



CARY ACADEMY

To: All Parents and Students

Date: 4/17/2020

Re: Grading for Spring 2020

Given the level of disruption created by the coronavirus pandemic, one can understand the impetus for many educational institutions to move to pass/fail grading policies this spring. At the same time, not all schools are experiencing the disruption in the same way. At Cary Academy, we've been thoughtfully considering our specific context as we assess the best approach for our learning community.

Unlike colleges and universities, our students have not had to contend with the sudden closure of residence halls and the scramble to move back home or find other affordable accommodations. Our students are working in already familiar surroundings and are not scattered across multiple time zones.

And unlike most K-12 schools, we transitioned to remote learning with a distinct advantage when it comes to equitable access to and overall comfort with technology and paperless classrooms. While we are having to implement some new platforms designed to support real-time interaction in an online setting, our teachers and students are readily adapting to this new modality and even embracing some of its advantages, such as the chat feature to capture questions or the electronic whiteboard to share collaborative work.

There is no doubt that the trimming of instructional time requires us to pare down our curriculum this trimester, honing in on our most essential learning objectives and adjusting our time and product expectations accordingly. We have full confidence in the ability of our teachers to design high-quality virtual learning experiences centered on key skills and conceptual understandings and to approach assessment and grading in the virtual environment with compassion and flexibility. We also have confidence in the ability of our students to engage enthusiastically and responsibly in online learning and to demonstrate their learning in relevant and productive ways.

While we are making adjustments to learning expectations and the ways we assess learning, this does not necessarily mean we need to change the grading system used to communicate progress. As an example, we can look to the College Board and its approach to this year's Advanced Placement exams. The College Board decided to narrow the scope of the material covered and the length of the exams, but it did not change its five-point scoring system or the way those scores will be reported to colleges.

We recognize that these are stressful times and that some students may be experiencing heightened anxiety about their ability to maintain good grades while adapting to the virtual setting and coping with the larger atmosphere of uncertainty that surrounds us. We believe that this is best addressed through attention to individual learning needs and opportunities for revision and reassessment. Our learning specialists and counselors remain available to help students with specific strategies to navigate virtual learning and manage stress. And, as usual, our divisional administrators are also on hand to field specific requests for extraordinary support or program accommodations as deemed appropriate.

A blanket shift to pass-fail grading may sound like a good option on the surface, but when we factor in our unique learning context and already strong ability to support individual students, we do not feel a compelling need to change the grading system. We worry that such a move would signal that our school lacked confidence in the ability of our teachers and our students to teach and learn effectively in an online environment. This message is not only out of sync with our mission and philosophy, but also runs counter to what we've seen happening in our virtual classrooms over the past several weeks. There is still powerful learning taking place throughout our school, and we believe regular grades at the end of the term will serve as a positive testament to the motivation, adaptability and resilience of our students.