



# Santa Maria Joint Union High School District

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## Santa Maria Joint Union High School District Distance Learning Response Plan

*Due to the unprecedented difficulties caused by the Covid pandemic and our efforts to improve student achievement in this environment, we are providing the following Response Plan. The plan has been created with input from all district stakeholders, and was constructed to address the historically low 1st Quarter Progress Report grades. In addition to the grade data, survey responses from both teachers and students provide some key take-aways that we will address in this plan. Primarily, the Response Plan will focus on these three areas:*

- 1. Student support for concerns with feeling overwhelmed by the assigned workload and frustration with having success in a distance model*
- 2. Teacher support for concerns about a lack of student motivation and engagement*
- 3. Significant decreases in passing grades and increases in failing grades across the board*

*Other elements of the plan are also included later in the document. Clearly the bullets above do not exist in isolation as simple cause and effect, but rather are interwoven together with valid concerns from both teachers and students. It is clear that many of you are going above and beyond in providing opportunities to students and working heroically to make student success possible. Site staff, certificated, classified and management are all making amazing efforts to assist students in every conceivable way. And just as clearly, many very hard working and conscientious students are struggling and on the verge of giving up because this is just really hard for them and they feel completely overwhelmed. We must all work together to improve student outcomes during this time.*

### **#1: Student Workload**

The student survey results indicate that large numbers of students feel overwhelmed with the workload, and the difficulties in managing it in a distance environment. We must work to mitigate this or more and more students will continue to fall behind, lose hope, and eventually give up.

Per CDE guidelines students must receive a minimum of **four hours** of **daily** instruction Monday through Friday. The four hours can be met by any combination of teacher instruction (Zoom or non-Zoom) and "time value" of work assigned. This is how they (CDE) plan to credit us for the days kids don't Zoom, but we have to show that we have assigned something in each class on those Non-Zoom days. If we use the capabilities of Canvas to 'chunk' out the sequence of work, to spread out the tasks/assignments a bit each day of the week, we can meet

the CDE requirements and help keep the workload manageable for our kids. Also note that an 'assignment' for these purposes does not necessarily have to be something that is 'turned in' and requires a grade. It can be a reading passage, a video, a recorded lecture passage, a topic you want them to be prepared to discuss, etc.

During a typical 5 day week, a given class needs to meet for 200 minutes. That class will meet on Monday Flex day for 40 mins and have one Zoom meeting of 80 mins. **These two combined add up to 120 mins, meaning 80 additional minutes of work can reasonably be given for the remaining three days. Anything beyond that additional 80 mins for those three days is going to contribute to student overload, especially if this is occurring for them in multiple classes.** The time value of assignments is a huge factor but it's not the only one. We are also asking students to organize themselves in ways they never have before and many are not capable of. Most kids are not skilled at independently organizing themselves or managing their time. They count on class time and patient teachers to help them under the best of circumstances, so this is a real stretch and one of the main reasons so many are failing.

It is important to be **generous** when estimating the time value of these assignments. In a classroom setting where the environment is controlled, with teachers and aides available to assist, a simple 20-minute assignment can pretty easily be accomplished in 20 minutes. In a distance setting where so many of our students struggle to find time/space and are distracted by forces they cannot control which can include, household distractions or responsibilities, technical difficulties, slow internet or internet outages, this 20-minute assignment might easily take 40 minutes... or more.

With respect to Zoom periods, many parents and students report that when they Zoom in, work is assigned during the first part of the period, and the teacher then signs off, or is not available to help if needed. This is not a widespread problem but **it is imperative that teachers remain accessible for the entirety of the 80-minute time frame. Signing off or checking out after assigning material is not acceptable. Monitor break-out rooms or group activity, answer questions if they arise, and generally be available to assist and/or instruct as needed. You wouldn't walk out of your classroom 20 minutes into the period and not return... so don't do that here!**

## **#2: Improving Student Motivation and Engagement**

When considering student engagement we need to acknowledge that this is very much a two-way street. We know tremendous efforts are being made to conduct outreach to the 'unengaged' and encourage participation. And we know that so many teachers are refining their practice in an effort to coax reluctant learners back and turn them into engaged learners. Administrators on site have conducted literally **hundreds** of 1:1 or Zoom conferences with students and parents. So it would be a misnomer to say we need to 'ramp up' our efforts because so many people are really working hard on this. But the efforts need to continue and we need to seek out additional strategies because so much is at stake here.

We also need to broadcast the message loudly that students **need to log into Canvas EVERY DAY. Not just on Zoom days. EVERY DAY.** We will send reminders out through all our communication channels to re-emphasize this. The weekly assignments in Canvas need to be posted on Monday and as previously stated they need to be reasonable in terms of the time value so that kids can balance multiple classes. It's also important to consider that equitable time be given to students to complete their work, because the A-L's and the M-Z's have different schedules. This is also another good reason to be flexible with due dates.

In addition to ongoing outreach efforts, the District will purchase for all teaching staff, a copy of The Distance Learning Playbook, by Douglas Fisher. It is a substantive work on how to effectively engage students in a distance setting.

The following links provide access to additional resources on engagement strategies and ideas on motivating students remotely:

[\(PDF\) Motivation for students in a time of uncertainty: Learning during COVID-19—and beyond. In 'MCERA YouTube Interview'](#) You can download the PDF, which provides a link to YouTube interview on student motivation and engagement during the pandemic.

<https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/5159073893163107340> Free Webinar from Brandman University on how to help students who are struggling online. The link will take you to a simple registration page. The webinar is scheduled for Wednesday, October 21st from 4-5:00 pm.

[Enhancing Motivation for Online Learning During COVID-19](#)

[Student Engagement and Motivation](#)

We must also continue to utilize our PLC time to really focus on best practices and strategies that work. Teachers working with teachers is the foundational backbone of PLC's and a structure that needs to be maintained even in this difficult environment. Our own teachers are our best resource to innovate and problem solve and having an opportunity to share with colleagues is more essential now than ever.

### **#3: Grades and Grading Practices**

**We know that issues around student motivation, engagement and previously mentioned concerns about the workload all contribute in part to the volume of failing grades. In addition to the work that needs to be done to increase motivation, encourage engagement and adjust the workload, we need to ensure that our own grading policies and practices are not in and of themselves a part of the problem.**

The use of grades has always been partly to communicate our expectations for student performance. How we arrive at these grades varies greatly across classrooms, even classrooms that teach the same content, and the formula used to derive that grade can be unfair to certain students, especially now. The Covid Pandemic and shift to distance learning has made grading inequities more pronounced than ever before, and our Progress Report grades from September are clear evidence of this. It is imperative that we recognize the unprecedented times we are in and be willing to adapt. We have to shift both our mind-set and some of our grading practices in recognition of this fact. The following grading guidelines should be followed:

1. It is suggested that teachers minimize the weight of quizzes and assessments as a component of the overall grade. The ability of large numbers of students to perform on assessments is severely compromised when they fall behind and if they are struggling to catch up, a bad score on a heavily weighted test can crush motivation and be a grade-killer as well. Consideration should be given to providing additional opportunities to re-take tests.

2. **Multiple opportunities to succeed shall be provided.** A policy of not accepting late work *may* have been acceptable in a traditional classroom environment, it is clearly **not** acceptable now. When working from home there are simply too many variables that are impacting our students during this time to adhere to rigid timelines and due dates. Tech issues (multiple possibilities here), ailing family members, responsibility for younger siblings, having to work to support the family, no solitary space to work or concentrate... just to name a few. A rigid policy of not accepting late work sends this message: **“Do what you are told to do... when you are told to do it...or it has no value”**. It is understood that some feel that strict due dates are necessary and that not accepting late work is our way of ‘teaching responsibility’. It is our job to teach content, and do so in a way that fosters actual learning. Students come in all shapes and sizes and they learn in a variety of ways and at different speeds. Especially in the current environment this should be encouraged and rewarded, whether it occurs on our timeline or not.
3. If an assignment is turned in late, and some ‘adjustment’ in value is made as a result of it being late, that’s ok, so long as the ‘adjustment’ is **minor** so the student feels validated by making the effort to turn it in. The ultimate goal should be for the student to do the work, not miss it. Banks, creditors and mortgage houses figured out the psychology of ‘late payments’ long ago. If the goal is to keep people paying, give a grace period. If that isn’t met, don’t make the penalty too great ( a 10% late fee is common) or people may not be able to pay at all. So lets make our ‘late fee’ reasonable and encourage our clients to keep working, in the long run it’s our best strategy.
4. Teachers are encouraged to work within their subject area PLCs to minimize the scope of content to only the most essential core standards. It is unrealistic for most subject areas to expect to cover the same breadth of content as would be done in a normal/traditional environment. Better to provide quality coverage of essential standards than to provide less depth but more quantity.
5. Individual feedback shall be provided when appropriate or requested and for all grades below a C-. *This might be comments on the document, e-mail, invitation to intervention during office hours or Monday Flex day to discuss assignments, etc.*

Additional options not on the table but that might merit consideration at another time:

1. Allowing students to make a decision on accepting a CR designation on a limited number of classes if it benefits them to do so. This must be analyzed case by case with the student, teacher and counselor to determine repercussions with A-G eligibility, overall GPA, and/or eligibility for athletics.
2. Possible adjustment to the standard grading scale. This is tricky with A-G eligibility, collegiate admission requirements, etc.
3. An extension on the deadline to drop a course without a failing grade.

## **OTHER AREAS OF FOCUS AND RELATED ISSUES**

### **Focus on Wellness Week:**

This was previously referred to in the Board presentation as ‘Dead Week’, but people have differing connotations and context for this, so it was suggested we change the name. Wellness can mean a focus on mental and physical health, including the ability to address student and staff stress.

We will use the week of October 26-30th:

- No new content or assignments will be given during this week.
- Students will be given the opportunity to focus on make up work, missing assignments, participate in needed interventions or remediation activities, or retake assessments.
- Without the need to provide new content instruction, staff can focus on outreach to students and parents, assist students with catching up, remediate and just generally connect with struggling students.
- This week could be very beneficial to teacher stress as well.
- This is the last week of the first quarter grading period, so this opportunity should have a big impact on helping to improve grades.
- This week should make an impact on student motivation by providing hope that they can catch up and improve grades without getting further buried by additional assignments.

### **Wellness Support for Students:**

Our SMJUHSD Counseling staff is available to provide support for students. Do not hesitate to refer to them if you have any sense that a student may be in need. We are also expanding our support services to include an additional Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) to assist with Tier 3 critical services and contract proposals are being considered from two separate outside agencies to provide additional coverage for services during this time.

### **Wellness Support for Teachers:**

The district is presently finalizing plans to make an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) available for our Certificated staff. Some of the services to be offered include: Family/life balance assessments, counseling, health and wellbeing, Legal services, Crisis support, and many more. The program will be in place within 14 days if not sooner. Human Resources will notify all Faculty Association members when the program is active and the steps for access.

### **Monday Flex Days:**

Monday Flex Days can be either Zoom, or Non-Zoom formats depending on the individual teacher and class. The new CDE guidelines require that some form of assignment be given each day of the week so this will need to include Mondays moving forward. We will be releasing a new format through Aeries for Attendance and Engagement tracking based on the CDE requirements. See attendance/tracking below...

### **Attendance Taking and Engagement Tracking:**

Attendance taking and Engagement tracking procedures will be changing as a result of new CDE requirements. We are in the process of programming Aeries and Canvas to provide as much support for these requirements as possible, without overburdening teachers with compliance/clerical tasks, but it is a tall order. A separate document will be released shortly that details the changes, shows sample teacher menus, and a video tutorial. The new CDE requirements will also require a shift (not a dramatic one) in the way we use our Flex Monday time period, but until further notice continue to use Monday to track engagement.

### **Office Hours:**

Teachers need to be available during office hours via Zoom. It is suggested that a set meeting room that doesn't change (e.g. the same zoom meeting room ID and password each day/week) be established so students can easily reach teachers. This information should be posted to Canvas so students and parents can access easily. Teachers **should** assign struggling students to engage during office hours for intervention/additional practice. Please be mindful that some students may receive multiple assigned interventions during office hours from multiple teachers, so communication and flexibility will be key in working through these potential conflicts as they arise.

## **Communication:**

- Every effort should be made to return email and phone calls within 48 hours. M-F.
- Teachers need to be present and available during working hours.
- Teachers need to be available for parent meetings or calls during office hours.
- Grades must be updated at minimum every two weeks.

A note on the above bullets. Most of you are working hard at reaching out and trying to connect with students, especially since progress grades came out. We must continue to make the effort to establish communication with students, even though some will continue to be non-responsive and 'unreachable'. The goal here should be to not give students a reason to give up, but rather to give them encouragement and support. Let them, and their parents know we care and want them to catch up and make progress. They are far more likely to be willing to put in the effort if they feel they are not being punished but being given a real chance to get back in the game.

## **Small Group Instruction:**

Surveillance testing is starting next week, and we are proceeding with plans to organize small group cohorts in the areas of Special Education and for English Learners. These groups may expand to other areas as we show we can bring students to campus in small numbers and provide safe supports for both staff and students. We are also in partnership with Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley (FBSMV), Good Samaritan Shelter, and the City of Santa Maria in providing a space for our Homeless and Foster Youth.

## **Translation Services for Teachers:**

The District recently purchased 'Language Line' to provide real-time translation for calls home. This service will enable teachers to contact home directly without scheduling a translation call session.

## **Tutoring Services:**

Each of our sites has tutoring options through Cal-SOAP and Title I services. If you are not sure how to access these, contact your site counselors or administration, they can assist you. We are also working on contracting for 1:1 on demand tutoring services for all students.

## **Conclusion:**

Apologies for the length of this document, and congratulations to those of you who made it this far!! In closing, we have to acknowledge the difficulties we are all experiencing and whenever possible, give ourselves a break and be thankful for making it through another day. Nobody asked for this, nobody is happy doing this, and we all look forward to better days ahead at some point. In normal times, even normal difficult times, those of us that work in education at any level and in any capacity could count on a certain level of validation for what we do, and what it means to other people. Students are a joy to be around (most of the time), our colleagues are some of the best and brightest people on the planet, and being able to work meaningfully in an educational environment is a true blessing.

But for the last eight months much of that daily validation has been absent from our lives. And the absence of that validation has been made worse because it has been replaced with stress, anxiety, fear, and a sense of loss. Taking all of that into consideration just makes it all the more amazing that people aren't giving up, and are continuing to fight the good fight on a daily basis.

Our community needs us to continue to do that. And they do appreciate it, even if they don't always tell us.

Happy Friday,

SMJUHSD Leadership