

Dear Overlake Community,

My thoughts are often with you as we all navigate these challenging times. I hope that you and your families are healthy. In talking with a friend last week, he mentioned that he could not recall any event in his lifetime that impacted everyone in the world as this pandemic has. This was a startling revelation for me. It made me realize that when history is written about this era, there will be a history before *and* after COVID-19, and I believe the description after will show that we changed in how we think about and operate in our daily lives.

As many of you have shared with me and from my own experience as a parent and teacher, we have successfully moved our 53-year-old brick-and-mortar school online. Making such a change would not be possible without the commitment and focus of our faculty and staff. What's clear from my conversations and meetings with our Overlake team: we are working to ensure students continue to receive an Overlake education. For all of this work I applaud our faculty and staff, as I am sure you do.

Along with our faculty and staff, I want to thank our students. Just four weeks ago we were all on campus working together in classes, on the fields and the stages, and now they are confined to working and socializing on online. I know this is not what any of them imagined their year would look like, particularly the class of 2020, but they have been amazing in meeting this challenge and embracing all of the changes that have come their way.

Additionally, our online launch would not be as successful had we not invested in several key areas of the school. These investments have been in people, specifically our teaching and learning team, and in our technology – moving to Canvas, instituting a BYOD program, and investing in a more robust technology infrastructure. Without these investments moving to an online school would have been near impossible. What's important to underscore: successful technology depends heavily on the users and their intentional and thoughtful use of it – something all of you know well.

Two weeks ago, we ran surveys for our faculty, families, and students to understand and learn from their experiences. We received a great deal of feedback about how the first two weeks went and how to improve the experience. There were also three consistent themes on assessment which were:

- 1) Students were experiencing a high level of stress both from trying to be productive students while learning in an environment they had no experience with, while also grappling with a global pandemic.
- 2) Faculty were challenged to maintain a consistent and equitable grading policy given the changes in the content coverage and the assessments.
- 3) Assessments in an online space need to be different. What we did in the past could not be transferred to an online setting.

Therefore, we have decided to eliminate percentage grades for the fourth quarter and move to a system of credit/no credit for students in grades seventh through twelfth. (Our fifth and sixth graders currently do not receive percentage grades). Students who achieve mastery of essential content and skills for the quarter will receive credit for the semester. We will still send comments.

As unprecedented as this change is for Overlake, we are not alone in this shift. Many independent schools across the country and locally have shifted how they grade, their grading structure, and the overall assessments for the remainder of the school year. Additionally, many of the most selective colleges and universities in the country have moved to an alternate grading system for their students.

Making this change came with significant discussion with our faculty, department chairs, and school leadership. Moving in this direction will allow faculty to focus more on student learning and mastery of skills and less on calibrating differentiation among students. For our students it provides a chance to think about what they are learning as they navigate through this very different educational experience.

Through what they learned in consultation with college and high school colleagues, our college counselors have gained complete confidence that colleges and universities will look at this semester in the context of the pandemic and review transcripts with great flexibility. Many highly selective universities have already reached out to schools to assure both current seniors as well as all high school students of their increased flexibility in regard to grades, credits, and transcripts. As many of you know, there are countless high schools throughout the country that have shut down for the remainder of the year, and students at these schools are receiving no grades or credits for this final semester.

The change also aligns with our value of compassion for how what we so carefully planned months ago has been fundamentally altered. Not changing our method of grading would be to pretend that we are still operating in the same environment.

Many of you have asked me what lessons we have learned since moving to Overlake Online. For now, I would say we have learned to adapt, to be resilient and flexible, to listen to one another, and to hold true to our Overlake values and community in all moments, whatever they bring.

I sincerely wish you and your family a restful, peaceful, and healthy two weeks together. I am hopeful that soon we will be back on campus together, reveling in our shared space and place.

Be well,

Matt

