

Grading on the Health Curve

SCENARIO: In response to a local flare-up of COVID-19 infections, the school district switches to remote learning for the second half of the semester. Internet service across the district is spotty with many students unable to access synchronous video lessons or even Google Classroom tools from their homes. The high school principal proposes that semester grades automatically convert to pass/fail to account for inequitable learning access. Some students and parents protest, saying this unfairly obscures the hard work they've put into their classes and could hurt their GPAs in college applications. What should the superintendent recommend?



SHELLEY BERMAN: Given the inequitable internet access, the principal has acted appropriately and deserves the superintendent's support. All students need a fair chance to access curriculum and meet course standards. If equitable access is unavailable, those lacking the opportunity to meet the standards should not be penalized.

Understandably, students who wish to attend competitive colleges will be concerned about the decision's impact on their ability to compete for acceptance. The principal can address those concerns by indicating that work ethic and performance can be highlighted by teachers and counselors in their reference letters. Their transcripts also can indicate that any pass/fail grades were due to pandemic-related adjustments made by the school rather than student choice.

To prevent this situation, the district could have acted proactively to provide hot spots and computers that enabled all students to participate as fully as possible, regardless of the changing conditions.

MARYELLEN ELIA: Rather than individual principals tackling this issue, it would be most appropriate for the superintendent to assemble a group of representative stakeholders to grow awareness of the

digital divide that exists across the wider student population and the resultant impact on learning and grading.

In addition to growing a shared understanding of the larger equity issue, the stakeholders group must be solution-oriented and involve internet providers, college representatives and community members to get creative about narrowing the access gap. The decision about grading doesn't necessarily need to happen quickly, especially at the cost of community outreach and input.

In the end, it may not simply be a decision between normal grading versus pass/fail. But whatever is decided, the district must offer a rationale that's clearly communicated and understood by all.

MAX McGEE: Keeping what's best for students top of mind, the wise superintendent will make a fourfold recommendation: (1) students' grades for the first half of the semester will be recorded on the transcript with an explanation; (2) students can elect to have their grades for this semester recorded as pass/fail, if they prefer; (3) all lessons will be made asynchronous for the remainder of the semester; and (4) for the next semester (or year), the district will provide families with free internet hotspots (ideally through partnerships with local business, nonprofits and government) to enable all students to learn synchronously.

This recommendation will be communicated frequently and endorsed heartedly

through a multitude of media by an array of messengers, including school board members.

MAGGIE LOPEZ: Frankly, there is more at stake here than students' GPAs. The superintendent needs to support the principal's pass/fail proposal and stand behind the recommendation. This decision will create as much equity for all students as possible, and it levels the playing field for students struggling to get digital access.

Complaining parents need to consider the greater whole not just their student. The virus prevails, and we must think big picture.

The superintendent could suggest the district compose a letter, signed by the superintendent and board, acknowledging to colleges the many changes and transitions that have occurred during this pandemic.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. Suggestions for dilemmas may be submitted to magazine@aasa.org.

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELLEY BERMAN**, superintendent, Andover, Mass.; **MARYELLEN ELIA**, senior fellow, International Center for Leadership in Education and retired superintendent; **MAGGIE LOPEZ**, retired superintendent, Colorado Springs, Colo.; and **GLENN "MAX" McGEE**, president, Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates in Schaumburg, Ill. Expanded analyses appear in the magazine's online edition.

See the panelists' full analyses of this case and read the AASA Code of Ethics at www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx.