




STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, Commissioner of Education 

DATE: April 7, 2020

SUBJECT: Grading, Graduation Requirements, and Prescribed Courses of Study

In accordance with Governor Ned Lamont's Executive Order 7C, and due to extended school class cancellations during the COVID-19 Pandemic, I am providing guidance pertaining to the available flexibilities for local or regional boards of education with regard to high school graduation requirements, prescribed courses of study, and grading practices. This guidance statement from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is intended to help superintendents, school officials, and boards of education make crucial policy decisions in this time of crisis that requires flexibility and the capacity to adapt to a new and unanticipated set of circumstances.

Schools in Connecticut and across the country are faced with making unprecedented decisions, such as:

- How will schools support their students who rather suddenly had to transition to a fledgling 'work-from-home' model of learning?
- How will students be graded?
- How will grading and graduation policies impact seniors planning to attend college in the fall or other students relying upon alpha grades for internships or school admissions?

The CSDE has consulted with leaders in Higher Education so we may all speak in a clear and unified voice on these complex issues that have a direct impact on students and their families.

Grading Practices:

Determination of grading policies and approaches continues to be at the discretion of the local or regional board of education. Due to local control, these practices vary across Connecticut districts (e.g., standards-based, traditional, competency-based, pass/fail, point systems, and alpha).

The CSDE supports the growing national consensus that, given the variability of online teaching and learning models, and issues of access and equity, it is appropriate to view the second half of the 2020 school year as a special case in terms of grading, GPAs, and transcripts. All students and staff are working under challenging conditions and, therefore, we encourage districts to focus priorities on student engagement and learning. We suggest that schools adopt a locally guided Pass/Fail protocol for grading while providing continued educational opportunities. All such "pass" markings shall constitute confirmation that the student has satisfactorily completed the necessary credits pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-221a. We anticipate that these uniform grading policies across the state will create a consistent grading scheme for evaluating all Connecticut students by post-secondary institutions within and outside Connecticut.

As guidance, the CSDE identifies the following potential options for pass/fail grading policies:

- A. **Standard Pass/Fail:** The traditional pass/fail standard, similar to what many colleges and graduate schools permit, as well as many high schools currently offer.
- B. **Pass/Incomplete:** This standard would apply to students in grades 9, 10, and 11. Students who for whatever reason were not able to complete their online assignments would have a district-determined timeline to complete the work, or approved project, and receive either a Pass or Fail grade. This option supports (1) students who may not have had adequate access to technology tools during class cancelations, (2) students with IEPs in need of direct support, or who otherwise require additional resources to succeed, (3) EL students, (4) students who may need counseling or mental health services that they cannot receive at home, (5) students who are sick themselves, caring for a family member, or dealing with the trauma of loss as a result of the pandemic, and (6) disengaged students, who with a second chance opportunity and counseling could regain their agency and get a result of Pass (and credit).
- C. **Pass with Distinction:** In some cases districts may want to recognize students who worked at a very high academic level during this extraordinary time of the coronavirus pandemic and celebrate their efforts with a designation of '*Pass with Distinction*'.
- D. **Recommendations:** Recommendations continue to serve as an important means of communicating information about students to colleges, universities, vocational programs and other post-secondary educational opportunities. Districts should use recommendations to supplement pass/fail protocols and share information concerning students' academic strengths and interests, personal qualities, role in the school community, extracurricular accomplishments, potential direction in the future, and other qualitative assessments of a student's potential contribution to the school or program at issue and society in the future.
- E. **Student Transcripts:** Districts should modify student transcripts to provide adequate context about the disruption caused by COVID-19 and the resulting change in grading for the period after March 1, 2020.

While Pass/Fail protocols may address learning and alleviate the associated pressures on students and their families, districts should continue to provide meaningful feedback to students to support student progress and foster academic growth.

Please note that in communication with the NCAA, the commitment was made that a Pass/Fail or Pass/Incomplete would not negatively impact our student athletes.

2020 Graduating Class:

The CSDE has worked closely with our partners in higher education - the University of Connecticut (UCONN), the Connecticut State College and University System (CSUS), and the Connecticut Consortium of Independent Colleges (CCIC), which represents certain private colleges and universities – to reach consensus and provide the following guidance on grading for

School Year 2019-20, for students applying to or enrolling in Connecticut colleges or universities. This guidance does not reflect grading policies for public and private colleges outside of Connecticut.

For the semesters which are taught through continued educational opportunities outside the school house Connecticut's public and private institutions of higher education will accept the following principles:

- Pass/Fail grades will be accepted for Connecticut high school students taught through distance learning for the semesters in which in-school classes are cancelled.
- For the 2019-2020 school year, the student Grade Point Average (GPA) will be calculated based upon performance while students were in-school classes, through the time when in school classes were canceled during March 2020.
- For current seniors, a student's GPA will include grades earned through December, 2019. Underclassmen GPAs will be calculated based on grades earned through December, 2019, and those earned beginning when classes resume for the 2020-2021 school year.
- For a year-long course, a student's GPA will include the fall term grade for the course.
- Colleges and universities in Connecticut will accept electronically certified transcripts from districts for newly enrolled freshmen, and will extend the deadline for receipt of officially certified transcripts.
- Understanding that families in Connecticut may have suffered a negative financial impact from COVID-19, colleges and universities in Connecticut will work with families whose ability to pay for higher education has changed in order to determine whether they are eligible for additional financial aid and what state, federal and institutional resources may be available to help.

CSDE, UCONN, CSUS and CCIC continue to work on further guidance, and will collaborate on an FAQ document for districts and families to be released soon.

Determination of Eligible Graduation Credits and Prescribed Courses of Study:

The CSDE recommends that local or regional boards of education continue their program of instruction. However, the CSDE understands that, in exceptional circumstances, a district may be unable to provide a particular course or courses through distance learning, or may need to depart from their planned curriculum. Pursuant to Governor Lamont's Executive Order 7C, the CSDE will allow districts to make a local determination to grant students the necessary credits for graduation even where such course or prescribed course of study may not be consistent with C.G.S. Section 10-16b or Section 10-221a(b).

In exercising local discretion, the CSDE urges local or regional boards of education to consider the existing flexibilities in awarding non-seat time credit that are currently available in C.G.S. Section 10-221a (f) and (g), including but not limited to, the attainment of credits through a successful demonstration of mastery, cross-curricular graduation requirements, and virtual learning on-line coursework.

Graduation Ceremonies

Graduation ceremonies are a local decision, however, CSDE cannot emphasize enough the importance of recognizing student achievement upon graduation. All decisions about the implementation of graduation ceremonies should be made by consulting [Governor Lamont's emergency declarations](#) in collaboration with local health officials who can assist in determining the level of transmission in the community.

School districts should consider options including postponement, virtual congregation, or other ways to mark the major accomplishment of high school graduation.

Consideration of the strong feelings of seniors completing their high school education should be paramount in your decision-making.

Next steps

The CSDE, in consultation with higher education partners, CAPSS, CABE, CAS and local district leaders will continue to produce a regularly updated FAQ section on our website in the coming weeks and months regarding the challenges described in this guidance and emerging issues that arise over the course of the pandemic. We plan to organize an opportunity for a large-scale conference call for responding to questions and concerns.

Please contact Keith M. Norton, Chief Strategic Planning Officer (keith.norton@ct.gov) or Chris Clouet, Special Advisor to the Commissioner (chris.clouet@ct.gov) with any questions regarding this guidance.

Thank you for your leadership and vision.

cc: Desi Nesmith, Deputy Commissioner of Education
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