

Tips from the Special Education Division: Modified Grading

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Question: What is the guidance for school and IEP teams when considering the use of modified grading?

Grade level academic learning standards apply to all students and while the required credits for graduation are the same for all students in a graduating class, there can be flexibility in how students demonstrate mastery of learning standards. When determined necessary by an IEP team, students can also access and work toward mastering the learning standard at a modified depth, breath, and complexity either through flexibility within a course or through comparable content course substitutions.¹

Prior to making individual modifications to grading practices for a student, the IEP team should first support the educator to set up the course content in a manner to support a wide variety of learners' needs. IEP teams can assist general educators to support all student progress through utilizing principles of universal design for learning², differentiating the content, and supporting students to access the learning standards at different levels of depth, breadth, and complexity. IEP teams must also review existing services and accommodations to ensure that they are effective to support student progress in grade level content and make changes if needed to the services and accommodations before determining if grading modification³ may be needed.

For students who also have an IEP, [WAC 180-51-115](#) outlines that they "must be provided needed accommodations to progress in the general curriculum toward meeting state and local graduation requirements". Additionally, the IDEA requirement that all students with disabilities are provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE), designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living (Section 300.1(a) of IDEA) must guide local decisions on grading practices.

When determining an appropriate approach to grading for an individual student, first consider what the policy is for all students and what flexibilities are available to all, as well as to what extent

¹ [Special Education Guidance on WAC 180-51-115](#): Procedures for Granting High School Graduation Credits for Students with Special Education Needs, page 8

² Learn more about [UDL Guidelines from CAST](#)

³ See question 56 of [High School Transcript FAQ](#) to learn more about how modified grades and/or curriculum can be noted on the transcript



those have been considered (even with some additional supports and accommodations) before going deeper into individual grading modifications. For example, all students may have the flexibility to make up assignments and retake tests.



A student's IEP team may determine that a student requires specific accommodations or modifications to access the learning of a course, but this does not mean that the student will also require modified grading, or that modified grading should be applied to all courses. When determined necessary for an individual student, the function of a modified grade is to produce an accurate, meaningful, and clear measurement of student progress and performance in the learning standards of a course.

Prior to any decision to modify grading systems, schools should clearly communicate the changes in coursework or grading policies to staff, students, and families, including the new grading criteria and how changes to the grading systems may impact GPA calculations and credit accrual. Modified grading should not be used as a method to make the course or content easier for a student.

An IEP team needs to consider the following questions when determining if the use of modified grading is appropriate for an individual student:

- What is the local policy on modified grading? What will modified grading look like? How will the modified grade accurately reflect the student's demonstrated mastery of the state learning standards?
- How will using modified grades support the individualized needs of the student? How did general and special educators discuss how to best measure the student's learning prior to determining a potential need for modified grades?
- Are there barriers or adverse effects of modified grades in the student's ability to earn credit and complete the graduation requirements for a high school diploma? Will there be any potential impact on the clarity of the student's preparation for postsecondary opportunities?
- Is the IEP recommending pass/fail grading, and if so, was regular grading first considered? Why was this not considered appropriate?

Considerations for the use of Binary Grading Systems

The use of binary grading systems (such as pass and fail) is generally not a recommended practice because it does not produce an accurate, meaningful, and clear measurement of student progress and performance in the learning standards of a course. Therefore, pass/fail grading should generally only be used when all other alternatives to grading have been considered and found not appropriate. Decisions for the use of pass/fail grading should be used on a case-by-case basis after carefully considering of the following points:

- Binary grading should not be used as a method to make the course or content easier for a student.
- District and school teams should not systemically use binary grading systems for any group of students or unilaterally across a course or content area.

- Any decisions to use a binary grading practice should be made prior to the course starting or as early in the academic term as possible.
- While using binary grading may have a positive impact on a student's high school GPA it can have unintended consequences on a student's potential college admission as universities may make different determinations about GPA or recalculate a student's GPA based on their institution's policies.

It would be contrary to the IDEA if a district or school was systemically using pass/fail grading for any group of students.

If pass/fail grading is determined to be appropriate for a student, the IEP team should:

- Make and document individual determinations about for which courses this is appropriate.
- Determine a plan for formative assessment so that there is a way to capture what progress the student is making in the curriculum over time.
- Develop a plan to revisit the appropriateness of pass/fail grading and to shift away from pass/fail grading for a student as soon as appropriate.

Resources

The following resources may be helpful to support school teams in considering alternatives to pass/fail grading:

Grading for equity: [Bring to Your PLC, School, Or District - Grading for Equity](#)

- Ties Center: [Inclusive Leader Series - Grading](#) (YouTube video)