



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, and High School Principals
From: Commissioner Riley
Date: May 8, 2020
Subject: High School Guidance

As noted in [guidance released on April 24, 2020](#) (*download*), DESE will continue to issue information to help district and school leaders and educators implement quality remote learning programs. This memo is specific to the needs of high schools and their students; for more comprehensive educational guidance, please see [DESE's COVID-19 page](#).

Students in the Class of 2020

With school buildings closed through the end of the 2019-20 school year, helping students in the Class of 2020 graduate and proceed with their postsecondary plans is a critical priority. High schools should be sure to review the status of each senior to determine the extent to which the student has met both local and [state requirements \(the competency determination\)](#) for graduation. (Note: Updates on the competency determination requirement are below.)

While recognizing the unique challenges of this spring's school closure, we remain committed to graduating students who are college- and career-ready and prepared for civic life. Our goal is for Massachusetts high school graduates to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to successfully complete entry-level, credit-bearing college courses; participate in certificate or workplace training programs; enter economically viable career pathways; and engage as active and responsible citizens in our democracy.

The majority of high school seniors were well on their way toward meeting this goal as of March 2020, when the statewide emergency began. For those students (identified by passing grades and earning their competency determination), schools should modify or eliminate procedural hurdles to graduation, such as community service and other requirements that are difficult to meet remotely. All high school seniors should be continuing with remote learning to deepen and advance their knowledge and skills and continue preparation for postsecondary life.

For students who were not on track to graduate – specifically, students without passing grades in courses that are part of local graduation requirements or who did not yet pass the 10th grade MCAS – districts should provide opportunities for skill-building credit recovery to help students recover from lost time on learning and provide support for them to pursue productive educational

and/or workforce options in the fall.

Competency Determination

On April 28, 2020, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, on my recommendation, voted to temporarily modify the competency determination requirement for high school seniors during the COVID-19 emergency. This change will apply to current high school seniors, as well as other actively enrolled students who were on track to graduate in the 2019-20 school year. Specifically, the competency determination can be awarded based on successful completion of a relevant high school course in each subject as follows:

- *For English language arts (ELA) and mathematics:* The competency determination may be awarded upon district certification that the student earned credit this year for a course aligned to the curriculum frameworks in the relevant subject matter and has demonstrated competency in that subject. For students who were not enrolled in a course in the needed subject area during this school year, DESE will examine relevant coursework that the district identifies and for which the student received credit in previous years.
- *For science and technology/engineering:* The competency determination may be awarded upon district certification that the student earned credit for a course aligned to the curriculum frameworks in the relevant subject matter and has demonstrated competency in one of the four tested disciplines (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, or technology/engineering) in either the current school year or a prior school year.

The cancellation of this spring's MCAS testing meant that the optional Educational Proficiency Plan MCAS mathematics tests were also canceled. Instead, students who are on [Educational Proficiency Plans](#) may just complete the courses Required in their Educational Proficiency Plan. For specific questions about Educational Proficiency Plans, please email nyal.f.fuentes@mass.gov.

We are still considering a range of options regarding MCAS testing for students in the classes of 2021 through 2023 (this year's juniors, sophomores, and freshmen), who may have also missed opportunities to earn their competency determination as a result of the pandemic. We expect to issue guidance on MCAS testing for future classes in the coming weeks.

Local Graduation Requirements

High schools in the Commonwealth set nearly all their own course requirements and have flexibility in how those requirements are implemented. Schools should be flexible in their local graduation requirements for students in the Class of 2020 while keeping in mind the need to prepare students for higher education and other postsecondary opportunities. It is important that schools understand the needs of each student and have, to the extent possible, a plan to help each student complete these requirements through remote learning during the remainder of the school year. Schools should also continue to help students make post-graduation plans.

With respect to calculating grades, schools should consider “credit/no credit” grading or grading

based on work completed in the first part of their year. (See further guidance on grading below.)

For high schools where seniors have block schedules, the completion of graduation requirements may be more challenging. In this case, schools should prioritize those block courses to ensure that students are completing the material necessary to meet the standards for graduation credit. This should include online and/or project-based credit recovery opportunities for students who are under-credited or in danger of failing courses. Schools will need to spend more time to support English learners, students with disabilities, and students facing disrupted home lives due to the upheaval caused by COVID-19.

Working with Students to Plan Next Steps

The Department encourages all high schools to provide online, virtual, or phone counseling (which may require some additional school technical resources) for students who have yet to decide on their postsecondary plan. Uncertainty about students' futures will create additional stress among students and their families. This planning is particularly important for potential first-generation college students, in that this absence from school may further exacerbate "summer melt," when students who intend to go to college do not show up for the start of school. It is essential to have family and student voices in this conversation. For students with disabilities, planning is likely to include close attention to adaptation of students' transition plans.

For districts that use [MyCAP](#) and/or electronic advising and planning platforms such as MEFA Pathways, Naviance, Xello, MassCIS, or others, schools will need to have direct communication with students to monitor the postsecondary planning process. This may include small group "virtual advisories or classrooms" or online forms to allow students and families to easily submit a request for support. The Massachusetts School Counselors Association has set up a [list of resources](#) that may be helpful for planning and implementing virtual counseling services.

For students who are not yet prepared for postsecondary life based on academic achievement, English proficiency, or other factors, schools should provide additional time and opportunities to gain the skills, knowledge, and experiences the students will need to be successful. This could include additional remote learning supports, summer programs, and creating opportunities for August or September graduations. The Department plans to publish more information about potential supports for extended learning opportunities.

Massachusetts Commissioner of Higher Education Carlos E. Santiago has extended the [priority deadline for state financial aid](#) (MASSGrant) from May 1 to July 1, 2020 to provide additional time for students who have yet to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. School district staff access the FAFSA completion tool in Edwin to see if an individual student has completed the FAFSA .

Graduation and Other Spring Ceremonies

The Department will share further guidance, including public health advisories for graduation

ceremonies, as more information becomes available about the public health situation. Many districts are considering virtual ceremonies, “drive-in” or “drive-by” celebrations, other community-wide celebrations with appropriate physical distancing, and postponing celebrations of achievement until a time when it is safer to participate in large scale activities.

Date on Diplomas

If your school does not hold a “virtual” or other graduation ceremony on a specific date, the date listed on the diploma can be as early as the date that final graduation requirements were completed, i.e., the date the diploma was conferred (which does not have to be the date of a particular ceremony).

Information for the Classes of 2021 and Beyond

Along with maintaining content instruction, the Department encourages schools to continue promoting college and career awareness activities. Schools may suggest that students take part in college and career searches on their own or participate in virtual tours of colleges. Schools are encouraged to use the [Early Warning Indicator System](#) and other data sources to identify and prioritize students who may be most at risk of not meeting specific academic outcomes. Additional outreach will be necessary to ensure that 9th, 10th, and 11th graders who were becoming disengaged during the school year make a timely return to the educational process. The Department plans to issue additional guidance and tools to help create a “soft landing” for returning high school students.

Course Taking

While a balance between enrichment and “core academics” is important, during the closure, schools should prioritize courses or material that are prerequisites for future courses in high school, so that students can avoid falling further behind. [More information](#) is provided in the April 24 [remote learning guidance](#) (*download*). When traditional teaching and learning returns, schools should plan to modify existing scope and sequences, syllabi, and core competencies in existing courses and create co-requisites, tutoring, and other academic supports in upper level coursework where students may have missed key content in earlier courses. Remote or in-person summer academic opportunities, particularly those focused on [prerequisite content standards in mathematics and literacy skills](#), may be necessary for many students to close gaps and be prepared for the next level.

Grading High School Coursework

We encourage schools and districts to be flexible in determining how course grades for the year will be given and recorded on a student’s transcript, particularly for students in grades 9, 10, and 11. For many families experiencing financial strain, job and food insecurity, mental and physical health issues, or other difficulties, academics may not be the primary focus right now. We need to avoid exacerbating current opportunity gaps around access to education. At the same time, we

need to be sure that students are attentive to the critical skills and knowledge they need to move on to the next level, and grades can be an important measure of that skill development. There is a balance between “holding students harmless” for circumstances beyond their control while still holding them accountable for work and performance. Further, grades matter to students and their families, particularly in the calculation of GPA and class rank as possible factors in college admissions.

While schools and districts have control over their grading practices, we encourage leaders to balance these important interests in determining grading policies during remote learning. We encourage thoughtful approaches that provide students with flexibility, including incentives to maximize learning while “holding harmless” students who could not adapt to the change to remote learning for a variety of reasons. Some examples to consider include:

- Within a credit/no credit system, students who were not passing a course before remote learning began should be provided the opportunity during the remote learning period to make satisfactory progress to earn a credit for the entire year.
- Students could be given the opportunity to “bump up” their final course grade (e.g., increasing a B+ earned prior to the school closures to an A-) for earning credit for work completed during the remote period.

Schools should communicate to their students, families, and educators that these are unprecedented times for everything, including grading. The entire nation is facing the same challenges, and colleges and universities will adapt to the situation.

The Department of Higher Education plans to issue guidance recommending that admissions officers at public institutions of higher education in Massachusetts recognize any student with a “pass” or “credit” on their transcript as satisfactorily completing the course but not include that “pass” or “credit” as part of the calculation of their GPA.

Guidance from the Department of Higher Education on Early College/Commonwealth Dual Enrollment Partnership (CDEP)/Dual Enrollment

Given the unique challenges COVID-19 has presented, students in dual enrollment coursework, whether in Early College programs, CDEP-funded programs, or other dual enrollment programming, need to be able to make informed decisions related to college course completion. More information from the Department of Higher Education can be found [here](#). Specific guidance on designated early college programs is also [available for download](#).

Guidance for Chapter 74 and Other “Pathways” Programs

The Department continues to work with the Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators and other partners to address issues around the Commonwealth’s college and career pathways.

This [document](#) (*download*), regularly updated, attempts to capture and address issues that are specific to districts and schools that operate college, career and technical education programs, including Perkins, Chapter 74, Innovation Pathways, Connecting Activities, Mass Grad, and MyCAP.

A note about industry-recognized and other credentials: The Department is currently assessing the impact of school closures on the opportunity for students to complete their training/testing related to earning industry-recognized and other credentials, and we will be exploring how to support additional opportunities for students to earn these credentials. More guidance will be forthcoming.

National Testing Updates

SAT/PSAT: May and June tests have been canceled. More information can be found at <https://pages.collegeboard.org/sat-covid-19-updates>

ACT: ACT has rescheduled its April 4, 2020 national test date to June 13, 2020 across the U.S. in response to concerns about the spread of the coronavirus. All students registered for the April 4 test date will receive an email from ACT informing them of the postponement and instructions for free rescheduling to June 13 or a future national test date. More information can be found at <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/covid19.html>

Advanced Placement (AP):

Information about [free, optional, virtual learning and at-home AP testing is available online.](#)

At-Home AP Exams

- To be fair to all students, some of whom have lost more instructional time than others, the exam will only include topics and skills that most AP teachers and students have already covered in class by early March.
- Information about what will be covered in this year's AP exams is listed on AP Central.
- Traditional face-to-face exam administrations will not take place. Students will take a 45-minute, online, free-response exam at home.
- For each AP subject, there will be two different testing dates. The full exam schedule, specific free-response question types that will be on each AP Exam, and additional testing details are posted on [AP Central](#). Exams start on Monday, May 11.
- Students will be able to take these streamlined exams on any device they have access to — computer, tablet, or smartphone. Taking a photo of handwritten work will also be an option.
- Any student already registered for an exam can choose to cancel at no charge. The College Board is waiving all unused/cancelled exam fees.

Instructional Support for Teachers and Students

- Students and teachers can attend [free, live AP review courses](#), delivered by AP teachers from across the country. These mobile-friendly classes:

- Are designed to be used alongside work that may be given by schools.
- Will be recorded and available on-demand so teachers and students can access them any time.
- Are not dependent on current AP teachers continuing instruction.
- Will focus on reviewing the skills and concepts from the first 75 percent of the course. There will also be some supplementary lessons covering the final 25 percent of the course.

For more information, visit <https://apcoronavirusupdates.collegeboard.org/>

International Baccalaureate (IB): Exams will not be held, but students will be awarded a Diploma or a Course Certificate that reflects their standard of work. This is based on the student's coursework and the established assessment expertise, rigor, and quality control already built into the program. More information is available at <https://www.ibo.org/news/news-about-the-ib/covid-19-coronavirus-updates/>

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