



GRADING

Introduction

In order to make grading most useful to students, parents/guardians, and educators, it is important that clear policies and grading systems be established within each LEA/district and consistently followed by teachers. While the SELPA recommends board-approved policies, LEA/districts are cautioned to avoid creating policies solely related to students with disabilities, as this may be seen as discriminatory.

Therefore, policies related to grading, report cards, and transcripts, must be inclusive and made available to all students.

Impact of Curricular Adaptations on Grades

Curricular adaptations include accommodations and modifications that allow a child with a disability access to the general education curriculum and assessments. LEAs/districts are responsible for ensuring that each teacher and provider is informed of his or her specific responsibilities related to implementing the student's IEP and the specific accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided for the child in accordance with the IEP.

In some cases, IEP teams will determine that a student with an IEP will be graded using alternate achievement standards, while in other instances, a student with an IEP will be graded based on grade-level achievement standards, with accommodations. In both cases, an LEA/district shall develop an objective rating criterion determining grade point averages that will lead to a ranking of students based on their grade point average for honor roll and college scholarship purposes. However, LEA/districts may not use a grading system that assign lower grade weights to all special education courses as it would be considered discriminatory practice on the basis of disability.

For more information regarding the determination of appropriate, individualized adaptations, please reference the SELPA Procedural Guidelines section on Curricular Adaptations.

Accommodations

Accommodations are adaptations that enable a student with a disability to participate in educational programming and complete school work or tests with greater ease and success. Accommodations do not fundamentally alter the curriculum or lower expectations or standards in instructional level, content, or performance criteria. Accommodations are changes made to the curriculum in order to provide equal access to learning and equal opportunity to demonstrate what is known. Students with IEP's may have accommodations, but students who do not have IEP's may also need and/or benefit from accommodations; therefore, accommodations do not change the way a student is graded.

Impact of Accommodations on Grading

Because accommodations do not fundamentally alter the curriculum or lower expectations or standards in instructional level, guidance from the California Department of Education suggests that a student's grade should not reflect that accommodations have been made. For students with IEPs being taught in a general education classroom, general and special educators may work collaboratively when grading. By working together to grade a student with an IEP, both teachers may be able to more closely track and monitor student growth and progress in the general education curriculum.



Modifications

Modifications are adaptations that provide a student with meaningful and productive learning experiences based on individual needs and abilities. Modifications fundamentally alter the curriculum or lower expectations/standards, in 1) instructional level, 2) content or 3) performance criteria to meet the student's needs. Therefore, modifications to grade level curriculum shall be an IEP team decision, and not simply determined because the student has an IEP or is receiving specialized services and/or in a specialized program. Agreed upon modifications by the IEP team, shall also be appropriately documented in the IEP.

Impact of Modifications on Grading

An LEA/district may indicate course modifications made or alternative grades awarded in any subject or course, however must ensure that modified grades are not based exclusively on the student's disability or educational program alone. To systematically modify grades for all students in special education is discriminatory and potentially violates Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Any modifications to programming, instruction, and grading must be determined by the IEP team. Once the IEP team has determined that a student will receive modified curriculum and supports, then the modifications to curriculum and grading need to be clearly documented in the student's IEP in order to outline the curriculum, instruction, program, and grading design.

In the event that a student with an IEP is receiving a modified program, an LEA/district may exclude the student from general grading practices and evaluate the student based on IEP goals and objectives.

However, a student cannot be marked as non-graded, grades cannot be modified, and eligibility for honors awards cannot be decided solely on the basis of special education status. As previously referenced, this is an IEP team decision and must be carefully considered and documented in the IEP should modified grades be used. The IEP should clearly outline the modified curriculum and grading once it has been determined that this is appropriate by an IEP team.

Considerations When Grading a Student with an IEP

The SELPA suggests that LEAs consider the following practice pointers when establishing LEA/district grading policies.

What to Consider

- Establish and follow a clear grading policy based on criteria set for aligning progress toward grade level standards.
- Ensure general and special education teachers are reviewing data and collaborating on progress toward grade level standards or meeting the grading criteria set forth in the student's IEP.
- Use a variety of objective assessment methods to monitor student progress toward reaching grade level standards or progress on alternate achievement standards. For example:
 - Monitoring daily assignments
 - Multiple testing formats (ie. multiple choice, cloze technique, long answer, and long answer responses)



- Performance assessments based on portfolios, demonstrations, projects and presentations
 - Observation of student learning and growth
 - Checklists
 - Rubrics
 - Student self-assessment
- When averaging several scores over an extended period of time, provide proportionate weight to individual scores ensuring that low scores in the grading period don't discourage the student and overshadow higher scores in the grading period. It is important to ensure that on formative assessments, a student is provided the opportunity to practice a skill without being penalized on their final grade. On the other hand, it is important that scores on the summative assessment are not so heavily weighted that a low score brings down the grade so significantly and diminishes the effort a student put into learning a new skill or offsets student mastery of that particular skill.

Practices to Consider Avoiding

- Avoid traditional grading practices that are fixed. Instead, create a flexible grading system that promotes student success at the beginning of a unit/learning a new skill/standard. Allow frequent opportunities for practice, feedback, and corrections for improved performance and work production.
- Avoid placing an uneven amount of weight on non-academic factors, such as behavior, attendance, and effort, into the final grade. Consider evenly distributing the weight of non-academic factors, while ensuring that formative and summative assessments are appropriately proportioned in a way that the grade is an accurate reflection of mastery of standards and curriculum combined with the learning process that a student experiences along the way.
- Avoid penalizing students' multiple attempts to mastery. For example, avoid grading policies such as, "a student may retake a test, but the highest grade one could receive is a B." or "a student may correct missed math problems, but will only earn a half a point of credit for each one."¹ Consider allowing the students' grade to adequately reflect the level of mastery a student has achieved toward grade level standards, even if it is after multiple opportunities for practice and/or assessments.
- Avoid placing heavy weight that homework has on a student's grade, especially if they are failing because of a homework issue. Homework is intended for students to rehearse content already mastered or provide opportunities to practice new skills without being penalized. Ensure that homework is designed in a way that encourages student engagement, accessible for all, and provides opportunities to practice skills. Then, provide options to grade based on the meaningful learning that occurs through the process.
- Avoid withholding accommodations when they are needed. If an accommodation, such as a graphic organizer, is used to support students in organizing their thinking/writing during day-to-day instruction, then ensure this accommodation is provided during assessments.
- Avoid assessing students in ways that do not accurately indicate their mastery. Ensure students are being assessed in a way that measures what a student has learned. For example, a student with low writing skills and high artistic skills may be able to best



demonstrate their learning through art, yet a student with low artistic skills and high writing skills would not be able to demonstrate mastery of content using art.

- Avoid extra credit and bonus points as it could alter a grade's accuracy for measuring what a student has mastered.
- Avoid group grades that may not accurately reflect what a student learned and how they came to learn it. Ensure there are multiple areas evaluated, including content mastery, collaboration or participation, meeting deadlines and presentation or style, so that each person in a group can be graded based on their personal performance.
- Avoid grading on a curve. Grades that are used to document progress, provide feedback, and assess mastery of content are based on a set of criteria. Therefore, grades should be based on a student's demonstration of knowledge and skills based on the set criteria.
- Avoid recording zeros for work not done as this may skew the grade to a point where the accuracy is distorted. Instead, consider removing some of the work not completed from the overall grade, providing a mark of not-graded, or providing more weight to the assignments completed.
- Avoid using norm-referenced terms to describe criterion-referenced attributes. When grading based on grade level standards, report on how a student is progressing toward that standard, not how the student is performing in comparison with their peers. Avoid using the term "average," and instead use "standard met" or "approaching standard."
- Avoid grade penalties due to behavior.

Report Card Requirements

LEAs/districts are responsible for periodic reporting to parents to indicate their child's progress or level of achievement in specific classes, course content, or curriculum. Typically, LEA/districts provide report cards to parents/guardians as a means of sharing information about their child's academic progress. This commonly leaves LEA/district personnel with questions about how to formally document grades on report cards for students with disabilities. Procedural guidance in this section is intended to provide LEA/districts with options for developing report cards that are meaningful to parent/guardians while ensuring confidential and non-discriminatory practices.

Regarding documentation that a student has a disability on a report card, a school may document that a student is receiving special education or related services, as long as the information being provided is consistent with the underlying purpose of a report card, which is to inform parents about their child's progress or level of achievement in specific classes, course content, or curriculum. The mere designation that a student has an IEP or is receiving related services, without more information about how the student is progressing, such as providing a grade or other evaluative standards, would not be consistent with IDEA's periodic reporting requirement. Therefore, the LEA/district should consider providing a parent/guardian with IEP progress reports in addition to the LEA/district report card in order to ensure the reporting process is both meaningful and meets IDEA's periodic reporting requirement.

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) acknowledges that students with significant disabilities could have unique needs that make the use of traditional report cards and progress reports ineffective or irrelevant. Therefore, OCR has provided guidance that states an LEA/district may use a different report card for students in alternative programs. As previously mentioned, the alternate reporting system shall



be as meaningful and effective in conveying information to parents/guardians as the system provided to students without disabilities and with at least the same frequency as students who do not have IEPs.

Should an LEA/district use their traditional report card for students receiving modified curriculum and/or grading, they may utilize a symbol or code to indicate that the student has received such modification to grade level standards. However, it should be noted that this type of coding should not be used solely for students with disabilities.

Student Transcripts

The purpose of report cards differs from that of transcripts. While report cards are intended to inform parent/guardians about academic performance, transcripts are meant to provide post-secondary institutions with an accurate picture of a student's coursework.

While report cards are shared with only parents/guardians, transcripts are more widely distributed. Consequently, LEAs/districts shall ensure that transcripts comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Because transcripts may be shared with potential employers, postsecondary institutions, and other organizations, they cannot disclose the existence of a disability.

An LEA/district may not identify that a student was placed in special education classes or received special education supports and services in any particular course on their transcript. However, course designations with more general connotations, not suggestive of special education, are acceptable. The California Department of Education suggests that LEA/districts use course codes on a transcript to indicate a modification or an alternate grading scale was provided as long as these designated codes are also used for students without disabilities who are graded on an alternate scale. Some codes LEAs/districts have used to indicate remedial courses include terms like "basic," "level 1," or "practical." Other permissible designations might include "independent study" or "modified curriculum" as long as those designations are not limited to special education courses. LEAs/districts are advised to avoid using designations limited to special education courses, such as coding a class using the term "special education." LEAs/districts are also cautioned to exclude specific information on the transcript that may suggest specialized supports were provided to a student in order to assist the student in meeting grade level standards. For example, a notation indicating the use of Braille materials is not related to whether that student mastered all the tenth-grade objectives for his or her literature class, therefore does not need to be included on the student's transcripts.

In specific circumstances, an LEA/district may disclose the fact that a student has taken special education courses to a post-secondary institution in instances where the parent and the student have knowledge of the specific information on the transcript that will be shared and provide written consent.