



CPS Student Grades during COVID-19-Induced Remote Learning

Young people experienced life-altering changes with the COVID-19 pandemic. One big change was the shift to remote learning in spring 2020, continuing through most of the 2020–21 school year. Families and educators raised concerns about students’ ability to engage in schooling given challenges around attendance and participation, especially for students in communities with high rates of illness, greater job risks or insecurity among family members, and other stressors that made remote learning more difficult.

Public discussion has focused on students’ test scores to measure how students fared during remote learning, and to identify students who may have unfinished learning from that time. But standardized test participation was low and past research has shown that grades capture much more information than test scores—such as whether students are coming to class, participating, completing assignments, and generally meeting their teachers’ expectations. Students’ grades offer important insights into their experiences from spring 2020–spring 2021; grades are valuable data to help educators effectively identify students who may benefit from continued support in the 2022–23 school year and beyond.

GRADES DURING COVID-19

Changes to grades during the pandemic

- **Chicago Public Schools (CPS) modified its grading policy for spring 2020 to prevent students’ grades from being adversely affected by the shift to remote learning.**
 - This included using:
 1. **Incomplete instead of F** when a student was not engaged in remote learning and did not demonstrate mastery of assignments in a course
 2. **Pass (P)** in cases where a student would have earned a lower grade in a course than the grade they had just before the pandemic started.
 - Neither Incompletes nor Passes were counted in the calculation of students’ grade point averages.
- **No-credit grades:** Although Incomplete and F had different implications for students, both grades indicate that students were not able to meet course expectations, and as a result, did not receive course credit
- **Pre-pandemic grading practices resumed in the 2020–21 school year—though given the realities of hybrid learning, instruction and grading likely differed from pre-pandemic approaches.**
- Teachers, not administrators nor district officials, decide grading policies and weights, per the CPS contract with the Chicago Teacher’s Union, within the context of some contract-identified guidelines.^A

^A Chicago Public Schools. (2017). Processional grading standards and grading practices guidelines for Chicago Public Schools teachers. Retrieved from <https://www.ctulocal1.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Professional-Grading-Standards-and-Practices-Guidelines-for-CPS-Teachers-8-15-17.pdf>

Research Findings

1 Grades declined for a subset of students in grades 4-8 during remote/hybrid learning but improved for high school students.

Grades 4-8

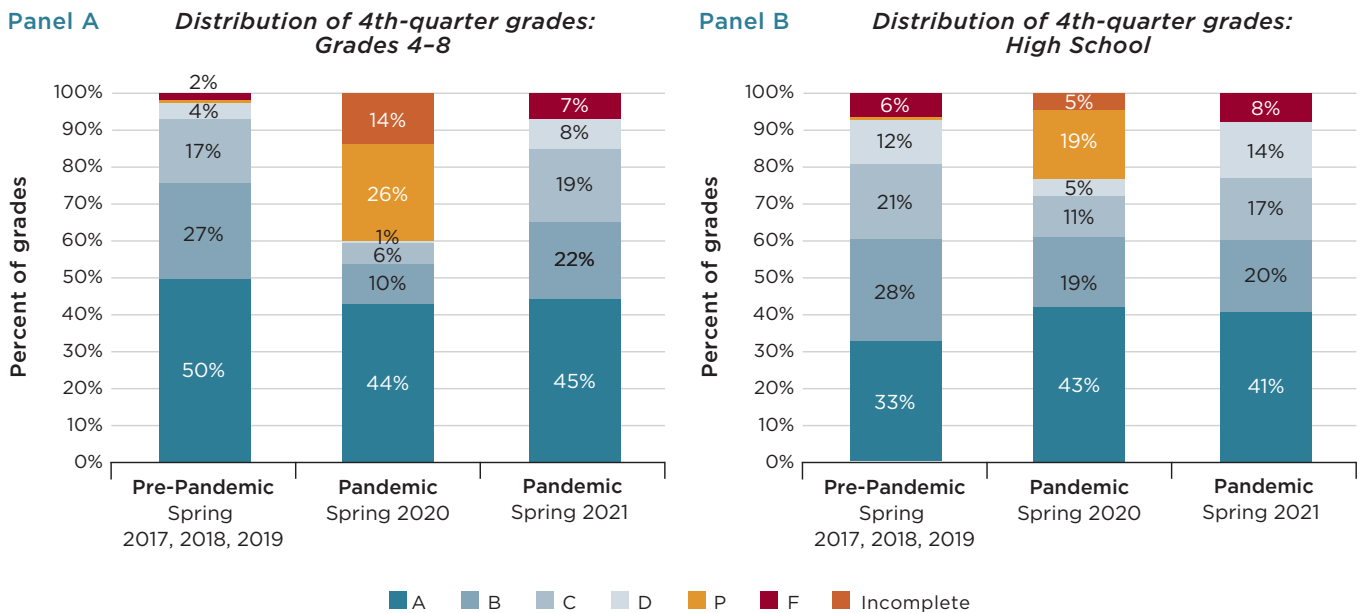
- In spring 2020, 40 percent of course grades for students in grades 4-8 were either a Pass or an “Incomplete” (see Figure 1).
 - At the same time, 54% of grades were As or Bs, signaling that many students were meeting teachers’ expectations.
- In spring 2021, 7% of course grades were Fs—an improvement over spring 2020 when 14% of grades were Incompletes, but still higher than pre-pandemic years (2%).
 - Combined, 67% of grades were As and Bs—higher than spring 2020 (54%), but not as high as pre-pandemic years (77%).

High School

- In both spring 2020 and spring 2021, high school grades were higher than in pre-pandemic years:
 - In spring 2020, there was a 10 percentage point increase in A grades, and a 1 percentage point decrease in Fs, compared to earlier years.
 - In spring 2021, the percentage of As remained higher than in pre-pandemic years (41% vs. 33%).
 - At the same time, there was a slight increase in Fs in spring 2021 compared to pre-pandemic years (from 6% to 8% of all course grades).

FIGURE 1

Grades were lower during remote/hybrid learning in grades 4-8 but were slightly higher in high school



Note: Analyses of grades are based on all courses, including non-core courses, that students took during the fourth quarter/second semester of each school year. For students in grades 4-8, this includes 3,028,082 courses during the three pre-pandemic years (2017, 2018, and 2019), 1,002,575 courses in spring 2020 and 901,039 courses in spring 2021. High school students took a total of 1,350,809 courses during the pre-pandemic years, 462,068 courses in spring 2020 and 497,679 in spring 2021. Remote learning began in spring 2020 and continued in fall 2020. In spring 2021, students transitioned to hybrid learning, with some days in school and other days at home, with younger students transitioning soonest and high school students transitioning last. Component rates, as labeled, may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

2 Twice as many students in grades 4-8 received Fs or Incompletes in spring 2021 as pre-pandemic years, while no-credit rates were fairly steady in high schools.

Grades 4-8

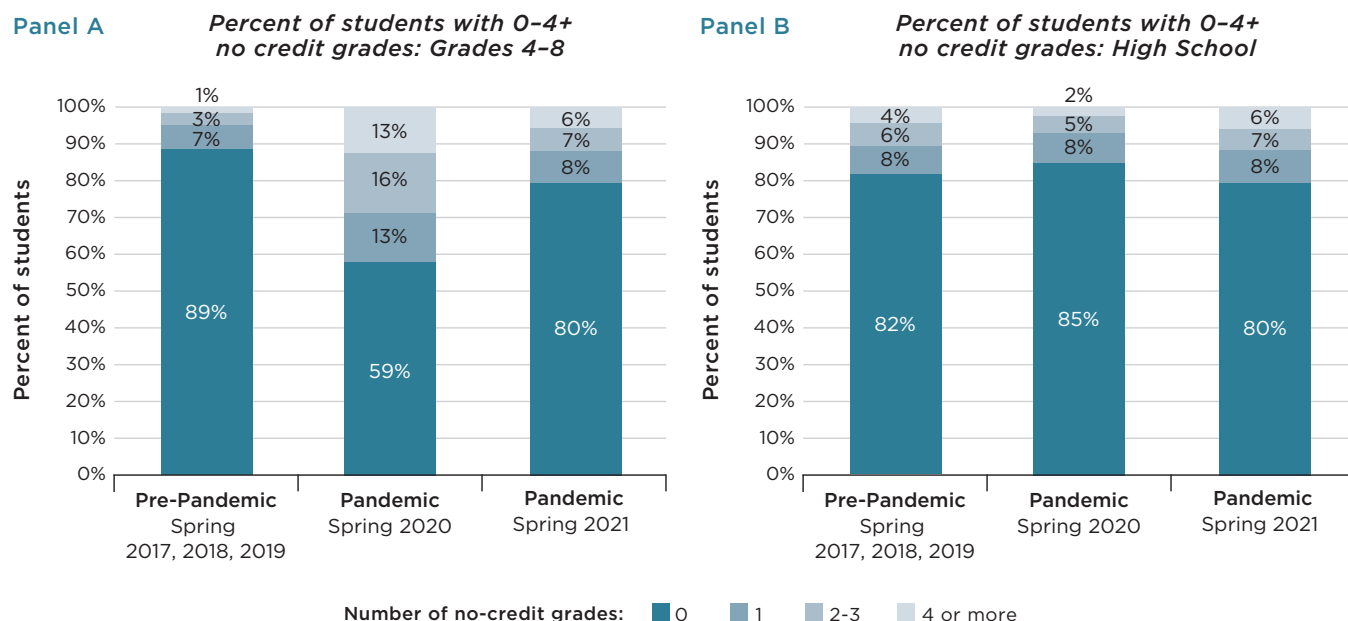
- Spring 2021: 21% of students in grades 4-8 received no-credit grades (an F or Incomplete) vs. 11% in pre-pandemic years, and 41% in spring 2020 (see Figure 2).
 - No-credit grades increased for all student groups and were comparably higher for some student groups—students with low prior test scores, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,¹ and students who were Black or Latinx—than in pre-pandemic years. (See full report, Figure 5.)
 - At the same time, more than three-quarters of all Black students, Latinx students, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch earned passing grades in all their classes in spring 2021.

High School

- At the high school level, no-credit rates remained similar to pre-pandemic levels throughout the period of remote learning (15–20%).
 - Differences in no-credit rates between student groups—students with different genders, race/ethnicity, free and reduced-price lunch status, English learner status, and homeless status—in both spring 2020 and spring 2021 were similar to pre-pandemic years.

FIGURE 2

The proportion of students in grades 4-8 who earned at least one no-credit grade was twice as high in spring 2021, vs. pre-pandemic years, and remained about the same for high school students



Note: Analyses are based on a total of 223,096 students in grades 4-8 (Panel A) and 156,791 students in grades 9-12 who were enrolled in district-run and alternative (Options) CPS schools at any point from the 2016-17 through the 2020-21 school year and remained enrolled long enough to receive course grades for fall and spring for at least one school year. Students were categorized based on the number of no-credit grades—Fs and Incompletes—they received during the fourth quarter/second semester of each year. See the Appendix for additional details about the analytic sample. Component rates, as labeled, may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

¹ Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are those whose household incomes are at or below 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line, respectively. In 2021, the poverty guideline for a household of 4 was \$26,500. (ASPE, 2021.)

3 Some elementary schools had higher rates of students who received Fs or Incompletes during remote learning, even compared to similar schools

Grades 4-8: Spring 2020

- In nearly one-third of elementary schools (120 schools), 20% or more of grades were an F or Incomplete (see Figure 3), compared with:
 - Another one-third—164 schools—where 5-19% of all grades were an F or “Incomplete.”
 - A final third—128 schools—where less than 5% of grades were Fs or “Incompletes.”
- Schools with higher vs. lower rates of no-credit grades were somewhat more likely to serve a larger percentage of students receiving free lunch and with lower average test scores, and predominately Black students.
- But even among schools serving similar populations of students, there were large differences in no-credit rates: among schools where 90 percent or more of students received free lunch, no-credit rates ranged from 1-38 percent (see Figure 4 in full report).

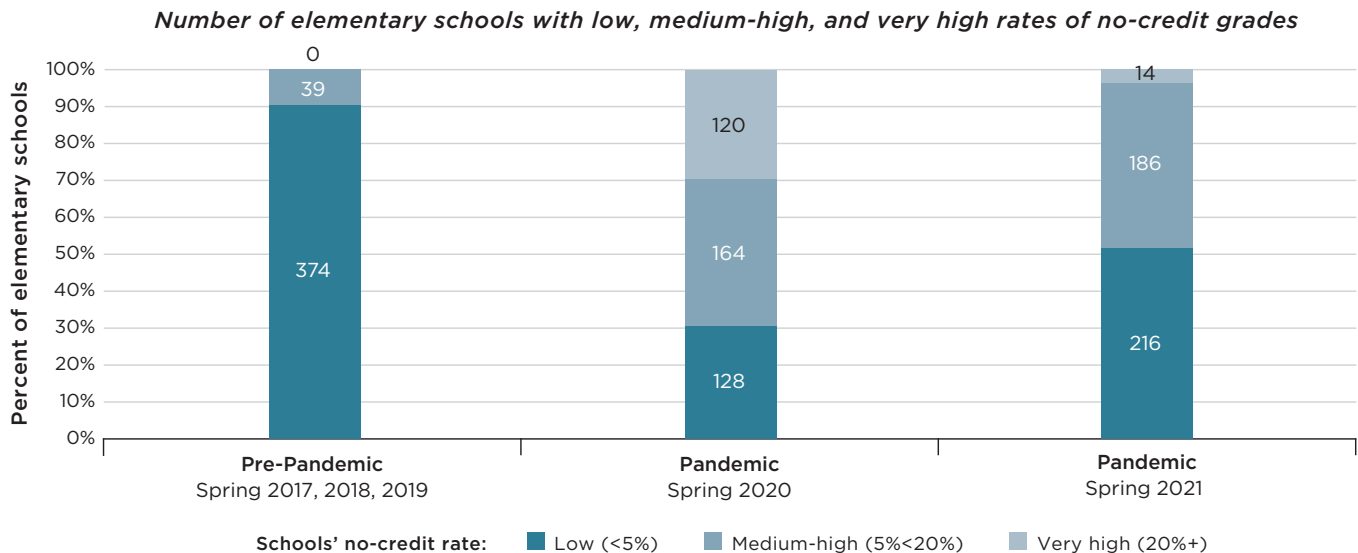
Grades 4-8: Spring 2021

- No-credit rates dropped significantly in spring 2021 vs spring 2020 (see Figure 3), but no-credit rates remained much higher at some schools than in pre-pandemic years, while returning to close to pre-pandemic levels at others.
 - Schools serving a larger percentage of students receiving free lunch and lower average test scores continue to have higher rates of no-credit grades, on average, but the relationships were smaller than in 2020. Differences by racial composition were no longer significant.

High School: Spring 2020 & spring 2021

- At most high schools, rates of no-credit grades were similar in spring 2020 and spring 2021 vs pre-pandemic years.
 - There were two district run (non-charter, non-Options) high schools where more than 20% of grades given in spring 2021 were no-credit grades—considerably higher vs pre-pandemic rates. Other schools’ no-credit rates remained similar to pre-pandemic years.

FIGURE 3
Elementary schools differed considerably in their rates of no-credit grades during the pandemic



Note: The analysis is based on 417 district-run (non-charter) CPS elementary schools that were open at any point from 2016–2017 through 2020–2021 and served students in at least one grade from grades 4-8. Schools were classified based on their no-credit rates—that is, the proportion of grades among students in grades 4-8 that were Fs or Incompletes—in pre-pandemic years, in spring 2020 and spring 2021. See the Appendix for additional details regarding the analytic sample.

Implications

Educators, families, and students were clearly committed to providing and engaging in meaningful learning in the midst of incredible challenges that began in spring 2020. Many are still exhausted from the impacts and duration of the pandemic. As school communities begin the 2022–23 school year, students' course grades data could help identify areas for celebration, and also identify students and schools who most need continued, and in some cases substantial, support:

- 1. In the midst of major disruptions in their lives, most students in grades 4–12 were able to remain engaged in school and continue meeting their teachers' expectations.** By spring 2021, 90% of elementary grades and 98% of high school grades had returned to pre-pandemic levels or higher—a sign that many students were able to engage in learning and put considerable effort into their academic work while studying from home. Some students even earned higher grades during remote learning, especially at the high school level. Collectively, this demonstrates the steadfast commitment and effort of students, families, teachers, school staff, principals, and district leaders.
- 2. Course grades could be used to identify the small group of students who may need different supports than they have received so far.** While most students' grades suggest that were able to engage in remote learning, course grades declined for a subset of students, especially in grades 4–8. Students with no-credit grades in spring 2020 and spring 2021 may need intensive supports going forward. And while students whose grades dropped from Bs/Cs to Cs/Ds may seem to be doing fine, they may actually need additional supports to ensure they are on a path for college readiness. New efforts could be focused on students who most need different supports than they have received so far. Schools or the district could organize data reports to identify and reach out to students find out why they are struggling, in a manner similar to the freshman on-track reports and teams used in high schools.
- 3. There is a need to understand why so many students received no-credit grades at particular schools and what can be learned and applied from similar schools with much lower no-credit rates.** Many of the differences in grades during the pandemic were associated with the school students attended, particularly those in communities harder hit by the health and economic tolls of the pandemic. At the same time, there were schools serving similar communities where grades showed no declines during the pandemic. CPS aims to eliminate the opportunity gaps in educational opportunities and supports for students,² and yet schools with large proportions of students who are Black, lowest-income, and with the lowest test scores were most likely to have high no-credit rates, highlighting the importance of examining and addressing this issue in order to provide equitable educational experiences for all students. Upcoming Consortium research will examine how students' reports of their school experiences changed during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic years and how experiences during remote/hybrid learning differed in schools with low rates of no-credit grades, compared to similar schools with high rates no-credit grades. In the meantime, these school-level differences could spark important conversations among staff within schools, and staff across Chicago, about what drove these schoolwide differences—and what is still needed today to address them.

² See <https://www.cps.edu/about/departments/office-of-equity/> for details.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

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Methodology:

We compared grades students received in their spring-term courses at three time periods: 1) spring 2017–spring 2019, 2) spring 2020, and 3) spring 2021. Comparisons across the three time periods were conducted separately for students in grades 4–8 and 9–12. Additional comparisons were conducted by student background characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, free- or reduced-price lunch status, English learner status, housing status, and prior test scores, by schools. Because course grades had been improving in the district in the years prior to the pandemic, and were particularly strong in fall 2019, right before the pandemic, we also compared the grade students received in each course in spring 2020 to their grade in the same course the prior semester, in fall 2019.^A We also conducted statistical analyses (hierarchical linear models) to determine the influence of different factors on the change in students' grades, including the influence of which school they attended. Some of these analyses are available in the longer report, and all are available from the authors.

A There was no decline in the number of courses in which students were enrolled from fall 2019 to spring 2020.

References:

ASPE. (2011). *2021 poverty guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2021-poverty-guidelines>

Chicago Public Schools. (2017). *Professional grading standards and grading practices guidelines for Chicago Public Schools teachers*. Retrieved from <https://www.ctulocal1.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Professional-Grading-Standards-and-Practices-Guidelines-for-CPS-Teachers-8-15-17.pdf>

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<https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publication-tags/grades-and-GPA>

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