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# Los Altos Town Crier

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Community news for Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View since 1947

## MVLA sees failing grades spike in distance learning

By Zoe Morgan  
Staff Writer/zoem@latc.com

Before the pandemic, when students were struggling in class, a teacher could stop by their desk, tap them on the shoulder and provide some one-on-one support. On Zoom, that can't happen.

The best bet is often to put students in breakout rooms, Los Altos High School teacher Arantxa Arriada said, so she can switch among them and check in with students. However, that makes it impossible to supervise what the rest of the class is doing.

Students and staff have spent much of the year adapting to this new landscape, and more students aren't on track to pass their classes. Teachers in the Mountain View Los Altos Union High School District gave over 1,000 more Ds and Fs in the first quarter of this year, compared to the same period last year – a 70% increase. The number of Ds and Fs spiked more sharply than the number of students receiving those grades, which climbed by a more modest 26%. Administrators and teachers say that means students who were already struggling before the pandemic are in many cases now falling behind in a greater number of classes, making it harder to catch up.

"That safety net, that guidance, it's just, it's gone; we cannot do it in the same way," Arriada said. "That's why I think you see individual kids failing multiple classes, because when they used to be able to keep their head above water, they can't any longer."

First-quarter grades, which run through Oct. 9, don't appear on a student's official transcript, but they are used by school staff as an early warning sign to identify students who are struggling, so they can intervene before semester grades are finalized. Although Ds count for credit toward graduation, they don't count toward admission to public four-year colleges in California. Administrators flag these students at the end of the first quarter, along with those getting Fs, as being in danger of failing the semester.

Existing mechanisms to make up classes, such as summer school, are designed to accommodate one or two failed semester-long courses. They aren't set up for students to make up all or most of their classes at one time.

With COVID-19 cases skyrocketing in Santa Clara County, the district is likely to remain in distance learning for a sizable portion of next semester. That means students struggling with online classes may be staring down another semester of the same.

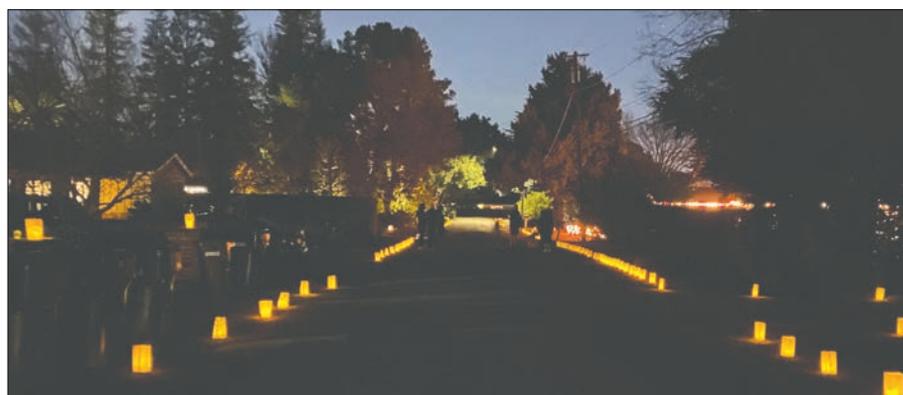
### Failing grades spike

Between both Mountain View and Los Altos high schools, over 200 more students received a D or an F in at least one class this fall compared to last year – a 26% increase, from 819 to 1,028 students.

The pandemic isn't impacting students evenly, Arriada said, but is instead bringing existing discrepancies and inequality to the forefront. Students with fewer resources often lack a quiet place to

See GRADES, Page 7

## Local holiday spirit lights up the night



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MALCOLM TAAM

Los Altos residents in the Hillview area went all-out last week in decorating their houses and neighborhood to celebrate the holiday season.

## El Camino Health begins vaccinations

First doses arrive as COVID-19 surge reaches new peaks

By Eric He  
Staff Writer/erich@latc.com

El Camino Health received 975 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine from Pfizer last week and began vaccinating frontline workers.

The shipment was part of the 17,500 doses provided by Pfizer to Santa Clara County and is shared between El Camino's

Mountain View and Los Gatos locations. The county began offering vaccinations to 6,000 skilled nursing facility staff.

In a press release, officials from the health system said they anticipate being able to inoculate all hospital employees by the spring.

The first recipients of the vaccine include a nightshift critical-care nurse, a respiratory therapist and an environmental services worker, as well as Dr. Daniel Shin, an infectious disease specialist who was part of the team

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COURTESY OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

The first shipments of the COVID-19 vaccine arrive in Santa Clara County last week.

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do their work, she noted. Sometimes, when students unmute themselves to speak, she can hear their siblings taking part in their own online classes in the background.

Low-income families are also more likely to have parents who need to work in person, meaning students get less supervision and high schoolers sometimes have to help younger siblings navigate their own classes, Arriada said.

There are also gaps in technology. Although the school district provides Wi-Fi hotspots and Chromebooks, Arriada said students still sometimes have trouble getting a clear connection.

Despite the barriers, there was actually a smaller jump in the number of low-income students receiving Ds and Fs, compared to the student body overall – 19% versus 26% for the total student population.

That may be partly because the data on students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals, the way schools identify students as low income, lags by a year, Superintendent Nellie Meyer said. That means there may be a “hidden” group of students who are now struggling be-

cause of the pandemic, but aren’t yet counted as low income.

Even without as sharp an uptick in the number of low-income students getting Ds and Fs, these students, as well as other groups including Latino students and those in special education, continue to be far more likely to fail classes than the student body overall. If students who were already failing a class now fail multiple classes, existing gaps in achievement could widen and become harder to bridge. Meyer called that potential “deeply concerning.”

“If they were failing one or two classes in the past, and now they’re failing six, it really is incumbent on us to make sure that they have that opportunity to (retake) those classes,” Meyer said.

Some MVLA students who are getting Ds and Fs are entirely disengaged from online lessons, Distance Learning Administrator Teri Faught said, while others are taking part and submitting at least some assignments. The district hasn’t released a count of the number of students who aren’t participating in online learning at all.

The district has seen the number of Fs shoot up far more than Ds. Between both MVHS and LAHS, there was a 27% increase in Ds

given at the end of the first quarter, compared with a 134% jump in the number of Fs. Last year, 640 Fs were given. This year, there were 1,500.

This may be indicative of those students who aren’t logging on for their online classes. Often students receiving Ds are working hard but struggling with the curriculum, Meyer said. In contrast, while students getting Fs may also be having a hard time with the coursework, it can also point to a lack of engagement.

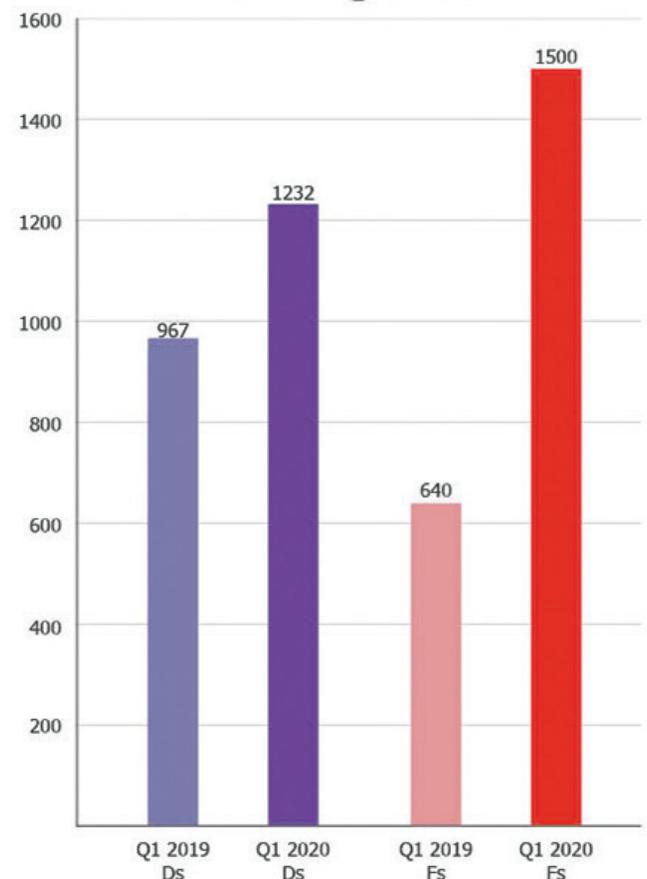
MVLA is not alone in seeing an increase in failing grades. School districts throughout the country are reporting sharp increases in Ds and Fs during distance learning, including other districts in the Bay Area.

“From talking to other school board members, it’s matching up with ours – the kids who were already struggling are struggling more,” said MVLA Board of Trustees President Fiona Walter, who also serves as president of the Santa Clara County School Boards Association.

### English learners

The groups that saw the largest percent increase in students getting Ds and Fs are those learning English, as well as long-term. See GRADES, Page 18

## Total number of first-quarter D and F grades



GRAPHIC BY RYAN MOLINARI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER  
The Mountain View Los Altos Union High School District saw a 27% increase in Ds in the first quarter of 2020, compared to last year, and a 134% jump in the number of Fs.



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# Schools

## GRADES

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English learners, defined by the state as an English learner who has been in the United States for over six years. In MVLA, these are often students who were born and raised in the U.S. but speak Spanish at home and struggle with academic English, said Mountain View High Assistant Principal Daniella Quinones, who oversees the school's program supporting those learning English.

Families of English learners have been particularly impacted by the pandemic, Quinones said. Many parents lost their jobs or much of their income, often working positions that require being there in person, such as day laborers, housekeepers and nannies.

Some students have had to start working themselves. While families want their students to focus on school, Quinones said it's a matter of meeting basic needs, like paying rent and buying food.

In one instance, a teacher emailed Quinones saying that a student was joining Zoom calls from his job, trying to keep up with his lessons, even though he

had to work to support his family. "It's been really sad for me to see that, but at the same time, we focus on their resiliency and just trying to ... provide them with the support and accommodations that they may need in order to continue to be successful in school," she said.

Although it's up to teachers' discretion, Quinones said many have worked with students who have special circumstances, modifying assignments and trying to focus on the course's main standards.

Those still learning English also have been disproportionately impacted by the virus itself, Quinones said. The majority of students learning English in the district are Latino, a group that accounts for over half of the county's COVID-19 cases, despite making up only a quarter of the population.

"All of that takes a toll on the student," Quinones said. "The burden, the emotional toll, the financial toll – I think it's bound to impact their academic access."

There was a 69% increase in the number of English learners getting Ds or Fs in the first quarter, increasing from 93 to 157

students. In the long-term English learner group, that number jumped 70%, from 54 to 92 students.

Beyond the increase in the number of students failing, Quinones said she's also concerned that she's seeing more students failing multiple classes.

"We're talking about kids who are in danger of not graduating because of their multiple Ds and Fs," Quinones said. "It's a real concern."

Back in the spring, when the district was using a credit/no-credit system rather than letter grades, students learning English didn't see the same spike. There was a 21% increase in the number getting at least one no-credit in the spring, compared to Fs the year before.

According to Quinones, in the spring, teachers working with English learners tried hard to give students the support they needed to receive credit for a class if they were passing before the pandemic. Letter grades, in contrast, provide less flexibility.

"It's like comparing apples to oranges," she said. "A credit/no-credit scale is much more forgiving than an A through F scale."

### Steps being taken

When district administrators saw the spike in Ds and Fs at the end of first quarter, they brought the data to school officials and teachers to analyze and find ways to provide support, according to Faught.

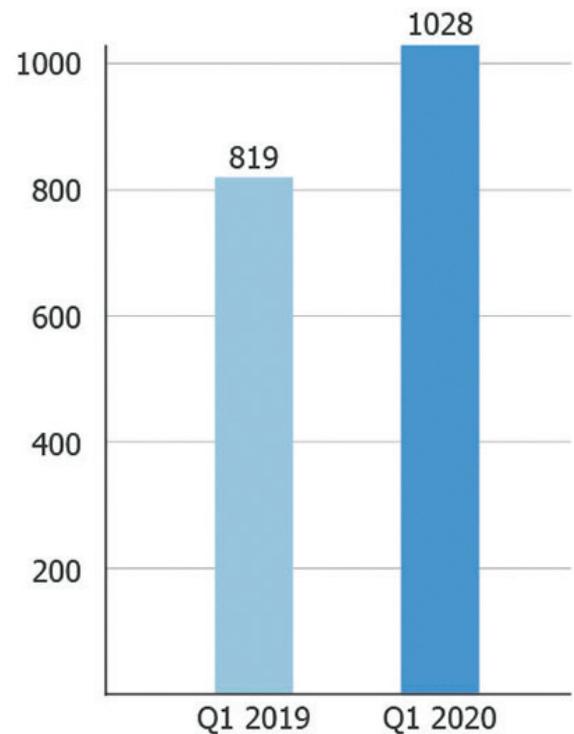
In some cases that meant setting up appointments with students, assigning a student to a tutor or reaching out to parents, Faught said. Teachers also helped students prioritize the assignments that have the biggest impact on their grade.

There's also the potential that some teachers will decide to bump up students' grades that are on the border, such as from a D to a C-, or cancel out certain missing assignments, rather than entering a zero, Arriada said.

She said deciding to do that is based on a philosophical view that students shouldn't be penalized for factors outside of their control, particularly when the pandemic is disproportionately affecting low-income students, as well as students of color. Some teachers take a different view, not wanting to artificially increase students' grades.

One effort the district launched to support struggling students was bringing small groups back onto campus. Although classes are still

## Students receiving at least one D or F



GRAPHIC BY RYAN MOLINARI/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

The students getting Ds and Fs increased 26% in the first quarter.

taught online, participating students have access to Wi-Fi, a quiet place to work and supervision.

The cohorts thus far are largely targeted at students receiving multiple Ds and Fs, though some are aimed at particular groups, such as those learning English.

When the county slid back into the state's highest risk tier for COVID-19 last month, the district paused opening new cohorts. Existing ones continued, though Faught said numbers shrank as families kept their students home.

The district intends to open more cohorts when health conditions improve, including extra-curricular ones to try to pique the interest of students who may feel disconnected from classes.

### Going forward

Despite the district's efforts, the reality is when semester grades are tallied, there's likely still to be an increase in the number of failing grades compared to pre-pandemic totals. District officials have been brainstorming new ways for students to make up courses.

Among the options are expanding summer school, running a special program over the week-long break in February, offering Saturday school and conducting classes later in the afternoon. Students also could potentially take courses with Edgenuity, the self-guided online content provider the district has been offering this year. Students also may be able to

make up classes in future school years.

Many of these options still have their limits and if a student fails enough classes, other paths may be necessary. Those include transferring to Alta Vista High School, the district's alternative school, taking courses through the district's Adult Education program and staying past four years.

As long as distance learning continues and options for credit recovery stay remote, a hurdle will be trying to give more work to students who are already disengaged.

"That's the challenge – it's, like, 'Oh, you're not coming to school? We're going to give you more school,'" Meyer said. "That really isn't logical, although it is what they need."

Meyer said despite the support measures put in place, she does think that distance learning will have a negative impact on the district's graduation rate. In 2019, MVLA had a 92.4% graduation rate, well above the state average of 85.9%.

Arriada has been stressing to her students that the pandemic and distance learning won't last forever, even if it's likely to continue for much of the school year. Ultimately, she said the district needs to find expanded ways for kids to make up work.

"We need to give them that opportunity. I think we owe them that," she said. "We need to get creative (and) think outside the box."

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