

Office of the Superintendent of Schools  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Rockville, Maryland

August 8, 2018

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education  
From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools  
Subject: Student Performance Relative to Change in Grading Policy (06-25-18-04)

**Question**

Ms. Ortman-Fouse requested information regarding whether there was a drop in student performance or drop in work production after the grading policy change, compared to before the policy change (prior to 2015?) and after (2015?).

**Response**

*Assumptions*

The question is focused on the change in [Policy IKA, Grading and Reporting](#), which was adopted by the Board on November 10, 2015. This change brought about the replacement of final exams with quarterly assessments and a change to the calculation of high school semester grades.

*Background and History*

On November 10, 2015, the Board revised Policy IKA, *Grading and Reporting* (Resolution 492-15), which eliminated two-hour semester final exams and replaced them with quarterly district assessments in certain high school courses, beginning in the 2016–2017 school year. The change to Board policy came in response to interest from parents/guardians, students, and educators about reducing the testing burden on students; increasing instructional time in the classroom; and developing shorter, more frequent measures intended to inform and improve instruction. This change also addressed a long-standing concern about the final exam “half day” schedule in high schools, in an effort to restore nearly two weeks of instruction to the high school schedule.

Prior to Board action, during the 2014–2015 school year, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) conducted a review of existing K–12 assessments and developed options for modifications to the assessment program. MCPS staff gathered feedback from teachers, principals, parent organizations, employee associations, and the Board’s Strategic Planning

Committee on options for possible changes and a plan for a revised assessment strategy. Considerations included the number of state and local tests administered in MCPS and the amount of instructional time lost due to test preparation, administration of the assessments, and the high school exam schedule. This review also coincided with the first full-scale administration of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers assessments, which originally were administered at two separate times of the school year during multiple days. Furthermore, the United States Department of Education had issued new guidelines calling for “fewer and smarter assessments” that are “worth taking, clear in their purpose, high quality, time-limited, fair, fully transparent, just one of multiple measures, and tied to improved student learning.”

As a result of these guidelines, in March 2015, the Board requested that MCPS consider changes to its testing program. Simultaneously, then Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Lillian M. Lowery asked all districts to review their testing programs and the Maryland General Assembly formed a Commission to Review Maryland’s Use of Assessments and Testing in Public Schools. The Commission made recommendations on how local school systems and the state can improve the process in which local, state, and federally mandated assessments are administered and used to inform instruction. As most of the existing required assessments were federal or state mandates, MCPS’ attention focused on high school final exams as an appropriate starting point to make revisions to the required assessment program. As a result, the change to Board Policy IKA in November 2015 set the stage for the replacement of final exams with quarterly assessments beginning in the 2016–2017 school year.

### *Implications for Grading and Reporting*

When final examinations were administered in MCPS in the past, the final exam counted for 25 percent of the student’s final semester grade. As a result of the replacement of final exams with quarterly assessments, changes were made to the calculation of the semester grade in high school courses effective in the 2016–2017 school year.

In order to engage stakeholders in the development of a revised method of calculating semester grades, MCPS benchmarked with other school districts and higher education institutions to develop options. Four options for revised grading calculations were developed in order to solicit feedback from stakeholders. These options included using Trend; a Numeric Percent Average; a Quality Point Average; or Maintaining a Final Evaluation Category (Attachment A).

Approximately 20 focus groups involving more than 300 participants were convened to solicit feedback on each of the options to revise the calculation of semester grades. These focus groups, in addition to hundreds of online feedback comments from the public, included middle and high school teachers, resource teachers, principals, school and central services administrators, parents/guardians, students, cross-functional groups, and community groups. Conferences also were conducted with colleges and universities to obtain perspective and feedback from higher education institutions. MCPS also studied grading practices in more than 20 other school districts.

The focus group and online feedback data were reviewed by a cross-functional leadership team of principals, central services staff, teachers, and association leaders, who provided input for the final recommendation. As a summary, stakeholders consistently felt that:

- The “trend” grading system needed to be changed. At the time, the MCPS semester grading calculation went with a downward trend for the final semester grade assignment. For example:

<u>MP1</u>	<u>MP2</u>	<u>Final Grade</u>
A	B	B (Downward Trend)

- A numeric percentage system was discussed as an option, but ultimately was considered to be overly precise. Stakeholders were concerned about heightened stress and anxiety among students in a percentage system. Stakeholders also were concerned about disputes regarding final grades, if a grade is being reported as a percentage (85 percent vs. 86 percent, for example).
- As a result, a preference to maintain a letter grade system of A, B, C, D, E was supported by most stakeholders.
- Instead of a downward trend as previously illustrated, the decision was made to use a mathematical “quality point” calculation average instead of the trend to calculate a semester grade. For example, in a quality point calculation:

<u>MP1</u>	<u>MP2</u>	<u>Final Grade</u>
A (4)	B (3)	3.5 = A

In addition, through benchmarking, it was clear that there is major variance among practices in school districts and colleges relative to final exams and semester grade calculations. Each grading option has advantages and disadvantages and there is no “perfect” solution. Colleges note that there is a wide range of practices among school districts in terms of grading practices and that there is no one “preferred” method.

Based on this feedback and in collaboration with the Board, MCPS revised the semester grade calculations in high school courses beginning in the 2016–2017 school year, maintaining a letter grade system, but replacing the downward trend with a “quality point” mathematical grade calculation. This resulted in changes to the semester grade calculation for 5 out of 25 (20 percent) of all possible semester grading scenarios, while the majority of grading pattern calculations remained the same as had been in place prior to the change ([Attachment B](#)). In addition, the new quarterly assessments were counted for a required 10 percent of the grade each marking period, bringing consistency to grading weights throughout the district.

*Comparison Data*

After two years of implementation of the new grading calculation, MCPS is continuing to study trends and implications of those trends. Data follow, which contain a breakdown of grades issued to students in three categories of academic subject matter in which high school course final exams were administered (prior to 2016–2017). Data cover two years prior and two years following the implementation of the grade policy change.

In the following charts, there is clearly an increase in the number of “A’s” after the new grading calculation was implemented. However, please note that there is a decrease in 2017–2018, which may reflect norming and calibration as a result of the standardization of district assessments and implementation of the MCPS Evidence of Learning Framework.

**Subject Category: English Semester 1 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	21.4	35.2	25.2	13.4	4.8	33,795
2015–2016	26.0	35.9	24.1	10.7	3.2	32,850
2016–2017	37.5	32.8	17.3	7.8	4.6	33,585
2017–2018	38.7	31.0	16.9	8.3	5.1	33,870

(Includes: English 9, English 10, English 11, English 12, Honors English 9, Honors English 10, Honors English 11, and Honors English 12)

**Subject Category: English Semester 2 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	23.8	34.8	24.3	12.7	4.4	33,390
2015–2016	27.7	33.9	22.3	11.7	4.4	32,867
2016–2017	38.1	30.9	17.5	8.7	4.9	33,639
2017–2018	37.4	28.9	17.5	9.8	6.3	34,060

(Includes: English 9, English 10, English 11, English 12, Honors English 9, Honors English 10, Honors English 11, and Honors English 12)

**Subject Category: Mathematics Semester 1 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	16.1	26.3	30.6	17.7	9.3	32,919
2015–2016	20.4	28.3	29.5	15.2	6.6	30,033
2016–2017	33.0	31.8	21.4	8.5	5.4	32,408
2017–2018	31.9	30.0	21.6	9.8	6.6	34,150

(Includes: Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Bridge to Algebra 2, Geometry, Honors Algebra 2, Honors Geometry, Honors Precalculus, Precalculus)

**Subject Category: Mathematics Semester 2 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	17.6	25.8	30.0	17.3	9.3	32,652
2015–2016	23.8	28.5	26.2	14.1	7.3	30,321
2016–2017	35.1	30.3	19.6	8.6	6.3	32,134
2017–2018	32.6	28.8	20.6	10.7	7.2	33,758

(Includes: Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Bridge to Algebra 2, Geometry, Honors Algebra 2, Honors Geometry, Honors Precalculus, Precalculus)

**Subject Category: Science Semester 1 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	26.5	32.0	24.4	11.9	5.2	25,784
2015–2016	28.5	31.9	24.7	10.5	4.4	25,526
2016–2017	40.8	32.1	17.1	5.9	4.0	26,658
2017–2018	40.6	30.2	17.1	6.9	5.2	30,466

(Includes: Biology, Chemistry, Geoscience, Honors Biology, Honors Chemistry, Honors Geoscience, Honors Matter & Energy, Honors Physics, Matter & Energy, Physics)

**Subject Category: Science Semester 2 Final Grade**

School Year	Percentage of Grades Issued to Students					Total number of grades issued
	A	B	C	D	E	
2014–2015	27.9	32.2	23.9	11.0	4.9	25,230
2015–2016	31.8	32.1	21.4	9.6	5.0	25,265
2016–2017	43.3	30.7	15.8	5.8	4.4	26,129
2017–2018	41.8	28.3	16.5	7.3	6.2	30,028

(Includes: Biology, Chemistry, Geoscience, Honors Biology, Honors Chemistry, Honors Geoscience, Honors Matter & Energy, Honors Physics, Matter & Energy, Physics)

***Monitoring Changing Conditions and Next Steps***

As we enter the 2018–2019 school year, MCPS will continue to monitor grading trends and impacts of the grading calculation. Staff also will initiate a process to bring greater consistency to the implementation of the electronic gradebook, setting new expectations for grading templates, categories, weights, and point totals that teachers use. Professional development in these practices also is being planned. Although a final exam or quarterly assessment may count for a percentage of a marking period or semester grade, the classroom teacher still controls the vast majority of each student's final grade, and greater consistency of teacher practices across the district is needed. This work to bring greater consistency to grading practices will coincide with continued use of the data platform and new tools in the electronic gradebook. In addition, the Maryland State Department of Education has published proposed amendments to Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 12A.03.02.08, *Grading and Reporting*, which could bring about additional requirements for local school systems in grading policies.

We will continue to implement the MCPS Evidence of Learning Framework, shifting student progress monitoring to a multiple measures approach and continuing to use district assessments to inform and improve instruction. Keeping in mind that district assessments are one of multiple measures used to monitor student progress, MCPS has worked to ensure that the quarterly district assessments are rigorous, valid and reliable, aligned to standards, and provide meaningful feedback to educators, parents/guardians, and students. Knowing that all grading systems have inherent flaws, MCPS will continue to monitor and assess grade trends in the coming years to ensure that they remain standards-based and a meaningful indicator of students' educational progress as part of a broad set of multiple measures.

For questions about the grading and reporting policy, please contact Dr. Maria V. Navarro, chief academic officer, at 240-740-3040, Mr. Scott W. Murphy, director, Department of Secondary Curriculum and Districtwide Programs, Office of the Chief Academic Officer, at 240-740-4000.

JRS:MVN:llh

Attachments

Copy to:

Executive Staff

Mr. Murphy

Mr. Ikheloa

# New Options for Calculating Semester Grades

IN RESPONSE TO SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY INTEREST in reducing testing and increasing instructional time, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is revising its strategy for assessments that includes the elimination of two-hour semester final exams in high school courses. This revised assessment strategy was presented to the Montgomery County Board of Education in July 2015 and was endorsed by the Board on September 8, 2015. The assessment strategy includes a proposal to eliminate all two-hour semester final exams in high school courses beginning in 2016–2017, restoring at least two weeks of instructional time throughout the school year. These exams would be replaced with centrally developed marking period assessments, which can be given during regular class periods.

Assessment serves an essential role in ensuring that rigorous, effective, and equitable teaching and learning occurs consistently across schools at all grade levels. The goal of the MCPS assessment strategy is to—

- Align local assessments to new standards and state/national measures;
- Gather formative assessment data throughout the school year to inform instruction, allowing for students to receive timely supports and interventions;
- Provide students with more frequent and varied measures to demonstrate learning; and
- Use assessment data to facilitate accountability and central office monitoring and support.

It is important to note that new marking period assessments will be centrally developed and consistent throughout the district, but may not be multiple choice tests. For example, as part of an instructional unit, a student might take a unit test in math or complete an inquiry-based project in science. Although many assessments of this nature are already in place, these would become required in certain courses and scored consistently across the district. As a result, there could be

changes to the way the final semester grade is calculated in MCPS secondary school courses. Currently, in high school courses in which a two-hour semester final exam is administered, the exam counts for 25 percent of the final semester grade.

To develop options for our assessment strategy, MCPS reached out to more than 20 school districts (13 from the state of Maryland) to gain an understanding of existing trends and practices. We found that final exam and assessment practices vary widely, as does the manner in which districts calculate final course grades. A few neighboring school districts have embarked on similar initiatives to eliminate final exams in favor of marking period assessments.

Based on our research and discussions with educators, Board of Education members, and others, MCPS is considering several options for calculating semester grades. MCPS will gather feedback on the following options and make a decision later this fall about grading calculations. Feedback can be provided online at [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org), search “grading options”. The deadline for submitting feedback is October 19, 2015.

## OPTION 1: Numeric (Percent) Average

Remove final exam/evaluation category. Each marking period carries equal weight; final grade calculated by averaging marking period percentage grades (MP1 + MP2 / 2).\*

### EXAMPLES:

MP1*	MP2*		FINAL SEMESTER GRADE
92% A	88% B	=	90% A
90% A	80% B	=	85% B
95% A	75% C	=	85% B
57% E	62% D	=	59.5% D
56% E	61% D	=	58.5% E

### CURRENT GRADING SCALE

89.5%-100%	A
79.5%-89.4%	B
69.5%-79.4%	C
59.5%-69.4%	D
Less than 59.5%	E

\* Standardized centrally developed assessments will be administered each marking period in courses for which there was previously a centrally developed final exam. These assessments will represent a meaningful portion of the final marking period grade, consistently across schools.

## OPTION 2: Quality Point Average

Remove final exam/evaluation category. Each marking period carries equal weight. Quarter and semester grades reported by letter grade; final grade calculated by averaging quality points (MP1 + MP2 / 2).\*

### EXAMPLES:

MP1*	MP2*		FINAL SEMESTER GRADE
A (4)	B (3)	=	3.5 = A
A (4)	C (2)	=	3.0 = B
D (1)	A (4)	=	2.5 = B
E (0)	D (1)	=	.5 = E

### SCALE

A = 4	A = 3.5 - 4.0
B = 3	B = 2.5 - 3.49
C = 2	C = 1.5 - 2.49
D = 1	D = .75 - 1.49
E = 0	E = Below .75

\* Standardized centrally developed assessments will be administered each marking period in courses for which there was previously a centrally developed final exam. These assessments will represent a meaningful portion of the final marking period grade, consistently across schools.

### OPTION 3: Trend

Remove final exam/evaluation category. Two marking period grades, averaged by trend (MP2 carries elevated weight).\* (Currently used in courses in which there is no final exam, per grading chart attached.)

#### EXAMPLES:

MP1*	MP2*		FINAL SEMESTER GRADE
A	B	=	B
B	A	=	A
D	A	=	B
A	D	=	C
D	E	=	E
E	D	=	D

\* Standardized centrally developed assessments will be administered each marking period in courses for which there was previously a centrally developed final exam. These assessments will represent a meaningful portion of the final marking period grade, consistently across schools.

### OPTION 4: Additional “Final Evaluation” Assessment Category

Keep current final exam category weighted at 25%\*\* , replace with teacher-developed “final evaluation” administered in class. Keep current grade averaging per grading chart attached. (Currently used for students exempt from MCPS final exams in AP/IB courses.)

#### EXAMPLES:

MP1*	MP2*	EVALUATION 25%**	FINAL SEMESTER GRADE
A	B	B	B
B	A	B	B
A	B	A	A
E	D	E	E

\* Standardized centrally developed assessments will be administered each marking period in courses for which there was previously a centrally developed final exam. These assessments will represent a meaningful portion of the final marking period grade, consistently across schools.

\*\* Additional possibilities under this option:

- The current final exam category could be maintained, but weighted at a lower percentage (10–20%).
- Marking period assessments given in MP1 + MP2 could be added together to generate a grade in the third “evaluation” category.

## Current Grade Configuration Table, Final Exam Averaged at 25%

### Grade Configuration for Semester Grades (Final Exam = 25%)

Teachers have the option to force a grade up or down depending upon the student's performance in the course and mastery of the course objectives.

Explanation on how to interpret the grades:

Example: CBE = C means the Quarter 1 grade is C, Quarter 2 grade is B, Exam grade is E and the semester grade is C. The semester grade is the grade that appears on the student's transcript.

AAA = A	BAA = A	CAA = B	DAA = B	EAA = B
AAB = A	BAB = B	CAB = B	DAB = B	EAB = C
AAC = A	BAC = B	CAC = B	DAC = C	EAC = C
AAD = B	BAD = B	CAD = B	DAD = C	EAD = C
AAE = B	BAE = B	CAE = C	DAE = C	EAE = C
ABA = A	BBA = B	CBA = B	DBA = B	EBA = C
ABB = B	BBB = B	CBB = B	DBB = C	EBB = C
ABC = B	BBC = B	CBC = C	DBC = C	EBC = C
ABD = B	BBD = B	CBD = C	DBD = C	EBD = D
ABE = B	BBE = C	CBE = C	DBE = C	EBE = D
ACA = B	BCA = B	CCA = B	DCA = C	ECA = C
ACB = B	BCB = B	CCB = C	DCB = C	ECB = C
ACC = B	BCC = C	CCC = C	DCC = C	ECC = D
ACD = B	BCD = C	CCD = C	DCD = D	ECD = D
ACE = C	BCE = C	CCE = C	DCE = D	ECE = D
ADA = B	BDA = B	CDA = C	DDA = C	EDA = D
ADB = B	BDB = C	CDB = C	DDB = C	EDB = D
ADC = C	BDC = C	CDC = C	DDC = D	EDC = D
ADD = C	BDD = C	CDD = D	DDD = D	EDD = D
ADE = C	BDE = C	CDE = D	DDE = D	EDE = E
AEA = B	BEA = C	CEA = C	DEA = D	EEA = D
AEB = C	BEB = C	CEB = C	DEB = D	EEB = D
AEC = C	BEC = C	CEC = D	DEC = D	EEC = D
AED = C	BED = D	CED = D	DED = D	EED = E
AEE = C	BEE = D	CEE = D	DEE = E	EEE = E

Grade Configuration for 9-week Marking Periods without Exam  
(Also for 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of senior year)

AA = A	BA = A	CA = B	DA = B	EA = C
AB = B	BB = B	CB = B	DB = C	EB = C
AC = B	BC = C	CC = C	DC = C	EC = D
AD = C	BD = C	CD = D	DD = D	ED = D
AE = C	BE = D	CE = D	DE = E	EE = E

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### *A Message from Interim Superintendent Larry A. Bowers*

## **CHANGES IN CALCULATION OF SEMESTER GRADES IN HIGH SCHOOL COURSES BEGINNING NEXT SCHOOL YEAR**

Dear Middle and High School Parents/Guardians and Students:

Last fall, the Board of Education eliminated two-hour semester final exams and replaced them with quarterly marking period assessments in certain high school courses, beginning next school year. The change to Board of Education Policy IKA, *Grading and Reporting*, came in response to strong interest from parents, students, and educators about reducing the testing burden on our students and increasing valuable instructional time in the classroom. As we transition from semester exams to quarterly marking period assessments, we will ensure that the assessments are rigorous, aligned to new standards, and provide meaningful feedback to students to improve their learning. You can find more information on the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) assessment strategy and the detailed timeline for implementation on the MCPS website at [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org) by searching “assessment strategy.”

As a result of the changes to semester exams and implementation of new quarterly assessments, there also will be changes to the way a semester grade is calculated in high school courses. MCPS staff gathered extensive feedback from school and community stakeholders, including colleges and universities, and examined the

grading practices of various school districts in deciding how grades will be calculated going forward. MCPS will continue to use a letter grade system and calculate the semester grade as follows, effective in the 2016–2017 school year:

### ***Marking Period Assessments***

- In certain courses, standardized marking period assessments will be given once each quarter and weighted 10 percent of each marking period grade. This will be calculated into the letter grade for the marking period. This only applies to courses that previously had a countywide final exam in English, mathematics, science, social studies, world languages, and technology.
- In these courses, a separate grading category will be visible online, for students and parents to view results of marking period assessments during the semester.
- Based on interest and feedback from stakeholders, the assessments will be allowed to go home with students after the assessment is given, which was not permitted with the current final exams.

### ***Semester Grade Calculation***

- The separate final exam grade on the student report card will be removed going forward.
- Similar to current semester grade calculations for courses in which there is no final exam, the semester grade will be calculated using the letter grades from each marking period.
- For all high school courses, the semester grade will be calculated by averaging the letter grade for each marking period, using a “quality point” assignment (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, E = 0).
- The new semester grade calculation for high school courses uses the same quality point calculation that is currently being used in middle school courses and in summer school.
- The MCPS grading calculation table will remain nearly the same, except in a few situations where the average replaces the practice of assigning grades based on a downward trend. An updated grading table follows.

## REVISED GRADING TABLE

Letters indicate MP1 MP2 = Semester Grade

AA = A	BA = A	CA = B	DA = B	EA = C
AB = A*	BB = B	CB = B	DB = C	EB = C
AC = B	BC = B*	CC = C	DC = C	EC = D
AD = B*	BD = C	CD = C*	DD = D	ED = D
AE = C	BE = C*	CE = D	DE = E	EE = E

*MP1—Grade for first marking period of the semester; MP2—Grade for second marking period of the semester. All calculations in the table above are the same as the current high school grading table, except where marked with \**

This new grading calculation aligns with standards-based approaches to assessment and college expectations and provides a grading structure that is fair, consistent, and understandable for students and parents. If you have any questions, please contact your child's school for specific information about implementation of MCPS grading and reporting policies.

Sincerely,

Larry A. Bowers  
Interim Superintendent of Schools