

School district outlines online grading

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The Del Norte Unified School District resumed grading for most of its students this week.

During a presentation to the school board April 23, Tom Kissinger, assistant superintendent of instructional services, said this week was a bridge to distance learning week and outlined what grading will look like the rest of the school year. Kissinger said the key principle was to “do no harm,” thus elementary and middle school students will not be receiving a letter grade.

Instead, teachers will be required to make sure students are participating and engaged by keeping track of student contact via Zoom, phone and email. Feedback will be based on completion of work and demonstration of progression in the work or whether work is missing or had not been submitted.

Kissinger said high school students’ work will be on an A through D scale, with some courses requiring a C or better in a pre-requisite in order to advance.

Del Norte High School Principal Randy Fugate clarified that if a student had passing grades in a class prior to the March 15 shuttering of the campuses, students can improve grades by re-engaging with their instructor. However, failure to re-engage in the class online, the grade could decrease. He added the grade would not fall below a D.

Teachers and students are connecting via online services Zoom, Google Classroom, SeeSaw and Canvas. Unfortunately, Superintendent Jeff Harris said, this means their goal is to provide high-quality educational opportunities, not high-quality instruction.

“This isn’t teaching as normal,” Harris said. He referred to Gov. Gavin Newsom’s March 13 executive order directing districts to “offer distance learning and independent study opportunities to its students to continue to receive state funding.”

“If you listen to Governor Newsom, he said, ‘Parents, you need to be prepared to homeschool your children.’ This is about homeschooling not about instructional models that we’ve all used since 1923.”

The DNUSD Board of Trustees unanimously approved a resolution governing grading during emergency school closures.

The statewide educational system remains fluid, especially when it comes to high school students meeting standards set by the University of California and California State University systems, Harris said.

“Tuesday we were told that the UC, CSUs were only going to be looking at pass/fails,” he said. “Giving a grade could disqualify students from entering college, negatively impact them moving forward and could also have some unforeseen circumstances with CIF. We’re having discussions with staff about what that means and how we can still utilize grades for purposes for valedictorian and those kinds of pieces.”

Fugate added the wrinkle students could face in the revised grading system is moving onto a CSU or UC after graduating. He pointed out the two public college systems had initially indicated grades wouldn’t matter coming into the fall semester.

“A high school senior who receives a D in a class instead of a pass/fail designation could be in danger of not being admitted to a UC or CSU in the fall,” Fugate said.

“A letter grade could also have an impact on a student’s ability to participate in athletics based on criteria set by the California Interscholastic Federation, which governs high school sports statewide,” he added.

To facilitate online learning Fugate said DNHS staff has distributed about 200 Chrome Books and have distributed more than 105 “paper modules” to families who either don’t have Internet access or feel their student learns better on paper rather than online. He estimated about 20 percent of the high school students rely on those paper modules.

Board member Charlaine Mazzei, who has a special needs son at Redwood Elementary School, expressed her concern about actual instruction, saying it wasn’t clear how that would take place.

“I assume the child has been instructed on how to do the work in the packet or how to do the work online, and that’s not necessarily the case when you’re supposed to be moving on to new material,” Mazzei said. “What is the expectation for teachers to record or provide instruction on new material as we move through the school year? And how is that going to be accessible to us parents who have to sit down with the kid and say, ‘This is how we add up fractions’?”

Board President Frank Magarino weighed in, wondering how teachers would support a struggling student with the required work.

Harris explained that one of the challenges is that for most students, distance learning is new.

“Teachers are providing new content, including videotaped lessons. I saw one instructor tutoring 27 students in math via Zoom. But, students are missing out on music classes, language and art lessons,” Harris said.

“Nobody signed up for this. Our staff is doing a great job given the limited tools they have.”

Magarino then turned and asked student trustee Elizabeth Ward what attending high school was like for her via distance learning. Ward said she misses the social aspect the most, adding that while she’s adapted well to Zoom and other distance learning modules, it may be different for a student who doesn’t have a similar drive to succeed academically.

“The information’s out there from teachers,” Ward said. “They always ask for questions. It depends on the student what they’re going to get out of it.”