Credit recovery isn't enough: How to manage a surge of failing course grades

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In a year of educational crisis, fall report cards brought more worrisome news. Failing grades are on the rise across the country, especially for students who are learning online. The results threaten to exacerbate existing educational inequities: students with failing grades tend to have less access to advanced courses in high school, and a failing grade in even one 9th-grade course can lower a student's chances of graduating on time.

A national scan of news reports and school district documents, combined with data from educator surveys, shows:

- Rates of failing grades have increased significantly across the country.
- Students from low-income households, students who are learning English, and students learning online are often most affected.
- Many teachers had to navigate a shift in district grading policies with limited support.

Addressing the problem won't be easy, but school systems should be wary of quick fixes like credit recovery programs, which can further diminish students' learning opportunities. Instead, schools must rethink student progress and dramatically increase support for those who are falling behind.

Dramatic rise in Fs can be seen across the country

News reports and district updates show failing grades are on the rise across the country.

- In New Mexico, more than 40 percent of middle and high school students were failing at least one class as of late October.
- In Houston, 42 percent of students received at least one F in the first grading period of the year.
- Nearly 40 percent of grades for high school students in St. Paul, Minnesota, were Fs—double the amount in a typical year.
- Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools reported that the share of middle and high school students earning Fs in at least two classes was 11 percent, almost double from the previous year.
- In California's Sonoma County, 37 percent of students across ten districts had at least one failing grade compared to 27 percent last year. Districts in Southern California, including Los Angeles Unified and Santa Ana, saw a sharp increase in failing grades. In response, the districts are giving students more time to improve their grades instead of issuing failing course grades.

Failing grades reflect and amplify long-standing inequalities

As with so much in this pandemic, the impact varies significantly across student groups. Students in remote learning settings, English language learners, and students from low-income households have been among the hardest hit.

Students learning via remote instruction are struggling. For example, officials in Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District, the second-largest district in greater Houston, reported 41 percent of online-only middle and high school students failed at least one class, compared to 15 percent of those attending in-person instruction. Given that students of color and students living in poverty are more likely to be in districts offering only remote instruction and are more likely to opt for remote learning when in-person learning is available, these students are likely to face disproportionate harm to their grades.

Other evidence suggests English language learners may be particularly at risk for failing grades. In Fairfax, Virginia, the biggest drop in grades came for students whose primary language is not English: 47 percent are underperforming in math this year, while 53 percent are underperforming in English.

Students from low-income households also see greater increases in failing rates. In Montgomery County, Maryland, 36 percent of 9th graders from low-income households failed the first marking period in English, compared to 6 percent last year when the same students took English in 8th grade.

When grading policies shifted, teachers needed more support

Most teachers and students didn't have to deal with grading last spring. In a national survey by the RAND Corporation, about 30 percent of teachers reported they were issuing course grades. Only 39 percent of principals reported that their students would receive a letter grade.

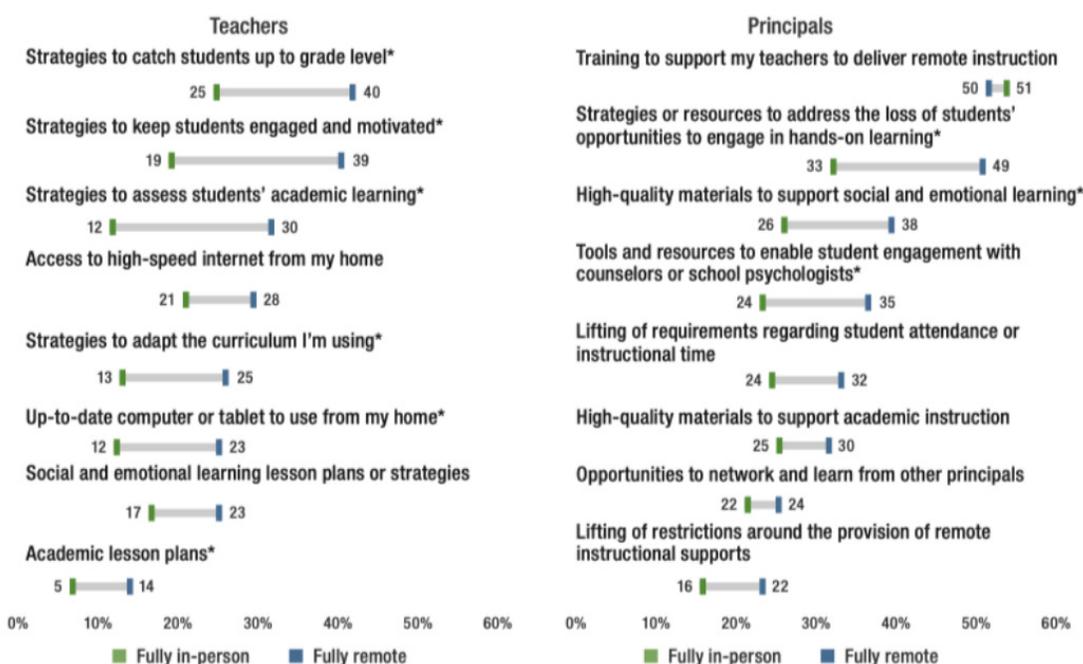**Figure 1. Last Spring, Most Teachers Weren't Required to Grade Their Students**
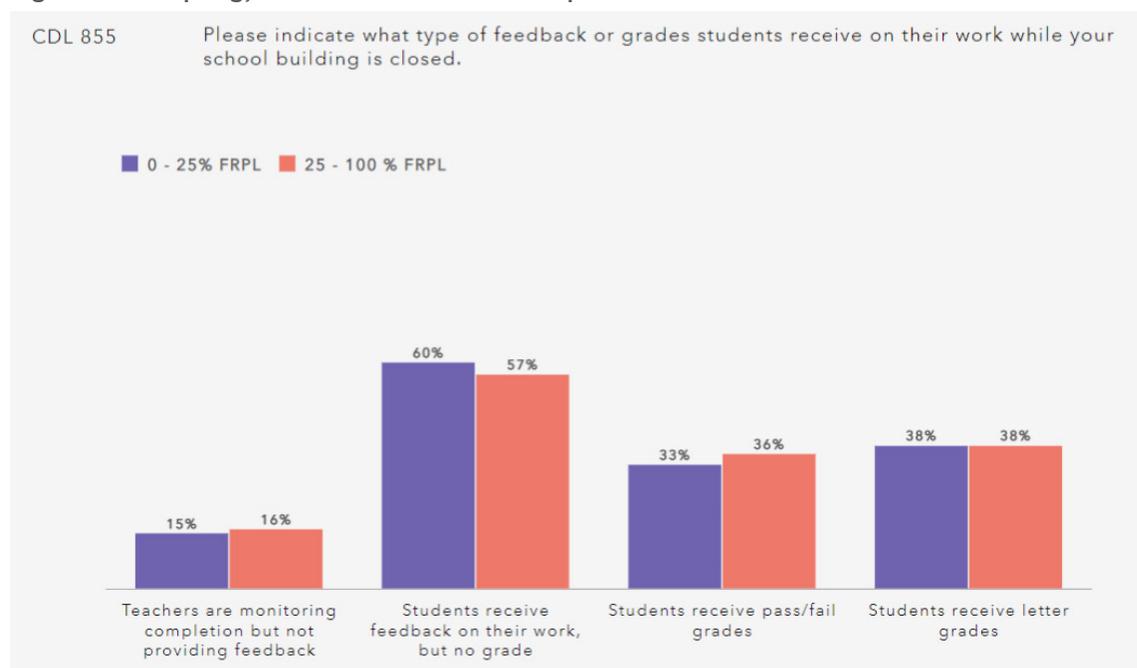
Source: *COVID-19 and the State of K–12 Schools; Results and Technical Documentation from the Spring 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys*, RAND Corporation, 2020. Figure by Bento.

Grading resumed this fall. CRPE's analysis of reopening plans in 106 large districts found that most required schools to submit grades for students. RAND's fall 2020 survey showed that 59 percent of teachers reported they were assigning letter grades. Secondary teachers were far more likely to report assigning letter grades than elementary teachers were (75 percent versus 41 percent).

Even as grading returned to normal, schooling didn't. More than half of the nation's school districts were hybrid or remote. Many teachers working in these new environments were at sea. Survey research, for example, suggested that teachers in these settings felt far less supported than teachers working with students in person.

Figure 2. Need for Supports Was Higher Among Remote-Only Teachers and Principals

Percentage Reporting Major or Very Major Needs

Teachers
- Strategies to catch students up to grade level* — 25 / 40
- Strategies to keep students engaged and motivated* — 19 / 39
- Strategies to assess students' academic learning* — 12 / 30
- Access to high-speed internet from my home — 21 / 28
- Strategies to adapt the curriculum I'm using* — 13 / 25
- Up-to-date computer or tablet to use from my home* — 12 / 23
- Social and emotional learning lesson plans or strategies — 17 / 23
- Academic lesson plans* — 5 / 14

Principals
- Training to support my teachers to deliver remote instruction — 50 / 51
- Strategies or resources to address the loss of students' opportunities to engage in hands-on learning* — 33 / 49
- High-quality materials to support social and emotional learning* — 26 / 38
- Tools and resources to enable student engagement with counselors or school psychologists* — 24 / 35
- Lifting of requirements regarding student attendance or instructional time — 24 / 32
- High-quality materials to support academic instruction — 25 / 30
- Opportunities to network and learn from other principals — 22 / 24
- Lifting of restrictions around the provision of remote instructional supports — 16 / 22

■ Fully in-person ■ Fully remote

Note: This figure is based on the following survey question asked to teachers and principals: "Please indicate your current level of need for additional support from school or district leaders in each of the following areas." Response options were "no need," "very minor need," "minor need," "moderate need," "major need," and "very major need." * indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between educators in schools providing in-person instruction and educators providing fully remote instruction.
Source: *Will This School Year Be Another Casualty of the Pandemic? Key Findings from the American Educator Panels Fall 2020 COVID-19 Surveys*, RAND Corporation, 2020.

With teachers expected to start grading in the fall, those with hybrid and remote classes were confronting major challenges. Meanwhile, their students were returning to school with even greater needs than before. RAND's survey found 66 percent of teachers reported that the majority of their students entered the 2020–21 school year less prepared for grade-level work than what is typically seen. Indeed, more than a quarter of teachers reported that a majority of their students returned to school *significantly* less prepared for grade-level work. These percentages run even higher in school districts in which students of color make up more than 75 percent of the student body.

Credit recovery isn't enough

If these trends in failing grades continue, the number of students who will need help getting back on track academically will far exceed what was needed in the past. Addressing the problem won't be easy. It's time to rethink student progress and dramatically increase support for students who are falling behind.

1. **Don't rely too heavily on credit recovery programs.** When students fail classes, many districts enroll them in credit recovery courses, which are increasingly online. While credit recovery programs can help students make it to graduation, studies show many students—as many as one third in one study—fail to complete their credit recovery course, and these courses do little to help students learn the content they missed. In many places, pandemic-related disruptions to learning are too great and affect too many students to rely on these programs.

2. **Rethink student progress.** Remote learning disrupted the learning progressions for a great many students. Early results from NWEA's MAP assessments also show that students may be keeping closer to their typical pace in reading than in math. Signs point to a wider than normal variation in learning progress across students and also across subject areas for individual students. As one superintendent recently noted during an interview with CRPE researchers, "Grade levels just don't mean as much anymore." As districts think about helping students recover what they've lost, they should consider a proficiency-based approach that maps out learning progressions, identifies learning targets, and provides varied and flexible strategies and interventions to support students to progress along those pathways from whatever their starting point is.

3. **Flood students with support.** Finally, the sheer number of students who will need additional support in the coming months and years, along with the widely divergent learning experiences they have had, suggests the need for an all-of-the-above strategy. Elaine Allensworth and Nate Schwartz in their Ed Research for Recovery brief point to intensive tutoring, extended learning time, and systems to monitor student progress and early warnings as high-value interventions to support students. Districts should also start thinking now about how to take advantage of next summer to get a jump-start on learning for next fall—an opportunity too many districts left untapped last year.

Schools will have to secure and align resources, staffing, and curriculum to carry out these recommendations. They may have to reassign or reconfigure staffing to accommodate new courses or additional sessions as students revisit previous content, or hire new staff to provide additional tutoring and extra instructional time. Districts may need to implement new curricula with better scaffolding and support for differentiation that zeros in on the most essential skills, or covers standards that students could not complete this year. And they will need to invest time and effort to map learning progressions and provide educators with the information that enables them to help students follow those progressions.

All of these resources will take time to marshal and reorganize. Even as we write this in January 2021, and even as the pandemic continues to rage in communities across the country, time is of the essence to start planning.