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# Assessment

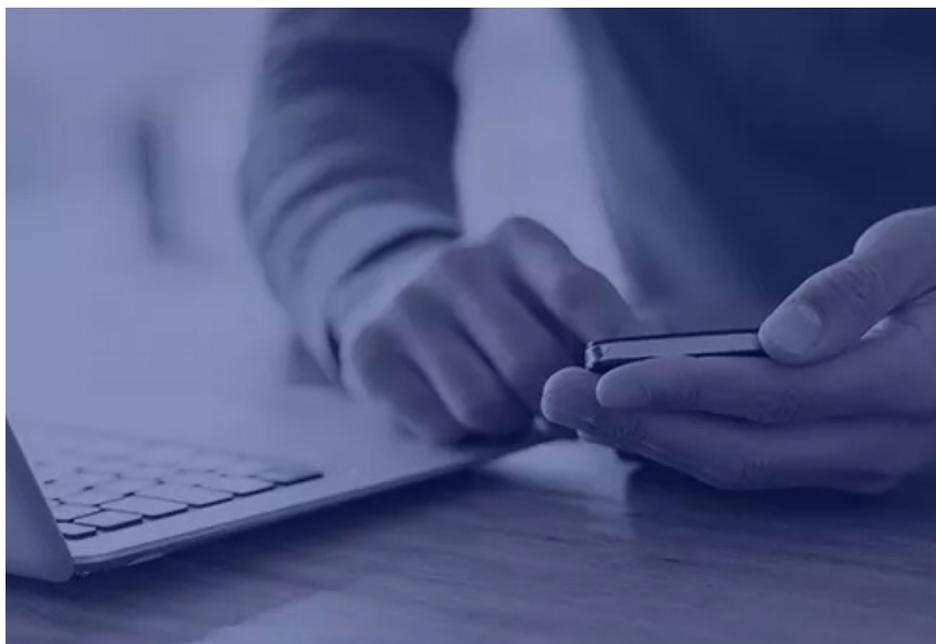
## EDITORS NOTE

Educators use various forms of assessment to measure student learning and comprehension. In this Spotlight, discover how the pandemic is challenging educators' ability to test for achievement, how teachers can reduce cheating in virtual environments, and how student test scores are projected to predict future learning losses resulting from school closures.

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Published on August 25, 2020, in Education Week

## How to Prevent Student Cheating During Remote Learning: 4 Tips

By Alyson Klein

**T**he student had perfect scores on the first two tests in Michele Kerr's math class, offered virtually this summer because of the coronavirus. But, in just a few minutes of one-on-one conversation during her online office hours, Kerr noticed he struggled to grasp the material.

Kerr quickly figured out what was going on. "You cheated" on those tests, she told the student. He admitted she was right.

Kerr, who teaches math and engineering in California's Fremont Unified School District, is always on the lookout for academic dishonesty. But she and her colleagues across the country are on heightened alert now that the coronavirus has forced thousands of schools to offer more virtual learning experiences than ever before.

"I expect cheating to go up in this new environment and I expect that it will have negative effects long term on how much students learn in their classes," said Arnold Glass, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University who has done research on the impact cheating has on learning.

Already, some teachers have reported that grades were higher this spring, when many schools went online only, and wondered if cheat-

ing could be at least partly the reason.

Here are 4 tips for discouraging and preventing student cheating:

### Tip #1: Emphasize Critical Thinking and Inquiry

A big part of the solution, educators and experts say: Give assessments and assignments that require students to analyze information, craft creative presentations, or explain their thinking.

"If you are developing critical thinking and inquiry-based activities that frankly require kids to think and apply their learning, you're not going to have cheating, because you can't cheat on that, you really can't," said Michelle Pearson, who teaches social studies at Century Middle School in the Adams 12 school district in Thornton, Colo.

On the other hand, answers that can be easily found on a cellphone, for assignments like "multiple choice and fill in the blank stuff, [that's] not necessarily higher-level thinking that should be in a final assessment," she said.

It's possible to offer creative, cheating-proof lessons even in a remote learning environment, Pearson said. For instance, last spring, when her district shifted to all-virtual schooling, she asked

students to research one of nearly 300 historical sites and create a presentation explaining its significance to westward expansion.

### Tip #2: Create a Classroom Culture That Discourages Cheating

Some educators are trying to create a classroom culture that discourages cheating and dishonesty, even if it's in an online environment.

Teachers at Oriole Park Elementary School in Chicago have been trying to help students understand that assignments and tests are about figuring how best to help them learn. That means starting the school year talking "less about grades, and more about: we want to know how you can get the most out of your education here," said Emily Hogan, who teaches 1st grade.

Hogan's colleagues have also brainstormed creating an "honor code" for their classes that focuses on academic honesty.

"We are talking about character and what character is comprised of and how they can be a good person when nobody is watching," she said. Such conversations are necessary because it would be impossible to cut off all avenues to cheating. "There's no way we can micro-manage them," Hogan said.

That approach can work for older students, too.

Kristin Record, who teaches physics at Bunnell High School in Stratford, Conn., plans to address the cheating issue more directly than in the past.

"My plan is to be a little more overt" than usual, she said, given how easy it is to cheat in a virtual environment. She'll tell students, "Let's be real with each other now, obviously you can take a picture of your work and text it to your friend. What do you gain by doing this? What do you lose by doing this? What's your motivation for doing it?"

Students in Record's class can receive college credit for their work, either through Advanced Placement or a dual enrollment agreement with the University of Connecticut. She'll remind them that the consequences for cheating in high school—say, getting a zero on an assignment—pale in comparison to the consequences of cheating in college, where students can be suspended or expelled from school.

### Tip #3: Use Peer Feedback, Daily Assignments

Allowing students to assess each other's work is another good way to cut down on cheating, said Pearson, the Colorado teacher. That's something that's a hallmark of her classroom, both in person and now online.

"I work diligently to really create a community network of peer feedback, where kids are giving direct feedback to each other, they are critically

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“

When you have peers evaluate peers, it reduces [cheating] tremendously because they are held accountable to their buddies.”

**MICHELLE PEARSON**  
TEACHER, CENTURY MIDDLE SCHOOL,  
COLORADO

thinking about what their partners are writing,” she said. “When you have peers evaluate peers, it reduces [cheating] tremendously because they are held accountable to their buddies.”

Kerr also recommends getting a good sense of what students know by asking them to turn in their classwork daily. That wasn’t as necessary when her district went all-remote in the spring. “I knew my kids and could tell who was cheating,” she said. But it will help when she has a new crop of students.

**Tip #4: Have Students Turn on Their Computer Cameras**

Technology tools can also help cut down on the temptation to cheat.

For instance, Kerr requires her students to turn their computer cameras on during tests and quizzes. And she disables the “chat” function in Zoom so that the class can only communicate with her, not each other.

Jacob Ryckman, who teaches English and English as a Second Language in the Plano Independent School District in northwest Texas, says some of his colleagues use software, available on Google’s Chromebook, that allows teachers to get a glimpse of their students’ computer monitors.

Google Classroom lets teachers create a quiz or assignment that must be completed in a certain time frame. And it permits teachers to change settings so that students can’t open any other windows, making it tougher for kids to pull off a quick search.

But, of course, students could still look things up on their phones or other devices.

“Especially when kids are working remotely, there’s no 100 percent fail-safe [strategy],” Ryckman said. ■

**NAEP 2021 Data Collection Milestones**



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress

Published on June 23, 2020, in Education Week’s Inside School Research Blog

**Will the 2021 Nation’s Report Card Be Another Coronavirus Casualty?**

By Sarah D. Sparks

The congressionally mandated tests dubbed the “Nation’s Report Card,” have measured the progress of U.S. students in reading and math for five decades, come fire, flood, and budget cuts. But the combination of a global pandemic and nationwide economic instability could throw off the 2021 National Assessment of Educational Progress

The National Assessment Governing Board, which supervises the NAEP, will hold a special session next week to gauge the prospects for administering the tests next spring, which are scheduled to cover reading and math in 4th and 8th grades.

In a May meeting, Peggy Carr, NCES’ associate commissioner, warned that it could be a heavy lift to recruit schools, train testers, and set up the test in what may be a disparate and rapidly shifting educational landscape next spring. Yet without the NAEP, the country could miss a crucial nationwide picture of just how much learning have students’ lost during the school closures and continuing disruption.

NCES would need to ask for an estimated additional \$50 million to pay to administer the NAEP under social distancing and varied school schedules. Traditionally, field staff work in teams to administer the tests to 25 to 40 students at a time, in sessions that run two hours or more, de-

pending on the subject. In 2021, the main NAEP had been scheduled to move to a new format which would require groups of students to be given an additional 30-minute session of questions to answer, which would reduce the number of schools and students needed to participate but potentially increase the amount of time students would be together in a testing room.

“It is NAEP’s job to describe educational progress, and if we are in a situation next spring ... where 90 percent of schools are open with 90 percent of their students, then I think it would be a massive lost opportunity for NAEP not to do its job as laid out in law to measure educational progress in a way that states cannot,” said Andrew Ho, NAGB board member and Harvard University education researcher.

Yet, schools are planning to start the next school year with an array of schedules, from digital learning to students taking turns by class or grade in attending school live on campus, and such social distancing is expected to still be in use next spring, at least in some “hot spots,” Carr noted.

NCES may have to hire additional test workers to cover all of the students, but it may also have a harder time recruiting, as workers would have to come into contact with children in many different sites to proctor the tests live.

“In a scenario where there’s a patchwork of instruction within and between states ... it

would be very difficult to make any sorts of adjustments,” Ho said. The College Board this summer gave up on attempts to administer its college admissions test SAT at home, and even though the NAEP has moved to digitally based tests, NAGB could not provide the NAEP via distanced learning at schools. “There’d be no control over the administration conditions. You would have to rely on parents to administer at home, with video proctoring. The challenges of a conversion like that would be insurmountable.”

But pushing back the NAEP to 2022 would start the tests on a new timeline, making it harder for researchers to track what happens in the next year.

Sean Reardon, professor of poverty and inequality in education at Stanford University, uses NAEP data to track patterns of opportunity and achievement gaps across states. Reardon said he

would be concerned about differences in test administrations and different response rates of students in different states, but said without NAEP, even states that are able to administer their own tests next year will not be able to compare their policies and outcomes to those in other states.

“Suppose this is not the only pandemic, or that this pandemic leads to changes in schooling that persist, on and off in different places, for more than a year,” Reardon said. “We’d like to learn from the many different responses of schools and districts what strategies are most effective for ensuring continuity of learning during school closings, online learning, etc. ... Basically, if we want to learn from the educational experiment that has been thrust upon us, then we need the best data we can [get], as soon as we can. NAEP is better positioned than any other data

source to provide the highest quality data under the circumstances.”

In fact, if the tests are administered next spring, NAGB is considering adding pandemic-specific questions to the background surveys given with each test. The questions would cover aspects of the school closures; students’ access to technology and other supplies for remote learning; teacher and school preparation for distance-learning and parent involvement in students’ education at home.

NAEP’s older, long-term-trend assessment in reading and math still will provide information about students from just before the pandemic; NCES completed its administration just before nationwide school closures this spring. Results from that test are scheduled to be released next spring, while the main NAEP’s 12th grade results in those subjects are set to be released this fall. ■

Published on August 26, 2020, in Education Week’s Inside School Research Blog

# COVID-Related Learning Loss Will Hit Younger Students Differently

By Sarah D. Sparks

**E**ducators are bracing for students to return to school this fall with significant learning loss, after more than six months of disruption from the coronavirus pandemic. New research suggests schools will need to target interventions differently for students in different grades and subjects.

Researchers with the assessment group Illuminate Education analyzed more than 500,000 computer-adaptive test scores in reading and math from kindergarten through 5th grade students in reading and math between fall and spring tests in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years. The data were used to project the difference in growth between the two years and the extent of learning loss in each grade and subject.

They found students in all grades and subjects had learning loss during the pandemic school closures this spring, but they followed different patterns. Kindergartners and 1st graders lost the most ground in general reading growth, but rising 5th graders lost the most fluency in reading aloud. Across every grade, students lost more learning in math than in reading, losing two and a half to four and a half months of learning, compared to a month or two in reading.

“It’s a little bit like riding a bike,” said John Bie-

Figure 1. Mean aReading scores by cohort.

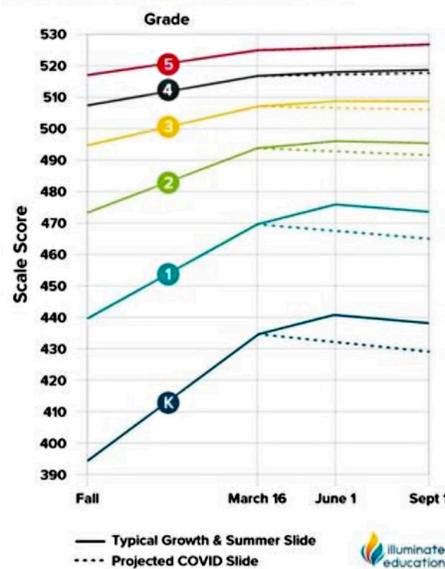
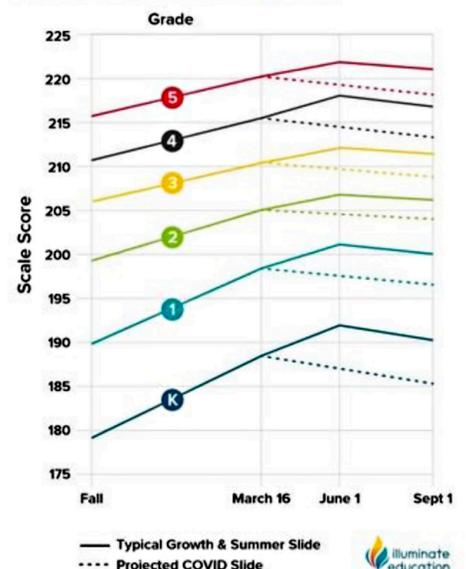


Figure 2. Mean aMath scores by cohort.



linski, a co-author of the study and Illuminate’s senior director of research and development “If we were to start teaching a kid how to ride a bike and then stopped. And then three months later said, okay, can you ride a bike? They probably

won’t be able to—they will have forgotten what they learned—but once they’ve mastered riding a bike, if they don’t ride for few months, they probably can get on a bike and ride again.”

“So in K-2 we see relatively dramatic losses,

from the foundational reading skills that kids build on to become proficient readers like phonics and phonological awareness,” he said. “By grade 4 and 5, reading is more about comprehension ... and we see very little loss in reading.”

A similar Brookings Institution study of upper elementary and middle school grades showed that while the average reading growth did not change much from 4th to 8th grades, the range of

students’ development widened, particularly in grades 6 and 8. In math, by contrast, students had lower math development as well as a wider range of achievement across the board. In math, too, the 6th grade transition year saw a particularly sharp learning loss.

The new study did not dig into which topics students were most likely to lose, but Rachael Brown, senior academic officer and co-author

of the study, hazarded a guess: “From the standpoint of what’s happening in the curriculum, 4th-, 5th grade and into 6th grade is the introduction of fractions, decimals and all manner of rational numbers,” she said. “Well, we know that that’s where many kids struggle in mathematics, and take that together with COVID and things are just going to be at a difficulty level that they haven’t encountered before.” ■

Published on July 9, 2020, in Education Week

## Standardized Testing and COVID-19: 4 Questions Answered

By Sarah D. Sparks

**B**ig state and national tests always require finely tuned coordination among researchers and schools. During the pandemic, large-scale assessments could become a complicated mess—if they can be pulled off at all.

Large-scale tests—from the Nation’s Report Card to state accountability exams—face an uphill climb next year, experts say, amid concerns that administering them could expose staff and students to a higher risk of coronavirus and prove difficult to do consistently among the shifting school set-ups expected next year.

“I have a teacher in the hospital right now who is fighting for her life from COVID-19,” said Dana Boyd, a member of the governing board for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, and the principal of East Point Elementary School in El Paso, Texas. Boyd was one of the members at a recent meeting calling for the tests to be pushed back from their planned 2021 administration. “Before this hit home I would’ve said, yes, let’s do this. ... [But] it’s bigger than data.”

The added risk, coupled with ongoing uncertainties about what schools will look like next year, is prompting states to consider another year without testing and may lead the federal government to delay the main National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading and math for the first time ever.

“I wouldn’t want to be blind for four years from 2019 to 2023, in one of the most critical and volatile periods in American educational history,” said Andrew Ho, Harvard University education economist and another member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which supervises the NAEP, also known as the Nation’s Report Card.

But Michael Casserly, the executive director

of the Council of the Great City Schools, said that 21 out of the 27 superintendents of the big-city districts that participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment, a smaller administration of NAEP, favor pushing the large federal assessments back by at least a year.

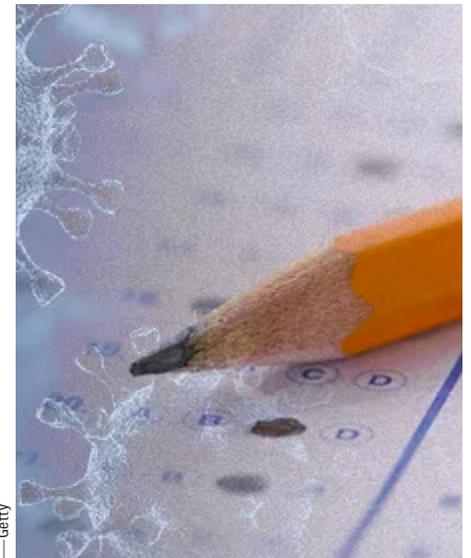
“And no one had a better idea,” Casserly said.

### What are the infection risks for a large assessment?

Testing environments generally can lend themselves to social distancing, of course; the same spacing that would reduce virus transmission would also deter cheating, for example. Still, at a time when schools are trying as much as possible to limit the number of students in school at a time, and keep the students who do attend in stable clusters, the traditional format of large standardized tests can be a challenge.

For example, to administer the 2021 NAEP in math and reading in grades 4 and 8, the National Center for Education Statistics typically sends out 3,000 proctors to roughly 13,000 schools nationwide over the course of a couple of months. Because each student takes only a subset of the NAEP’s questions, these proctors bring 22,000 tablet computers preloaded with the selected questions for each student.

Health and safety requirements differ from state to state and at times district to district, but at a minimum the proctors will need additional training and equipment to safely supervise the tests and clean equipment between testing sessions. Casserly said many school districts have also limited outside access to school buildings and are requiring various kinds of health or tem-



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Test administrators often move from school to school in the same test, presenting the possibility that they could spread the virus into multiple schools.”

**MICHAEL CASSERLY**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CITY SCHOOLS

perature screenings for entry.

“Test administrators often move from school to school in the same test, presenting the possibility that they could spread the virus into multiple schools,” he said. “If anyone in the school becomes sick, that school is likely to be shut down at least temporarily with no notice.”

### How could the pandemic challenge testing validity?

The biggest argument in favor of large-scale testing next year has been the need for information about students’ growth and learning during the longest period of schooling disruption in more than a century. But that disruption isn’t over, experts say, and likely will make the results from any large test difficult to compare across districts and states.

Casserly, of the Council for the Great City Schools, explained that 25 percent to 35 percent of urban parents polled in his districts have reported they do not plan to send their students back for face-to-face instruction next year. Many schools plan to alternate groups of students using in-person and remote learning, and because some districts plan to help keep students at a safe distance from each other by using space in under-enrolled schools to house students from over-enrolled schools. In both cases, that means the students on campus during testing may not be the same as the students enrolled at the school, and the background characteristics of students who stay home versus those who attend on different schedules may differ significantly, which could skew test results, Casserly said. Some test officials are trying to plan for that reality. Peggy Carr, NCES’ associate commissioner, said that the agency planned to stagger testing days for NAEP with at least two visits per school, plus a make-up day, to capture students who had uneven attendance patterns.

“At the end of the day, there’s going to be an asterisk around any 2020-21 [test] results if they’re given,” said Stephen Pruitt of the Southern Regional Education Board, a 16-state group which coordinates around education and economic issues. “I think you have to ask the question, are people really going to even pay attention to themselves this year? If states are already considering not testing themselves, would they really give an honest effort to administering NAEP?”

### How could the pandemic affect state tests for 2020-21?

The U.S. Education Department waived requirements for 2019-20 state accountability tests during the school closures this spring, and a few states, including Georgia and Michigan, have already requested waivers for 2020-21 testing as well.

## To Test or Not to Test?

The World Bank, which has been studying how international education systems are responding to the pandemic, found many other countries have also canceled or postponed assessments this past spring or for next year, though some, such as Germany, have continued to test with strict hygiene protocols.

The World Bank said education leaders, in making those testing decisions, should take into account these considerations:

- If the tests are used to make decisions such as class placements or funding allocation, school leaders must plan a different way to inform those decisions transparently and fairly.
- If tests move online, leaders must ensure students with disabilities, those in remote areas, and those with limited internet access have equitable access to the exams.
- If tests move to remote proctoring, leaders must consider how to ensure security and prevent cheating or test leaks.

“Given the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic and the resulting state budget reductions, it would be counterproductive to continue with high-stakes testing for the 2020-21 school year,” said Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp and state Schools Superintendent Richard Woods in a letter on the waiver request. “In anticipation of a return to in-person instruction this fall, we believe schools’ focus should be on remediation, growth, and the safety of students.”

By contrast, Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath explicitly announced last month that he would administer the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, or STAAR, next school year. Texas, one of the states that monitor student growth, will have to adjust its A-F school accountability system because it has missed this spring’s round of student testing, and Morath worried that missing two years of student data could make it difficult to understand how students have been affected by the pandemic.

“We cannot allow this public health crisis to become a generational education crisis,” Morath said in a presentation to the state school board. Schools would provide more time for students to take the online test and the overall testing window would be expanded to about 30 days, according to a Texas Education Agency spokesperson. This could allow smaller groups of students to be tested at a time; the state plans to release more detailed guidance for schools on how to test safely later in the school year.

Unlike national tests, state accountability tests are usually proctored by local teachers or central of-

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Knowledge is still knowledge ... but the nature of how we test will depend upon how education has been delivered, how equitable it's been in terms of access for students.”

GOV. JAMES GERINGER  
WYOMING

vice staff, meaning that districts may be able to cut down on the number of visitors needed to enter the school building. Chris Minnich, chief executive officer of the testing group NWEA, said it is working with Georgia and Nebraska to pilot a different kind of state assessment, which would be administered in shorter chunks at three periods over the course of the year. That may reduce the time and number of students needed for testing at any given time.

### Can large tests be conducted remotely?

Remote testing could provide an option for assessing students who are learning in schools with hybrid schedules but testing in a digital or online format is not the same as remote testing. While NAEP, state accountability tests such as those in Texas and Georgia, and international tests like PISA have all moved to digital formats, they do not have remote proctoring, and critics have raised questions about how quickly such a system could be up and running.

The NWEA tested about 100,000 students online this spring using its adaptive MAP Growth test, Minnich said. But he said formative assessments used to inform instruction are easier to administer at home than large-scale assessments more commonly used for research or accountability, because they require less security.

“Teachers and proctors generally receive a pretty distinct guidance about what questions they can help the kid with and not help the kid with, and I think that’ll be harder when you’re dealing with individual parents possibly at home,” Minnich said. “I do get concerned about students who have very specific accommodations not receiving those accommodations, because that actually is a big deal.”

The College Board, which had originally planned to administer the SAT remotely this summer, had to cancel because of security concerns, but in the United Kingdom, medical students successfully took three-hour “open book” medical exams with questions designed to be impossible to simply look up online.

As part of the ongoing discussions of the NAEP, former Wyoming Gov. James Geringer said delaying large-scale assessments could provide an opportunity to adapt them to align with whatever changes in instruction become permanent in the classroom after the pandemic.

“Knowledge is still knowledge ... but the nature of how we test will depend upon how education has been delivered, how equitable it’s been in terms of access for students,” Geringer said. “I think there’re going to be dramatic changes in how students learn and how they’re exposed to information ... We have to deal with near-term uncertainties, but we also have to be planning for the certainty of change to how [testing] has been conducted in the past.” ■



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## OPINION

Published on July 6, 2020, in Education Week’s Finding Common Ground Blog with Peter DeWitt

# Why Should We Allow Students to Retake Assessments?

By Thomas R. Guskey

**A**s schools look ahead to update grading policies when they reopen, one hotly debated issue is whether students should be given the opportunity to retake assessments. Proponents argue that retake options reduce test anxiety and allow students to demonstrate more fully what they’ve learned. Critics contend that retakes lessen students’ motivation to prepare for assessments and encourage poor study habits that leave students ill-prepared for college and careers. At the very least they want students to meet strict requirements for the retake privilege.

Although many authors and consultants have stepped forward to offer their opinions on retakes, few have studied the origin of the idea or the accompanying research. As a result, the debates continue unresolved, rarely changing anyone’s perspectives or practices.

Few proponents or critics of assessment retakes know, for example, that the idea can be traced to the work of Benjamin Bloom in the 1960s. Bloom observed that the assess-

ments most teachers use at the end of learning units serve mainly as evaluation devices that confirm for which students the teachers’ instruction was appropriate and for which it wasn’t. He believed, however, that if those same assessments could be used as part of the instructional process to provide students with feedback on their learning, they could become powerful learning tools. To underscore this informing purpose, Bloom suggested labeling them “formative assessments” (Bloom, 1968; Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971).

But assessments alone do little to improve student learning or teaching quality. What counts is what happens after the assessments. Just as regularly checking your weight or blood pressure does little to improve your health if you do nothing with the information, what matters most with formative assessments is what students and teachers do with the results.

To bring improvement, Bloom stressed formative assessments must be followed by high-quality, corrective instruction designed to remedy whatever learning errors the as-



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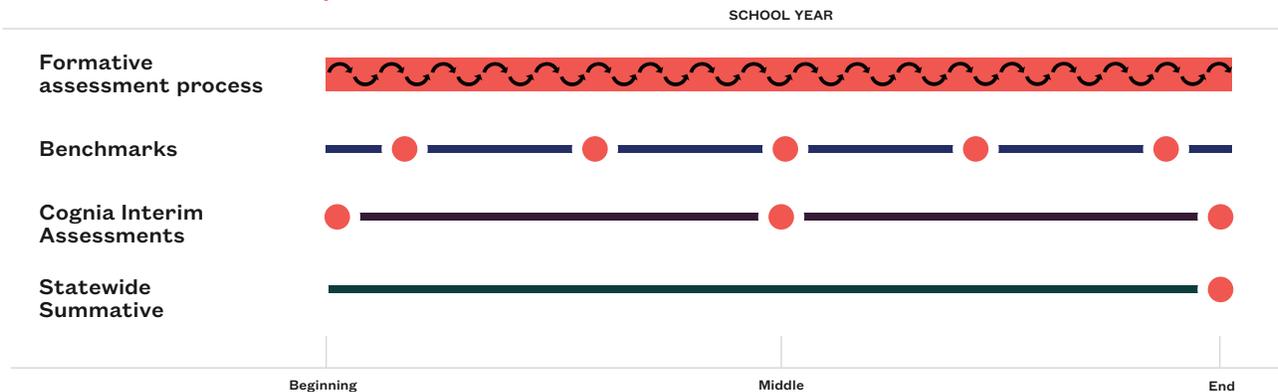
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Cognia demystifies the terms for you.

## Balanced Assessment System



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assessments identified. Unlike reteaching, which typically involves simply repeating the original instruction, correctives present concepts in new ways and engage students in different learning experiences.

Furthermore, the correctives initially must be conducted *in class, under the teacher's direction*. They cannot be optional activities for students to complete on their own as homework or in special study sessions before or after school. If left optional, those students who could benefit most are the least likely to take part. Instead, teachers need to guide students through the corrective process, so they see its benefits and experience the success it brings.

While the teacher directs the corrective work, students who performed well on the initial assessments engage in special enrichment activities. Rather than simply moving ahead, these students deepen their understanding through self-selected, learning extensions and inquiry experiences. Or they may choose to become a peer-tutor for one of their classmates.

When the correctives are completed after a class period or two, Bloom recommended students who engaged in correctives be given *a second, parallel formative assessment* for two reasons. First, the second assessment helps teachers determine if the correctives were effective in helping students remedy their learning difficulties. Second, and perhaps more important, it gives students a second chance at success and, hence, has great motivational value.

### Common Concerns

After I appeared on Education Week's A Seat at the Table and answered two questions (one from a student and the other from a teacher) about retakes during our discussion on assessment and grading, educators continued the chat on social media. Eric E. Castro and Yosup Joo both said they were huge fans of the process, but their "pain point" was when it came to the number of students in their classes and their ability to offer retakes.

### Time and Coverage

Teachers often express concern that taking class time for correctives will require them to sacrifice curriculum coverage. Indeed, early units with correctives generally require more time. But to move on without completing correctives puts the most vulnerable students in double jeopardy, having to remedy existing problems while keeping up with new material. Most teachers find, however, that as students become accustomed to the corrective process and real-

ize its benefits, class time can be reduced, and students can complete most of their correctives as homework or in special study sessions.

Furthermore, by not allowing minor errors to become major learning problems, teachers ensure students are well prepared for subsequent learning tasks. Instruction in later units can therefore be more rapid, with less time spent on review. By pacing their instruction more flexibly, allowing more time for early units and less time in later ones, most teachers find they don't have to sacrifice curriculum coverage to offer students the benefits of high-quality corrective instruction.

### "Not What Life Is Like"

Other teachers believe that giving students a second chance is, "not what life is like." They point out that a surgeon doesn't get a second chance to perform an operation successfully and a pilot doesn't get a second chance to land a jet safely. Because of the very high stakes involved, each must get it right the first time.

But consider how these highly skilled professionals learned their craft. The surgeon's first operation was performed on a cadaver—a situation that allows a lot of latitude for mistakes. Similarly, the pilot spent many hours in a flight simulator before ever attempting a landing from the cockpit of a real jet. Such experiences allowed these professionals to learn from their mistakes and improve their performance. Similar instructional techniques are used in nearly every professional endeavor. Only in schools do students face the prospect of one-shot, do-or-die assessments, with no chance to demonstrate what they learned from previous mistakes.

### Fair Grades

Still other teachers suggest it's unfair to offer the same high grades to students who require a second chance as were awarded to students who performed well on the initial assessment. Certainly, students who initially did well should be recognized for their success and given opportunities to extend their learning through stimulating



ERIC E. CASTRO @eecastro · 2h

There is a lot of discussion in the Chat about retakes. I'm a huge fan of giving students the opportunity to demonstrate later-learning. The problem – for me – becomes one of practicality, not philosophy: retakes take my time.



Yosup Joo @mysteryosupjoo · 2h

Plus, Guskey states that there should be a "corrective activity" to provide a personalized learning experience. That would be a pain point for me unless somehow automated, which in itself would require more time.



enrichment activities. But if the grade's purpose is to describe how well students mastered specific learning goals, and if students engaged in correctives eventually demonstrate the same high level of mastery, don't they deserve the same high grades?

Driver's license exams offer a comparable example. Many people don't pass their driver's exam until their second or third attempt. Should their driving privileges be restricted as a result? For example, should they be allowed to drive only in fair weather? Should their license indicate "Fair weather driving only." Of course not! Because they eventually met the same high standards of performance, their driving privileges are no different. The same is true of medical board exams for physicians and the bar exam for attorneys.

### Conclusion

The question regarding retakes isn't simply, "Should students get a second chance?" Rather, it is, "How can we use assessments to help students improve?" If we incentivize success on the first assessment by planning enticing enrichment activities and guide students in correcting the learning errors identified on that assessment, we're much more likely to realize Benjamin Bloom's dream of having all students, ALL students learn well. ■

*Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and independent consultant. DeWitt provides insights and advice for education leaders. This guest blog is written by Thomas R. Guskey, professor emeritus at the University of Kentucky.*

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**Grading for ELLs, as for all students, should not be formulaic, it shouldn't be rigid, it shouldn't be a mystery or a surprise.**

- Margo Gottlieb  
 in Education Week Teacher

## OPINION

Published June 29, 2020, in Education Week's Classroom Q&A Blog with Larry Ferlazzo

# Strategies for Grading ELLs in Content Classes

By Larry Ferlazzo

**H**ow do you handle grading for English-language learners in mainstream content classes? Grading can be one of the banes of a teacher's existence.

An added complication can be when an English-language learner is in a “mainstream” content-subject class—what are the best ways a teacher can handle this situation in an equitable way?

Margo Gottlieb, Kristin Spears, Becky Corr, Pamela Mesta, and Olga Reber offer their responses to this question.

### Grading shouldn't be “formulaic”

*Co-founder and lead developer of WIDA, Margo Gottlieb is an expert in curriculum, instruction, and assessment of language-learners, having started her career as a teacher and currently working with teachers and school leaders across the United States and internationally. Margo is author/co-author of more than a half dozen professional books, including Breaking Down the Wall: Essential Shifts for English Learners' Success (Corwin, 2019):*

Grading is an institutional tradition, yet how do you describe it? Is it a metric, as in a number or letter? If so, how much better is a B than a C, or how much more has been learned if your students score 81 (a B) versus 79 (a C)? Does grading represent standards-referenced performance?

If so, what is the difference in the designations “making progress” v. “approaching” in representing students' knowledge of grade-level content?

In either instance, what does “grading” mean for English-language learners (ELLs) whose knowledge base is in a language other than the one in which instruction and assessment are imparted? What does it mean for ELLs participating in dual-language programs where teachers must conform to reporting achievement only in English? How can we maximize equity of grading practices for the heterogeneous mix of ELLs and ELLs with Individualized Education Programs in mainstream content classrooms?

Grading for ELLs, as for all students, should not be formulaic, it shouldn't be rigid, it shouldn't be a mystery or a surprise. Grading shouldn't be a norm-referenced event where students are ranked or compared with their peers. In essence, grading should be part of ongoing assessment as and for learning—based on student self-assessment and negotiation between teachers and students—that is integral to teaching and learning. As an outgrowth of conversations between multilingual learners and their teachers, grading should stem from mutually agreed upon decisions about students' demonstration of learning.

Admittedly, the linguistic, cultural, and personal histories of ELLs are unique; these distinct

qualities should provide the context for teachers to begin their discussion with the students. Content teachers across disciplines have the responsibility of maximizing ELLs' opportunities to learn; to do so, they must: 1) provide a variety of scaffolds for ELLs to make meaning from oral and written text, 2) be strategic in inviting ELLs to interact with peers in one or more languages, 3) give ELLs choices in how to demonstrate learning through multimodalities (such as visually, orally, digitally, or in writing), and 4) listen to and invite student voice.

So, what can mainstream content teachers do when negotiating grades with their ELLs? Here are some practical ideas:

- Co-create long-term goals for learning, such as for the semester, and short- to mid-range learning targets integrating language and content that take students' “funds of knowledge” and interests into account. An example learning target for a unit of learning on the birth of the U.S. in a middle school social studies class might be, “Students will argue (with claims, evidence, and reasoning) whether English or multiple languages should have prevailed in the U.S. post the American Revolution.”
- Co-construct criteria for success in student-friendly language for individual projects and long-term assignments. These expectations should convey clear outcomes, and students should be aware of how the criteria or descriptors will convert to grades. Have ELLs orally restate the criteria in English or paraphrase the criteria in their home language in their journals to serve as a reference guide.
- Move from teacher modeling of grading practices and crafting of performance criteria at the beginning of the year to include their application to samples of student work. Later in the year, gradually transition from student-teacher conversations to student-led conferences where ELLs show evidence and justification for meeting their learning goals.
- Together, create a learning contract of joint decisions that answers the questions:
  - What evidence will reflect your learning, and how do you know it will meet the criteria for success?
  - Which modalities (visual, oral, written, digital) do you prefer to use to express your learning?
  - Which language(s) do you plan to use to explore, research, and analyze content?
  - What will be the contribution of student self-assessment to grading?

While language and content are often indistinguishable during instruction, when it comes time for grading, mainstream content teachers must consider ELLs' oral language and literacy in relation to their conceptual understanding. Through ongoing discussion between teachers and students, grading should become a transparent negotiated process in which ELLs are vested to do their best.

### Formative assessments

*Kristin Spears is an ESOL coach and teacher in Spartanburg, S.C., District 6 where she helps plan and conduct ESOL professional development and collaborates with elementary teachers on how to best serve the ELLs in their classrooms. In her teaching career, she has worked in various upstate S.C. schools with students in grades K-8:*

Like so many other issues in education, grading ELLs is a tricky topic. There is no easy, one-size fits all answer. Why? Because like our native English speakers, each ELL is unique. So often, teachers ask, "How can I give him/her a grade? He/She just moved here! They can't even speak." They want their students to be exempt from this seemingly unfair situation. Often, teachers aren't trained in how to proceed with these students, so they want to be exempt from their heart and head dilemmas of how to reach, teach, and grade their students.

But grading is not the underlying issue; it is giving the appropriate assessment to grade. How a teacher approaches assessing a nonspeaking newcomer in the 3rd grade is completely different from assessing an ELL that was born here. Assessing a newcomer with a strong foundation in their native language is different from assessing a newcomer with limited education.

High-stakes testing is unavoidable; therefore, ELLs should be exposed to the same format as these tests. However, they should not be the primary form of classroom assessments. When using these multiple-choice tests to prepare students, consider including these scaffolds based on each ELL's proficiency level: picture references, oral administration, and eliminating answer choices.

Formative assessments are more appropriate for ELL students, especially newcomers, and more informative for the teacher. In their book, *New Frontiers in Formative Assessment*, Noyce and Hickey define the use of formative assessments as "the process of monitoring student knowledge and understanding during instruction in order to give useful feedback and make timely changes in instruction to ensure maximal student growth." The key word in that definition is *during*. While summative assessments take time out of the instructional day, formative assessments are built into the daily or weekly routines of the classroom.

Some examples of formative assessments are:

labeling and drawing models, completing graphic organizers, keeping a content journal or reading log, conducting an interview, rating scales, and ticket out the door. The amount of scaffolding needed on each assessment depends on a student's language-proficiency level. A newcomer may need to label a premade picture with a word bank or match pictures while intermediate students should draw and label their own diagram. A limited-English-proficient student might need sentence frames for their journal, while an intermediate student might just need a sentence starter. We want students to continue to move forward in their zone of proximal development. This is also known as productive struggle, pushing students to reach their fullest potential. Once a child has reached mastery with a particular scaffold, that scaffold is removed.

Another benefit of formative assessments is the immediate feedback teachers and students gain. Gottlieb, in her book *Assessing English Lan-*

*guage Learners: Bridges to Educational Equity*, refers to this as assessment for learning. Assessment for learning gives teachers the data they need to make informed instructional decisions about how to proceed with content instruction. Does content need to be retaught? Are more language supports needed? Can a picture or diagram be used to help explain the content? Teachers use their expertise to continually monitor and adjust and then assess again. Over time, these formative assessments create a portfolio of student work that can be used for grades but, more importantly, can be used to document student gains and successes.

"English is a language, not a measure of intelligence."

- Unknown

Grades are a measure of a student's growth toward and mastery of intended outcomes and content standards. They are a form of feedback to students, parents, and other educators about a student's grasp of the content and standards. Students and parents take that feedback to heart. For students who are learning English, grades are an important source of feedback and pride.

When the classroom instruction and assessments align to what students can do according to their English proficiency, then grading becomes

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**Formative  
assessments are more  
appropriate for ELL  
students...**

- Kristin Spears  
in Education Week Teacher

much easier. In the absence of instructional and assessment strategies for English-learners, students really struggle with learning the content, and grades can sometimes reflect that. Students and parents can really take that feedback to heart. Take, for instance, a student who made excellent grades when they were learning in their first language before they arrived in the United States. If they come to the U.S. and receive poor grades because the instruction they are receiving is not comprehensible or the assessment is a measure of their language rather than their content knowledge, they can start to question their identity as a good student as well as their intelligence.

English-learners have the dual challenge of learning language and content at the same time. They have to work at least twice as hard. When students are held to high expectations and re-

### Assessing content apart from language proficiency

*Becky Corr is the president of EdSpark Consulting, which is dedicated to igniting partnerships for diverse*

ceive the appropriate support for language, then mastering the content standards becomes possible. It is important to expect English-learners to master the content and communicate this expectation along with the assurance that they will be provided with language support.

When assessing English-learners, it is important to assess their growth toward and mastery of the content standards separate from language. In other words, the assessments must match what a student is able to do at their current proficiency level. Collaboration with the ESL teacher is helpful when it comes to assessment and throughout the teaching and learning cycle. If the instruction throughout the unit is not comprehensible to the student, then modifying an assessment or providing an alternative method of assessment will not be helpful. On the other hand, if collaboration between the ESL teacher and content teacher has been strong and students have benefited from comprehensible input, then providing an assessment that matches the proficiency level of the students is beneficial. Most states have a document similar to the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors or the NY-SESLAT Performance Level Descriptions. If unsure of a student's English-proficiency level, collaborating with your ESL teacher will be helpful for putting into context what a student is able to do.

Students' identities—how they see themselves within the academic world—are influenced by the feedback they receive from teachers. When the content knowledge of English-learners is validly assessed separate from language proficiency, the result is powerfully affirming.

### “Four essential considerations”

*Pamela Mesta's experience includes administration, ESOL, bilingual, elementary, early childhood, educational technology, professional development, and interpretation/translation. She currently works as an ESOL supervisor in a Maryland public school district and is also an adjunct college professor. Mesta has her B.A. in communications, her M.A. in education, and has done postgraduate work in ESOL, educational technology, and school administration. Her certifications include ESOL Pre-K-12, Elem/MS 1-6, Administrator I/II, and national-board certification in early childhood.*

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- Becky Corr  
in Education Week Teacher

*work in educational technology. Her teacher certification is ESOL Pre-K-12.*

Grading English-language learners (ELLs) can be a bit tricky if you haven't had much experience in this area. No worries! Here are *four essential considerations* to guide your practice:

**1. Connect with your ELL specialist!** This person will be your best point of contact for where to begin with each of your ELLs. Remember, you are the master of your content, and he/she is the master of language development. Together, you can decide what linguistic and content modifications to the curriculum must be made, how language and content goals will be interconnected, and what expectations you both have for student progress.

**2. Get to know your learners!** Take some time to get to know information about your ELLs. This includes details about their prior schooling experiences, cultural backgrounds, values, and interests. It is also important to research grading systems from their previous schools/countries and discuss these differences with your students. This will help to establish a clear understanding of your expectations. Do some research on the stages of language learning and find out what ELL levels your students are, based on recent language assessments conducted by your ELL specialist. Knowing what levels they are will help you to set reasonable, yet achievable expectations for learning. When an ELL is below grade level in content knowledge, establish a baseline of where they are performing and “grow” their content knowledge from there. If separate objectives have been set for the student, their achievement should be measured with alternate assessments based on those objectives.

**3. Match instruction to assessment!** Teach students how to be learners first before teaching and assessing content. Modify assessments the same way you modify instruction based on your students' cultural backgrounds and linguistic levels. These modifications should be woven into all formative and summative assessments. The most important thing to remember is that grades should never be a direct reflection of language level, meaning that students should have the opportunity to do well regardless if they are newcomers or advanced ELLs. Oftentimes, this involves creating individualized, differentiated assessments. Provide clear rubrics for assessments and projects along with exemplars that can serve as models.

**4. Formatting is not universal!** It is best not to assume ELLs are familiar with the assessment format you are using (multiple-choice tests, constructed-response items, etc.). It is best to have study guides (*with answers*) and review handouts that match not only the contents of the test but also the format so ELLs can practice both. These supports will also help your ELL specialist, as he/she may not be familiar with the content. Allow ample time for students to study the information once they have experienced it in the same format the test is going to be administered. In some cases, allow the use of notes. Visuals used in assessments should be also be the same ones used in notes, instructions, and handouts. ■

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## OPINION

Published on April 13, 2020, in Education Week's Finding Common Ground Blog with Peter DeWitt

# Assessments and Grading in the Midst of a Pandemic

By Thomas R. Guskey

**T**he coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to educators throughout the world. Schools have had to change entire instructional programs in widely varied contexts with inequitable access to technology and other vital resources. School closures and requirements for social isolation have created untold hardships for students and their families, especially those with multiple children at different grade levels, whose parents cannot stay at home, whose English may not be the primary language, and where the parents are also teachers.

In making these changes, educators recognize that we can't do everything we did before. We must examine our purposes, establish priorities, and decide what is truly most important. When it comes to assessments and grading, two major needs influence these decisions.

First is the need to *encourage and support student learning*. We need to provide the best possible learning experiences for students under these constrained and demanding conditions. We also must do our best to ensure all students learn well, achieve important academic goals, and are not hindered in their learning progress.

Second is the need to *document and quantify student learning* for the purposes of accountability. Schools need to verify the success of these alternative instructional programs. For students, we also need to complete report cards and fill in transcripts. For graduating seniors in many schools, we need to calculate class ranks, identify the top 10 percent, distribute academic honors, and name a valedictorian.

Unfortunately, under the adverse circumstances we currently face, these two needs pull us in different directions and prescribe different courses of action. To accomplish one means sacrificing aspects of the other. This brings new importance to establishing our priorities, especially in light of issues related to fairness and equity. For educators who make encouraging and supporting student learning their priority, however, the direction is clear.

### Assessments

When it comes to assessments, supporting student learning means focusing on feedback instead of a score or grade. It means helping students to see assessments as learning tools that

have an integral role in the learning process, rather than as evaluation devices that mark the end of learning. It means making clear to students that the primary purpose of assessments is to verify what they've learned and to identify any learning problems so we can work together to remedy those problems. Hence, cheating on an assessment serves no purpose other than to delay our efforts to help *all* students learn well.

An emphasis on feedback also means we must plainly articulate our learning goals and the criteria we use to determine when students meet those goals. We need to be clear about how we will know if students "get it" and not worry about quantifying their performance on a scale with 101 different levels. Most important, we need to plan alternative approaches to help students when they don't get it. This change eliminates the need to distinguish formative and summative assessments. If our focus is on feedback, then *all* assessments are formative until students get it. When results show they get it, then the assessment becomes summative

### Grading

When it comes to grading, encouraging and supporting student learning means ensuring grades accurately reflect what students have learned and are able to do, not when or how they learned it. As schools physically close and move to online learning, most attempt to accomplish this in one of two ways.

In schools required to give grades for the current term, even when not all students have adequate online access, grades are typically based on evidence of student learning gathered up to the time of school closure. But then they do three things:

1. Add an asterisk to the grade to indicate it is based on the portion of the course completed up to the time of school closure.
2. Develop specific procedures that allow students to improve that grade by redoing assignments or assessments, even when the grade remains based on only a portion of the course.
3. Develop additional procedures for students to fulfill all course requirements and complete the course, with assistance from teachers, in order to remove the asterisk from their grade. Schools vary in the timelines they set for both #2 and #3 because the length of school closures remains uncertain. Ensuring fairness and equity for all students remains paramount in making these decisions.

Other schools, however, recognize the extraordinary nature of our current situation and are tak-

ing the same path as many elite colleges and universities: They are shifting temporarily to “pass/fail,” “satisfactory/unsatisfactory,” or “credit/incomplete” grading for the current school year. The University of Chicago, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Stanford University, along with many others, all recently decided to temporarily shift to pass/fail grading after switching to remote learning this semester in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The key to successful pass/fail grading rests in establishing clear criteria for “pass” and making those criteria challenging, rigorous, and attainable. This doesn’t mean lowering standards.

Rather, it means being clear about the standards and doing all we can to ensure students meet them. Excellent examples of similar pass/fail grading include certification examinations in medicine, nursing, law, military, or civil service.

The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates said, “Desperate times require desperate measures.” What he meant is that in adverse circumstances, actions that might have been rejected under other circumstances may become the best choice. And these are certainly desperate times.

Pass/fail or credit/incomplete grades may prove to be the fairest and most equitable grading option available to educators in these desperate

times. By making student learning our primary focus; helping students share the same focus; ensuring the criteria we establish for passing or earning credit are clear, rigorous, and attainable; and then doing everything we can to help ALL students meet those criteria; we will make the best of these difficult and trying times. ■

*Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and independent consultant. DeWitt provides insights and advice for education leaders. This guest blog is written by Thomas R. Guskey, senior research scholar, University of Louisville, and professor emeritus, University of Kentucky.*

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