

IT'S TIME TO TAKE A Break

In the wake of rising stress, anxiety, and depression, mental health days are more necessary than ever.

A 2019 CDC SURVEY captured a grim picture in Florida: 1 in 3 high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness to the point where they stopped engaging in usual activities, with nearly 1 in 5 "seriously consider[ing] attempting suicide." With these numbers reverberating across the nation, it's clear that there is a mental health crisis among teenagers.

Understanding school is a major stressor both academically and socially, some states have offered a novel measure: mental health days for students. In 2018, Utah passed legislation that enabled students to take a day off for mental health reasons as an excused absence. States like Oregon followed suit, allowing students up to five excused absences every three months as either a sick or mental health day.

Although a growing movement has made this idea a reality, bills to establish mental health days have stalled in the Florida legislature. In their inaction, policymakers are ignoring the voices of millions of students whom this measure would impact: A May 2020 Harris Poll of over 1,500 teenagers found that 78% believed that schools should support mental health days.

This all comes in the midst of a youth mental health epidemic. A 2017 study published in the

Journal of the American Medical Association discovered that the teen suicide rate was at its highest point in nearly two decades. Using data from the CDC, the study reported that there were 47% more suicides among the high school age group in 2017 than there were in 2000. Another survey from the Pew Research Center found that 7 in 10 teenagers see anxiety and depression as major problems among their peers. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health days are a necessary step forward towards addressing the deterioration of mental health among our youth. Number after number reveals the emotional plight students are enduring, and it's time that lawmakers listen to the stories behind the statistics.

These excused absences are distinct from "sick days," in which the issue, whether physical or mental, is severe enough to require a doctor's note. Mental health days are not a solution to long-term problems such as a mental health disorder or chronic sleep deprivation, but they do allow students to take a step back during extenuating circumstances to rest and recalibrate before the next day. Although students would be missing a day's worth of school, forcing them to come to school when their mental health is suffering means they aren't learning in the first place, resulting in a loss of engagement in the classroom and extracurricular activities in the long run.

Establishing these days would also help open the conversation up around mental health and combat the norm that portrays asking for help as a weakness. By passing legislation that implements excused absences, lines of communication between students, parents, and teachers regarding students' mental health would be established, decreasing stigma and potentially encouraging students to seek help. This is particularly pertinent as a 2018 report from the National Council for Behavioral Health found that 49% of Generation Z is worried about external judgement when they say they've sought mental health services. This stigma deters students from discussing their mental health with friends and family and serves as a barrier against them seeking support.

Schools around the country are already instituting mental health programs to promote awareness, support, and education. At our school, Lady Gaga's Teen Mental Health First Aid and Suite360 programs informed students about the mental health resources accessible to them and how to recognize symptoms of mental illness. Although these programs offered educational resources about mental health, Florida must go beyond just requiring instruction time in classes if they want to do more than patch a bullet hole with a bandage. Students can't effectively improve their mental health if they are overwhelmed with academic responsibilities and



social pressures, meaning that these programs, and consequently students' lives, would be enhanced if this policy were implemented.

Mental health days are by no means a panacea to all of Generation Z's woes. Establishing more emotional and mental health support and reducing the societal stigma around mental health are all essential measures to prioritize our students' well-being. But ensuring that students are not overloaded is a prerequisite to facilitating a healthy environment and making the topic of

mental health more than words on a PowerPoint. And the reality is that on some days, teenagers simply need a break.

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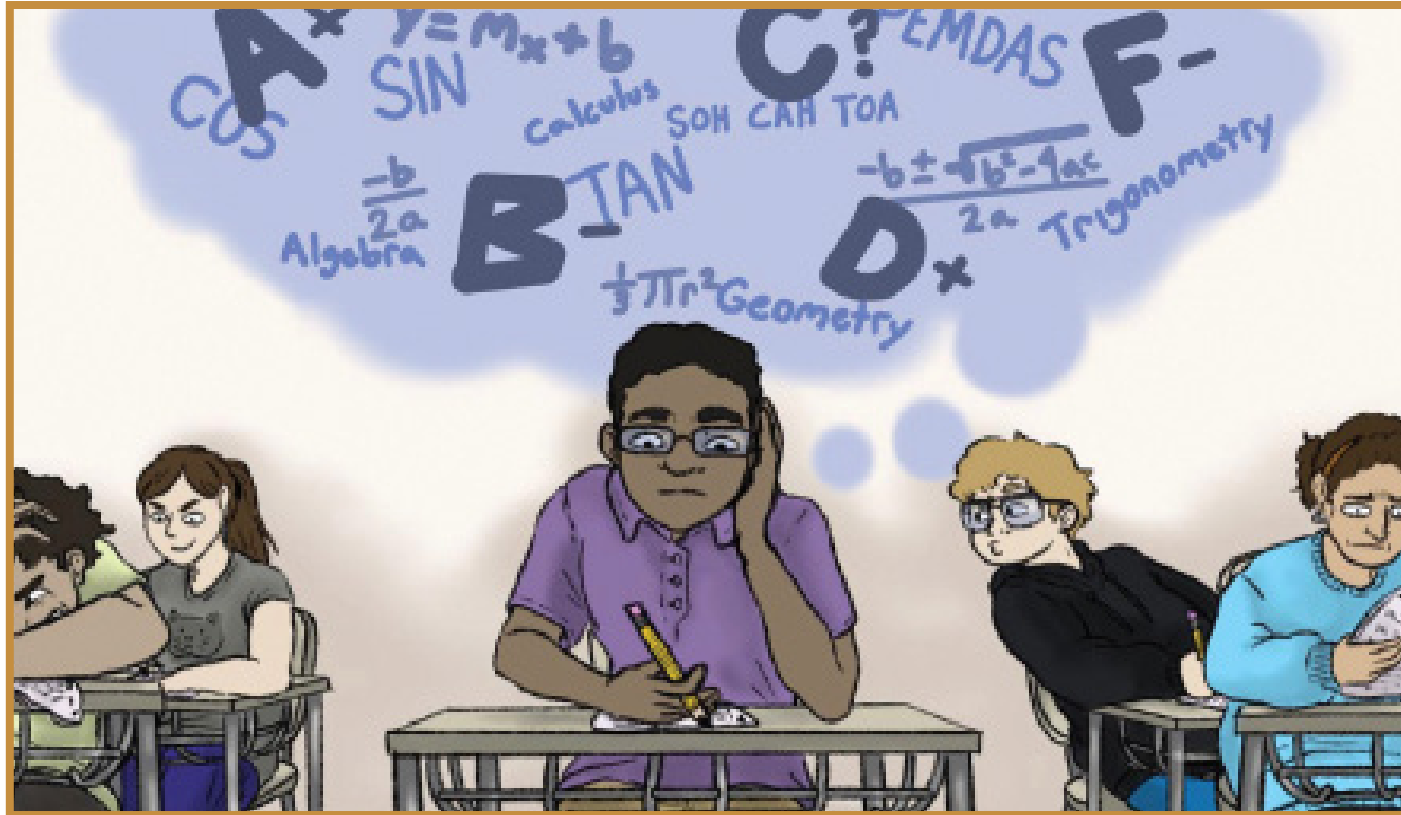
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*contributor: Miles Wang
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Why Pass/Fail is Necessary

with the pandemic exacerbating inequities, letter grading is failing our students



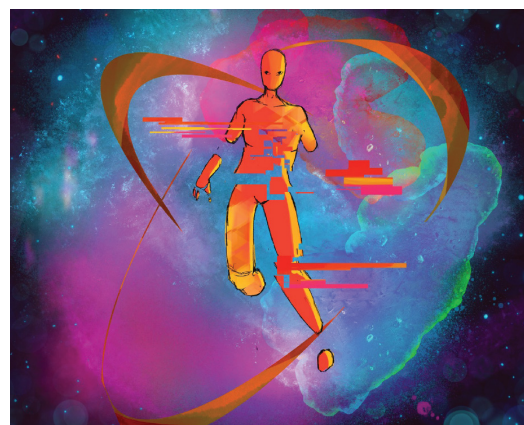
"I hope [my image] evokes reliability and/or understanding. Teens, AKA test takers, [will] hopefully relate to at least one of the figures shown," Visual junior Giovanna Romano said about the cartoon above. "I thought it would be a good idea to illustrate how different people handle hard tests, and different emotional reactions to not knowing the answer."

CLUB GIVES STUDENTS A VISUAL OUTLET



Visual freshman Mila Audet, first year club member
Name of Piece: Devilish Hairdresser

"Comparing artwork with others in the club has helped me see other's techniques and how to implement them into my art. [The piece] is supposed to convey a feeling of nostalgia and childhood...my inspiration came from on online game I used to play. I usually make traditional art then go onto digital to add effects."



Visual Senior David Corona
Name of Piece: Damaged

"[My art's] biggest inspiration was the nebula in space... the feeling of tranquility, of being alone with oneself—something that, because of COVID, more people are feeling the effects of. The comparison between my art last year and this year shows a significant improvement. I would heavily recommend [the club] if you want to learn how to draw the human figure."

The Animation and Figure Drawing Club, founded by visual dean Melissa Glossmanova, has been a part of Dreyfoos life for nine years. With presidents Giovanna Romano and Margot Tricomi, the club fosters imagination and exploration of artistic technique. There are two main branches of focus — animation, primarily digital work, and figure drawing, using traditional pen to paper styles. Members learn about animation techniques, movement progression, and working with models. "From education to actual production, our club does it all," Co-President Romano said. Club meetings take place Wednesday afternoons after school.

by Olivia Metzler

When COVID-19 first struck the globe during the spring term, many universities, from MIT to UC Berkeley, began taking letter grades off students' transcripts, instead replacing the multitude of A, B, C, D, and F grades with two simple words: pass, or fail. In uncertain times, this pass/fail grading system acknowledged the volatility of students' lives and noted that letters cannot account for one's learning potential during a pandemic.

But the crisis isn't over yet: as existing inequities in our education system continue to be exposed and exacerbated, Dreyfoos must follow in their footsteps and acclimate to the new reality, by adopting an opt-in pass/fail grading system for this school year.

It's kind of hard to learn in a pandemic

Economic scarring from the COVID-19 crisis has put millions of households out of employment, many of whom were already one paycheck away from financial disaster. And this won't be resolved anytime soon: Forbes reports that it could take 4 years for the 22 million jobs lost due to the recession to come back.

It's no wonder, then, that putting food on the table and paying rent are the chief concerns of numerous families, and many students now have greater familial responsibilities such as caring for elderly relatives or younger siblings. These hefty obligations may conflict with classes and homework, leaving underprivileged students behind compared to more privileged ones.

Inequities also come in the form of the digital divide that exists across households: underprivileged communities are less likely to have access to high-speed internet and technology. When Palm Beach County schools reopened, nearly two-thirds of students opted to continue distance learning instead of attending in-person classes. However, the Palm Beach Post reports that in the county, 92,000 households, or 17 percent of the total, lack crucial access to high-speed internet in an era of digital learning. This disparity has resulted in low-income students less likely to log onto school classes, according to district records from the spring semester, creating an uneven playing field in

the classroom. It is callous to presume that students without access to a laptop or stable internet access can educationally engage at the level of those with resources.

These factors have proved destructive to students' grades, with recent data from the school district painting a troubling picture: 13.5 percent of high school grades were F's, more than doubling the amount of F's from last year's 5 percent — and similar situations have played out in districts across the nation.

Behind the screen, the declining mental health of students is another reason for grave concern. A survey of 3,300 U.S. high school students in June conducted by the Center for Promise found that nearly one-third of students reported that they have "more often been feeling unhappy or depressed," and a similar percentage reported being "much more concerned than usual about having their basic needs met." The pandemic has categorically changed everyone's lives, and with social isolation taking a toll on mental health, is hindering many students' academic performance in class.

No more letters?

Unlike the traditional letter grading system, in which there are distinctions between A, B, C, D, and F grades, the pass/fail system operates on a binary framework — that is, you either pass or fail the class. If you pass a class, you receive the full credits of the course without affecting your GPA.

Implementing a pass/fail policy at Dreyfoos would reduce the pandemic's manifold pressures on students, ensuring that students' GPAs and future opportunities are not damaged because of greater family responsibilities, financial instability, struggling mental health, and lack of technological resources. After all, letter grading doesn't reflect a student's true effort and learning capacity when these factors are in play.

While students may be concerned about the

system not allowing them to increase their GPA for scholarships and college admissions, colleges like the University of Virginia utilize optional pass/fail grading, which maximizes flexibility for students and their individual circumstances by allowing them to choose whether to have pass/fail or letters on their transcript. Furthermore, all of New York City public high schools have adopted optional pass/fail grading for this school year. Dreyfoos should do the same, in recognition of the pandemic's disproportionate impacts.

Opponents of the pass/fail grading system may argue that such a system would decrease students' motivation to learn because they'll know that completing or not completing an assignment won't appear on their transcript. However, while this claim may appear true at face value, it isn't supported in the real world.

Take a glance at medical schools, many of which had adopted pass/fail grading before the pandemic. A 2018 study published in the Southern Medical Journal examined the pass/fail system's impact on these students and concluded that their overall academic performance was similar to that of the letter grading system, suggesting that an "enhanced learning environment" with pass/fail systems doesn't come at an academic detriment. Other reports not only find similar results, but further note that pass/fail systems foster cooperation, reduce competition, and increase intrinsic motivation to learn.

While these conclusions may be surprising to some, it makes sense when you analyze how students learn. Teenagers' single-minded focus on achieving an A over a B doesn't mean they are intrinsically invested to learn any subject; rather, they are bent on completing assignments to bump up a letter through any means. The pass/fail system not only levels the playing field but strengthens classrooms as learning environments, and allows students to re-examine the deeper purpose of learning.

Education has been described as the great equalizer, but amidst a pandemic and a radical transformation to digital learning, it is anything but equal. Taking into account each student's circumstances creates not just a fairer educational system, but a humane one.

STAFF EDITORIAL

STANDARDIZED

FUTURES

WHY ONE TEST SCORE SHOULDN'T
DICTATE STUDENTS' LIVES

In April, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) issued an emergency order eliminating the Florida Standards Assessment's consequences for students this year. While the move is a good first step to alleviate extenuating circumstances due to COVID-19, a temporary order is not enough: Standardized testing has been a virus in our education system long before the pandemic. To prevent further damage to students' futures, this policy must be permanently enacted.

The order grants power to school districts to determine whether FSA testing affects high school graduation and third-grade promotion. While some states have abandoned these policies in favor of a more holistic approach composed of grades and teacher evaluations, Florida is one of the remaining states with testing requirements that stand in diametric opposition to years of research.

For students who have passing grades and

conduct, one failing test score compromises graduation. The Carnegie Corporation reports that mandating "college and career ready" tests for graduation would cause the national graduation rate of 75% to drop to the 50% range. Because high school diplomas are expected in the workplace, this derails students' futures: A 2014 study conducted by the think tank New America concluded that using these rigorous "exit exams" for high schoolers is associated with a disconcerting 12.5% increase in incarceration rates.

But the ramifications of the FSA begin long before high school. Florida was one of the first states to adopt third-grade retention, holding back students without standardized test scores showing reading proficiency. Despite improving third graders' reading levels in the short-term, the psychological implications of retention on students, which may stem from being removed from their age group, lead to lower academic success in the long run. Examining 37,000 children, Notre Dame sociologist Megan Andrew discovered that students who repeated a year between kindergarten and fifth grade were 60% less likely to earn a high school diploma than students with similar backgrounds, illustrating holding back students only holds back their lives.

DESPITE IMPROVING THIRD GRADERS' READING LEVELS IN THE SHORT-TERM, THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RETENTION ON STUDENTS, WHICH MAY STEM FROM BEING REMOVED FROM THEIR AGE GROUP, LEAD TO LOWER ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN THE LONG RUN.

Standardized testing's appeal lies in its quantitative nature — after all, what can go wrong with using trustworthy numbers to measure students' abilities? But it's clear that flashy figures can't hide its glaring flaws. Testing can't accurately measure a student's knowledge and potential for success as many students simply don't perform well under pressure or lack access to testing prep like wealthy families. That's why research by UChicago Consortium



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shows students' grades are five times better at predicting college and future-readiness than the ACT, and that's also why minorities and low-income students often perform worse than more privileged students on exams.

Furthermore, the consequences of standardized testing act as classroom barriers. The Migration Policy Center found that nearly 13% of students in Palm Beach are English language learners, and high-stakes tests that require English proficiency disproportionately harms these students' futures even when they have competent subject knowledge. Standardized learning also encourages teaching to the test, meaning that since teacher and school evaluations rest on students' scores, lessons focus on rote and temporary memorization over expanding creative and innovative thinking.

All of this isn't to say standardized testing should be eliminated; to the contrary, well-designed testing provides valuable insight on the progress of schools and students. But leaving the futures of children solely up to one set of numbers isn't just dangerous — it's inhumane. We must lift the shackles that standardized learning places on our education system and in doing so, pave a better path for our youth.

by Miles Wang
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