned about their GPAs and being denied consideration at their colleges of choice. Shame on the district for exacerbating the very problem they claimed to be trying to fix. Furthermore, any students without computers have been given free Chromebooks by our district and the 70 students (according to statistics presented in the last board meeting) without internet connectivity are being provided free hotspots and discounted wireless access as well.
2. Student academic performance is more likely to reflect racial, economic and resource differences.
Response: While this may be partly true, San Diego Unified School District, the second largest school district in California, and far larger and more diverse than SDUHSD, is offering a choice to their students. Per their website, SDUSD serves students from 163 different countries, speaking 60 languages and is comprised of a population that is 47% Latino. If SDUSD can offer a choice, our district certainly can too.
3. Teachers are being asked to supply high quality instruction remotely for which most are inadequately prepared.
Response: Again, shame on our district leaders for not adequately preparing our teachers. According to comments made during the April 21, 2020 board meeting, part of the district's distance learning plan rollout included teacher training on distance learning strategies, educating teachers on the technology available to deliver lesson plans and improving their ability to interact with students. Do we really think our teachers, some of the brightest and highest paid educators in the state, will shirk their responsibilities and do anything but a stellar job in educating our students? Perhaps our district is not giving their own teachers enough credit. Our teachers' jobs are to creatively inspire and motivate our students to learn. They will use all available online tools and technologies to continue improving students' understanding of course material. While we cannot expect distance learning to look just like traditional classroom education, we can expect our teachers to continue to do their jobs.

In closing, here are sample student quotes (with permission) from a few of the twenty-seven articulate arguments presented to our school board on April 21, 2020:

- As Taylor Putnam, a junior in the district, stated at our district board meeting "An 'A' in my AP class is now equivalent to a C in a regular class. I am an 'A' student, not a 'Pass' student."
- Erica Strohm, a junior in the district, made a heartfelt statement at the district board meeting. In her words, she said, "My grades in high school did not start off too well. I struggled a lot freshmen and sophomore year, but this year I was determined to raise my GPA. I accomplished this by taking an AP class and working extremely hard to get straight A's. All the work was worth it when my GPA increased, but now with pass or fail....I'm starting to lose my drive."
- Josh Kabo, a sophomore in the district stated, "I started a petition to give an option for students to choose either a GPA or credit or no credit....I need a higher GPA to be considered for merit scholarships since my mom has cancer and much of our money goes to paying medical bills."
- Joseph Hurt, a junior in the district explains, "it penalizes the students who push themselves to achieve excellent grades in both honors and AP classes. This impacts me since I would like to attend one of the military academies and these academic institutions are requesting grades for the second semester."