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## Making Change Stick: A Case Study of one High School's Journey Towards Standards-Based Grading

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# MAKING CHANGE STICK

A Case Study of one High School's Journey Towards Standards-Based Grading

Article by Matt Townsley and Megan Knight

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explain the experiences of high school teachers and administrators in the midst of transitioning to standards-based grading practices. The researchers used a single case study methodology to investigate how teachers and administrators described their school's implementation successes and challenges. Data triangulation occurred through analyzing semi-structured interviews, meeting agendas, handbooks, and relevant documents provided by study participants. Using Kotter's eight steps for leading organizational change as a framework, we recommend school leaders blow off the cobwebs and get started, understand staff needs and provide teacher support, and be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

## Introduction

Grading continues to be a controversial subject in the eyes of educators (Sun & Cheng, 2013; Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011), parents (Dexter, 2015; Frankin, Buckmiller, & Kruse, 2016; Yost, 2015), and even policy makers (Hewitt & Duffort, 2019). A century of research suggests grades have been subjective and unreliable at communicating actual student learning (Brookhart et al., 2016). School leaders attempting to address this problem are striving to eliminate toxic grading practices (Reeves, 2008), while others are moving away from points and percentages towards grading based upon targets or standards (Hierck & Larson, 2018; Proulx, Spencer-May, & Westerberg, 2012; Rinkema & Williams, 2019).

In 2014, Peters and Buckmiller documented a grassroots movement of schools implementing standards-based grading (SBG) in one Midwestern state. These early schools noted barriers such as incompatible student information systems, stakeholder push back, and an internal implementation dip. More recently, Townsley, Buckmiller, and Cooper (2019) followed up with school leaders in the same state and determined there may be a second wave of SBG. While many of the newly anticipated barriers are different from the earliest adopters in the state, the transition towards SBG continues to be a challenge in the eyes of high school principals.

Literature documents a variety of implementation-related hurdles when improving building-wide grading practices. For example, Peters and Buckmiller (2014) reported that helping parents move beyond traditional grading practices and the perceived fear of unknown post-secondary implications with SBG is a significant barrier for early adopting schools. In addition, parents accustomed to viewing marks with points and percentages in electronic grade books often wonder why the change is needed altogether (Yost, 2015). Furthermore, secondary teachers report little, if any, previous grading-related professional development, and when asked to consider alternative grading approaches, elicit tension regarding deep philosophical beliefs such as the purpose of school (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Teachers with 15-20 years of professional experience tend to view SBG less favorably when compared to their colleagues with less than 10 years of experience (Hany, Proctor, Wollenweber, & Al-Bataineh, 2016).

Research also suggests high school students struggle with eliminating points and percentages (Peters, Kruse, Buckmiller, & Townsley, 2017), and their teachers initially grapple with the logistics of determining letter grades from standards for high school transcript purposes (Schiffman, 2016). All the aforementioned challenges, while important, have been documented retroactively, once standards-based grading is already in place. Other high schools have started the journey towards more effective grading practices and have eventually withdrawn (Hewett & Duffort, 2019; Holland, 2018). To date, much of the research has focused on educators anticipating barriers or looking back at their experiences following the change. Deeper insight is needed to discern the most helpful implementation steps and pitfalls to avoid from the perspective of a school in progress. Furthermore, additional research is needed to understand the conditions in which teachers accept and resist standards-based grading as a change initiative in school (Townsley, Buckmiller, & Cooper, 2019).

Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explain the experiences of high school teachers and administrators in the midst of transitioning to standards-based grading practices. Our current case study documents the successes and challenges of a single high school with a track record of dipping their toes into a major grading shift for close to 10 years and a sense of urgency to fully implement standards-based grading within the next academic year. The timing of these educator perspectives within the overall transition provides a deviant case situated within what Flyvbjerg (2006) described as an information-oriented case selection. In line with suggestions for future research from Peters and Buckmiller (2014), the current study attempts to better understand one potential standards-based grading implementation framework at the secondary level. This research is important because it will provide high school leaders a potential success blueprint as well as pitfalls to avoid in the early stages of transitioning to standards-based grading.

## Literature Review

### LEADING CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

School leaders play an imperative role in changing schools through actions such as building a shared vision, identifying specific short-term goals, distributing leadership, and structuring the school to facilitate collaboration (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2019). According to Mulford (2006), three major elements are necessary for school leaders facilitating change. First, a supportive staff culture should be developed through frequent, ongoing, and transparent communication. When teachers are empowered to be a part of the process rather than merely on the receiving end, they are more likely to support the change. Second, a community of learners should be developed in which teachers regularly share their practices with each other while critically reflecting upon needed changes in response to student learning data. Jones and Harris (2014) echoed this sentiment of necessary collaborative, interdependent professional learning structures in their analysis of principals' ability to lead effective organizational change. Finally, continuous improvement must be viewed as an institutional norm rather than merely in response to outside mandates. Educational administrators themselves must appreciate the need for change rather than basking in the comfort of the status quo (Zimmerman, 2011).

In addition, leaders interested in facilitating organizational change must apply key elements of emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy in order to effectively determine the extent to which staff members will accept the change (Issah, 2018). As such, "school leaders require political astuteness to lead and manage change successfully" (Starr, 2011, p. 656) in today's era of increased stakeholder expectations to improve learning outcomes. The most successful principals leading second-order change possess a deep personal investment in its rationale and are flexible in their leadership actions (Taylor & La Cava, 2011). One second-order change requiring prudent leadership and strategic organizational change has been standards-based grading.

## IMPLEMENTING STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

Standards-based grading (SBG) is a philosophy of communicating student learning disaggregated by standards rather than assessments in which the grade book emphasizes *what has been learned over when it was learned*. Because many teachers and parents experienced points and percentages as learners themselves, SBG may be perceived as a second-order change in the eyes of many stakeholders. To that end, it is important for school leaders to clearly define and communicate what SBG is and why shifting from point accumulation is necessary.

A number of authors converge in defining SBG around three principles. The first principle is communicating student learning in the grade book or report card based upon standards or targets rather than total points accumulated (Iamarino, 2014; Lehman, DeJong, & Barron, 2018; Noschese, 2011; O'Connor, 2018). Because student learning is better described in relation to discipline-specific, parent-friendly language rather than the assessment medium (e.g., Chapter 3 Test), standards are rewritten in parent-friendly language and students' current levels of learning are communicated in relation to these standards. The second principle is not including work habits such as homework

completion as part of the final grade (Iamarino, 2014; Reeves, Jung, & O'Connor, 2017). Learners are expected to make mistakes and learn from their errors on practice attempts; therefore, formative work such as homework should receive comment-heavy descriptive feedback (O'Connor, 2009). The third principle of standards-based grading is providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding of standards (O'Connor, 2018; Spencer, 2012; St. Pierre & Wuttke, 2015). When a student demonstrates a less-than-desirable understanding of a standard early in the course, he/she is provided future opportunities to demonstrate understanding, which replace previous attempts in the grade book. Once implemented, educators using SBG report their teaching is more focused, effective, and enjoyable (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Furthermore, SBG promotes greater consistency between classrooms (O'Connor, 2018) and assists teachers in adjusting their instruction (Scriffiny, 2008).

## GRADING REFORM LEADERSHIP

Grading reform is an often overlooked dimension of instructional leadership (Guskey & Link, 2019). This effect is likely amplified in high schools in which principals often rate themselves as being less confident in leading curriculum and instruction efforts when compared to their middle school and elementary principal colleagues (Bucher & Ingle, 2013). A number of principals report benefits from involving teacher voices throughout the conversion to SBG (Urich, 2012; Weaver, 2018), which may alleviate administrator apprehensions to lead instructional change. Furthermore, schools starting conversations about grading should begin with the purpose of grades rather than getting sidetracked about the scales, policies, and electronic grade book implications (Brookhart, 2011; Reeves, 2011). Following the development of grading purpose statements, Feldman (2019) recommended schools start with a small pilot group to introduce specific changes at the classroom level. Beyond these initial leadership actions, few details have been documented describing the most helpful implementation steps for schools transitioning to standards-based grading.

## Theoretical Framework

Using Kotter's (2012) model of change as a theoretical framework, we captured the perspectives of a cross section of stakeholders at a high school in the early years of transitioning its grading practices. Kotter (2012) offered eight steps for business leaders seeking sustainable improvements, which we find equally applicable for educational leaders. A summary of Kotter's (2012) steps include:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency: Help others see a need to change, sometimes as a result of a recent crisis.
2. Creating the guiding coalition: Work alongside a willing group of employees to guide, coordinate, and communicate the change.
3. Developing a vision and strategy: Clarify how the change is different from the past and describe how it will align with the intended vision.

4. Communicating the change vision: Ensure as many people as possible receive—and have a voice in—the message and are excited about the change.
5. Empowering employees for broad-based action: Shift from planning to doing. Involve as many people as possible to remove barriers and work towards the intended outcomes.
6. Generating short-term wins: Celebrate people and accomplishments that bring the organization closer to the long-term change.
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change: Continually communicate and celebrate important milestones.
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture: Ensure the “change” becomes a part of the organization’s culture such that employees believe it is the norm.

This framework has been previously selected in educational case studies to understand changes such as school district reorganization (Nitta, Wrobel, Howard, & Jimmerson-Eddings, 2009) and increasing leadership opportunities for teachers (Cooper et al., 2016). With Kotter’s theoretical framework in mind, we sought to understand what educational leaders seeking to implement SBG should do and avoid at each step in the change process to ensure lasting improvement.

## Research Questions

Research questions guiding the data collection and analysis for this study were:

1. What successes do high school administrators and teachers encounter regarding standards-based grading implementation?
2. What concerns and struggles do high school administrators and teachers have regarding standards-based grading implementation?
3. What is the relationship between Kotter’s (2012) organizational change theory and the perceived successes and barriers with initial standards-based grading implementation?

## Methods

A qualitative case study methodology guided the research design, data collection, data analysis, and reporting for this study. Yin (2018) defined case study research as “an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). This study employed an embedded single-case design focused on a single critical case. A critical case study tests the

accuracy of a predetermined theory (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) contended that “propositions will lead to a complete research design” (p. 35) because they guide data collection and analysis decisions. The theoretical proposition guiding this study was Kotter’s (2012) organizational change theory; specifically, we sought to affirm or deny the proposition that SBG leadership actions perceived as successful by participants will align with Kotter’s (2012) steps for successful organizational change, while leadership actions perceived as unsuccessful will not.

## CASE DESCRIPTION

When identifying a case to be studied, researchers may select an individual, small group, community, school, or event (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Case study researchers must be intentional about selecting a case (Yin, 2018) by using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Since this study focused on a single critical case in pursuit of testing a proposition (Yin, 2018), the selected case for this study was a high school in the Midwestern United States that was in the beginning stages of implementing SBG at the time of this study. Central High School, a pseudonym for our selected case, draws students from urban and suburban communities within and around a city of approximately 250,000 people. Central High School has approximately 2,000 students and a nearly 95% graduation rate. For this study, SBG implementation was defined by the following principles:

- student learning is communicated in the grade book based upon standards or targets rather than total points accumulated,
- work habits are not included in determining the final academic grade; work habits could be included as a separate report or not at all, and
- multiple opportunities are provided to demonstrate understanding of standards.

Schools were not considered for case selection if school leaders could not communicate that they were in the midst of a multiple year SBG implementation plan using all three of the aforementioned SBG principles. Moreover, elementary schools were not identified as a case since grading practices are often more inconsistently implemented at the secondary level (Guskey, 2006).

As part of an embedded case study design, the case was divided into subunits for clarity throughout data collection and analysis. In this study, embedded subunits included administrators and teachers who were actively involved in the school during SBG implementation. Not included directly within the case or its subunits were parents or school board members because SBG implementation was still primarily internal at the time of this study; such subgroups did not have adequate exposure to or understanding of the school’s fledgling start to SBG to provide perceptions of its successes and barriers.

## PARTICIPANTS

We used purposeful and opportunistic (snowball) sampling to recruit participants (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). Although there is “no clear cutoff point” established for participant numbers within case study research, Yin (2018) recommended collecting enough data to confirm or deny the proposition. Likewise, Creswell (2014) recommended collecting data until “saturation” has been met, that is, “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights” (p. 189). Therefore, we interviewed three administrators and four teachers within the case, gathering enough data to confirm or deny the research proposition. Table 1 includes a list of participants in this study. Pseudonyms have been used and general titles included to protect participant identity.

TABLE 1

Participant Pseudonyms and Roles

PSEUDONYM	ROLE
Cassy	Administrator
Caleb	Administrator
Thomas	Administrator
Tyler	Teacher
Nathan	Teacher



Albert	Teacher
Keely	Teacher

## DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and documentation, both of which are recommended for case studies (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

**Semi-structured interviews.** The primary form of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which are “an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or actions” (Yin, 2018, p. 118). Interview questions were organized around Kotter’s (2012) steps for organizational change. For example, in line with the first step of establishing a sense of urgency, we inquired participants regarding the decision-making process and reactions leading up to the current standards-based grading implementation timeline.

Before conducting interviews, we piloted interview questions with volunteers in similar settings and roles, and then we revised the interview guides for clarity and consistency. Interviews with participants lasted approximately one hour and were conducted and recorded via online video meetings. After each interview, we shared notes and updated a reflexive journal to ensure reliability, reflect on the data, initiate informal data analysis, and set aside personal opinions (Creswell, 2013).

**Documentation.** To triangulate interview data, documents were collected and analyzed. Such documents included professional development agendas and resources, board of education agendas and minutes, emails, timelines, drafts of grading policies, handbooks, teacher assessments, rubrics, syllabi, and information posted on district websites. All documents that were not already public were voluntarily provided by participants.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by utilizing deductive and inductive coding processes (Miles et al., 2014). Prior to data collection and analysis, deductive codes were created based on the theoretical framework, namely Kotter’s (2012) eight stages for organizational change. After data collection, interview transcripts and collected documents were labeled according to the predetermined codes. Inductive coding followed with a first cycle of

descriptive coding and a second cycle of pattern codes (Miles et al., 2014). Table 2 depicts the deductive and inductive codes derived throughout data analysis.

TABLE 2

Deductive and Inductive Codes

<p>PREDETERMINED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CODES (DEDUCTIVE)</p>	<p>FIRST CYCLE DESCRIPTIVE CODES (INDUCTIVE)</p>	<p>SECOND CYCLE PATTERN CODES (INDUCTIVE)</p>
Urgency	False perception of clarity	Second implementation wave created a sense of urgency
Guiding coalition	Unsure if teachers “get it”	
Vision	Top-down decisions; lack of teacher voice	Voices heard and unheard: Staff perceived different sources of decision-makers
Communicate	Guiding coalition is present, but may not be trusted	A bell curve of buy-in
Empower to remove barriers	Several, but not all, barriers have been removed	Teachers understood the “why,” but struggled with the “how”
Short-term wins	Teachers know the next step (full implementation), but they’re looking for guidance on the “how”	Macro-level wins exposed micro-level barriers
Consolidate gains	Compliance more than buy-in	
Anchor in the culture		

Teachers and  
administrators sensing  
small wins

Why now?

## Findings

As a result of data analysis, five major themes emerged from the data: (A) Second implementation wave created a sense of urgency, (B) Voices heard and unheard: Staff perceived different sources of decision-making, (C) A bell curve of buy-in, (D) Teachers understood the “why,” but struggled with the “how,” and (E) Macro-level wins exposed micro-level barriers.

### SECOND IMPLEMENTATION WAVE CREATED A SENSE OF URGENCY

Central High School has experienced two waves of SBG implementation. The first partial rollout occurred almost a decade prior to the full implementation. Administrators and teachers noted distinct differences between the two approaches and acknowledged improvements that have taken place from one to the next. However, while administrators perceived a sense of urgency to move forward, most teachers felt overwhelmed by the fast-approaching deadline for full implementation.

**Dipping a toe into the pool: Initial implementation was slow and segmented.** Several years before full SBG implementation was initiated at Central High School, the Common Core State Standards were making their way into curriculum guides across the state. Around the same time, a group of district and building administrators attended a conference focused on culture, leadership, and grading and returned with a zeal for SBG. As Cassy discussed, the concept of focusing on “what students should know and be able to do was something we have been talking about for a very long time,” and SBG seemed like a “better way” for teachers to sharpen their curricular focus. Therefore, teachers were asked to base their grades on priority standards for each course, rather than point accumulation based upon a combination of task completion, assessment accuracy, and behaviors. Teacher participants described the initial rollout as “piecemeal,” explaining how teachers’ misconceptions led to a variety of implementation practices, many of which were inconsistent with best practices in grading. Albert provided an analogy to describe the early SBG stages:

We started by dipping in our toe. And then we pulled our toe out. And then we maybe tried to dip our toe in again. And then maybe picked a different toe. And then maybe we got up to the foot, but we just never got up to the ankle. And now I think we’re saying, ‘okay, if we’re going to get in this we just have to jump in.’

### **Diving in: Administrators set a deadline for whole school SBG**

**implementation.** After years of department-specific SBG practices, administrators decided it was time to require consistent whole-school implementation. One factor influencing this decision was a shift in leadership positions that led to SBG proponents in key positions within the district and high school. Their desire to move forward with SBG led to the realization that “standards were not being addressed as seriously as we would have liked.” Therefore, during the fall of 2019, administration announced that by the 2020-2021 school year, all grades would be based entirely on content standards. As Cassy articulated, the communicated deadline “was absolutely what we needed because now I think we have a lot of teachers that are very serious about determining which standards fit with their courses.”

Another influential factor in the second, more vigorous push for SBG was the ability to convert standards-based grades into letter grades within the school’s electronic gradebook. Cassy explained, “the biggest reluctance to actually completely embrace standards-based learning has been the next step for students. What does postsecondary look like?” Nathan reiterated that the “capability to still give that transcript letter grade was important to the teachers, the staff, students, and the parents.... And that’s gone a long way in driving the timing of it.”

### **VOICES HEARD AND UNHEARD: STAFF PERCEIVED DIFFERENT SOURCES OF DECISION-MAKERS**

Central administrators and teachers had distinctly different perspectives regarding whose voices were heard throughout the initial stages of SBG. Although administrators acknowledged a top-down approach, they also perceived opportunities for teachers to provide input along the way. In contrast, teacher participants interpreted limited opportunities for teachers to voice concerns or provide feedback, lamenting that teacher input was not truly heard nor utilized.

**Administrators perceive two-way communication.** Administrators recognized that the decision to fully implement SBG at the high school by 2021 was a top-down decision. Caleb described various efforts to “make it transparent” that the high school would be grading based on content standards by 2020-2021, stating that the message had mostly been, “Hey, parents, we’re going to do this.” He added, “That can probably be improved.... We just have a really hard time communicating with everybody and getting everybody to pay attention.”

All three administrator participants discussed efforts to communicate with and listen to various stakeholders. As Thomas, who was particularly instrumental in setting the 2021 deadline, put it, teachers “don’t always like the idea [of SBG], but they get a good say in it.” explained that administrators “have really worked hard to give teachers the voice that they want in this process,” adding that “we do value our teachers. We have great teachers here. We trust in their ability to teach and their thoughts on how to do it best for our students.” Cassy was the catalyst in forming a standards-based grading leadership team, and although she personally recruited teachers who were already

interested in SBG, she welcomed anyone—including students—who expressed interest in joining the team.

**Teachers perceive top-down mandates and lack of teacher voice.** Contrary to administrator perceptions, teacher participants expressed frustration with a lack of teacher voice. Teachers perceived the building leadership team (a separate committee from the SBG leadership team) as “messengers” who attempted to voice teacher concerns and were met with resistance from administration. One teacher voiced that teacher leaders approached administrators with concerns, but “[they say] the same thing: ‘Well, this is just going to happen. I understand those are the concerns, but we’re doing this anyway.’” Thomas corroborated this notion by stating, “When people leave our office they don’t necessarily agree with us, maybe just come to terms and ... realize they don’t have an argument against [SBG] that will work.”

In addition to administration, teachers perceived a second layer of top-down decision-makers squelching their voice. Teachers contended that the early adopters of SBG received “preferential treatment” and were “somewhat listened to,” while simultaneously rejecting concerns and ideas from their colleagues. For example, Albert reported that a member of his department was among the first wave of teachers interested in SBG and insisted he create the new grading scales. Albert asserted, “they shoved it down our throats and the rest of our people in our department ... didn’t get to have any input.” Similarly, Tyler lamented that teachers who piloted initial SBG practices created policies that “the rest of us [were] just expected to follow along with.” He continued, “It doesn’t create a trusting environment.... It adds to the miscommunication and mistrust and resentment.”

## A BELL CURVE OF BUY-IN

Participants described a continuum of support among Central High School teachers, ranging from those who “believe in it wholeheartedly” to those threatening to “get out of education completely.” Most Central teachers fell somewhere near the middle of the spectrum. This “huge, huge range” of beliefs existed not only throughout each department at Central High School, but within the SBG leadership team, as well. Albert mentioned that the SBG leadership team included “people that volunteered to be on the committee because they didn’t want somebody else to make decisions for them,” as well as people who “buy into and believe it hook, line, and sinker, heart and soul.”

**Wholehearted enthusiasm.** A small group of Central teachers were not only supportive of SBG, but were on the frontlines of implementing and promoting SBG practices. Administrators shared that a group of teachers “were very interested” in SBG from its inception, catalyzing changes at the grassroots level. Additionally, Tyler indicated that “some teachers ... wholeheartedly bought it and cannot speak well enough about it,” emphasizing that this small but influential group included both new and veteran teachers. One thing remained consistent in participants’ descriptions of teachers on both ends of the buy-in spectrum: unwavering beliefs about what great education should be.

**On the verge of breaking.** Participants consistently referenced a small but vocal group of teachers who were so distraught about the changing grading practices that they were “inches away from absolute rebellion.” The majority of this vehement group seemed to be experienced teachers who were nearing retirement. As Keely described, such teachers believed they were “not broken,” so new grading mandates seemed to undermine their time-tested teaching methods. Teachers strongly against SBG voiced to numerous colleagues that they would rather quit their jobs—even switch careers—than implement SBG. As Albert put it, such teachers “say they are going to quit. They’re done. They’re not going to do this. Explicative, explicative, explicative.” When describing his colleagues’ strong emotional reactions to SBG, Albert reflected, “They are very concerned that this is going to take their passion away.... You have people who are really sad. They’re going through a grieving process.”

Both teachers and administrators voiced that the strongest resisters “will need to either retire or leave” because their beliefs not only prevented themselves, but also their colleagues, from moving forward. One teacher explained, “[They are] throwing anchors in the boat instead of off the side of the boat. We don’t need people here that are going to help us sink the ship.” The majority of teachers, however, were neither undermining school efforts nor shouting from the rooftops; this group acceded, “I don’t want to do this, but I’m not going to go find another job. I’m going to figure out how to make this work, but I’m going to do the minimum that I can do.”

**Cautious compliance.** Administrators and teachers agreed that while the majority of teachers were compliant with Central’s new grading policies, genuine belief in the system was still catching up. Albert asserted that “some people were doing [SBG] out of compliance only,” himself included. He conceded, “I’m a rule follower, so ... I’m going to do what you tell me to do. I still am not sold 100% that going to all standards is the way to go.... But I’m almost there.” From Tyler’s point of view, the acquiescent culture stemmed from “limited teacher voice,” which “created an environment where [teachers] are waiting to be told what to do.”

Caleb was aware of the lack of buy-in, yet he believed actions must precede beliefs. He stated, “[Teachers] are not really going to do [SBG] until we force them to do it.” Similarly, Nathan shared, “I don’t think the buy-in is going to happen until we’re actually in the thick of it.” The concept of doing before believing came to fruition with one department that began as “the biggest resisters” and eventually became the “department that’s having the most success with standards.” The general perception among participants was that “more and more people are getting on board” with the concept of SBG, yet teachers remained apprehensive to adopt all of its ensuing practices.

#### TEACHERS UNDERSTOOD THE “WHY,” BUT STRUGGLED WITH THE “HOW”

The purpose of SBG at Central High School was well articulated by Central teachers, almost verbatim from the SBG handbook. The same rationale was reiterated multiple times by multiple participants, including those both in favor of and opposed to SBG.

Although teachers could easily regurgitate the rationale for SBG, many still struggled to put theory into practice. As Caleb described it, Central's biggest barrier to SBG was "that mindset [of] a really traditional high school teacher.... That's just not how they were trained." Similarly, Keely believed many teachers maintained a points-based mindset when developing assessments, and Cassy paraphrased common complaints that "We've always been successful with points and percentages.... Why would we mess with that?" Although the current Central grading policy allowed employability skills to count towards up to 10% of a student's final grade, teachers remained "really worried" about student behaviors and expressed "that we're going to create a lazier student." Specifically, Central teachers lamented the policy allowing students to reassess, which Nathan pointed out as a "huge, huge roadblock" for teachers who believe students will "see what's on [the test] and then retake it."

## MACRO-LEVEL WINS EXPOSED MICRO-LEVEL BARRIERS

To reach the goal of complete SBG implementation, school leaders worked to remove systems-level barriers involving curriculum guides, schedules, and electronic grade books. As SBG gained traction, classroom-level barriers became worrisome for teachers. In particular, teachers desired improvements with grading scale conversions and subsequent postsecondary implications.

**Barriers were removed at the systems level.** Administrators and teacher leaders worked to remove barriers and create small wins for teachers at the macro-level. One commonly mentioned success was receiving time and flexibility to "define courses" by selecting priority standards and developing curriculum guides. A second systems-level support provided—yet needing refinement—was the manipulation of the school schedule to provide time for academic interventions. Instead of large study halls, students could be placed in tiered levels of support to help them meet course standards. Teachers communicated a desire for increased intervention time, and although the limited time led to a heavy focus on reassessment, Nathan indicated that the designated intervention time was "becoming more and more meaningful." A third barrier removed was the electronic grade book, which now had the ability to record standards-based grades that would convert to a final letter grade. Specifically, teachers now had the ability to use something other than an average of all acquired points to calculate a final course grade.

**Barriers still existed at the classroom level.** The biggest barrier identified by almost every participant was the creation of a common grading scale; there was an overwhelming sense of pressure to create the scale in a timely manner and with accurate conversion grades. At the time of interviews (spring 2019), the conversion scale was still being finalized by the SBG leadership team. Teachers were feeling a sense of panic regarding impending scale-dependent deadlines, such as writing and using proficiency scales for each priority standard. Furthermore, "a lot of the apprehension" stemmed from the proposed conversion grades, particularly that a "beginning" score of 1 turned into a passing grade of 60%, D. Tyler noted that his department typically gave an initial formative assessment, and "generally the scores are

around 1.5. Well, right there, they have already passed the class.... They can learn absolutely nothing in class and still [pass]." Albert further lamented, "We're giving everybody a level one if they look at you right." Conversely, he believed an "exemplary" score of 4 "was too hard to get."

Another continuous barrier was the community's perception that Central students were disadvantaged for postsecondary opportunities. Caleb and Thomas disputed this prevalent complaint, emphasizing that Central would continue producing typical transcripts with letter grades and GPAs. Albert, however, discussed postsecondary implications arising from the classroom level:

One of the biggest fights for standards is the one is too easy and the four is too hard....

That's not fair to the kid across town that goes to [West] High School that all they have to do is do what the teacher says and the teacher is going to give them a 98 and they get an A. And they're competing to get into [major universities]. They're competing for scholarships. Apples aren't equaling oranges over here.

Throughout all implementation barriers, teachers' apprehensions shared a common thread: time. A comment from a teacher at the administrator-teacher town hall summarized it nicely: "We need time. This takes a lot of time to set up."

## Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explain the experiences of high school teachers and administrators in the midst of transitioning to standards-based grading practices. Central High School appears to have a history of strategic decisions leading up to the forthcoming full SBG implementation deadline set forth by administration. Our intent in this case study was to understand how leadership actions aligned with Kotter's (2012) steps of change as a potential framework for future school leaders to consider. Table 3 depicts Kotter's steps, each aligned with themes and recommendations derived from data collection and analysis.

TABLE 3

Kotter's Steps for Organizational Change Aligned with Themes and Findings

<b>KOTTER'S STEPS</b>	<b>RELATED THEMES</b>	<b>OUR RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS</b>
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<p>Establishing urgency</p>	<p>Second implementation wave created a sense of urgency</p>	<p>Set an aggressive deadline (with manageable action steps) to initiate action.</p>
<p>Create the guiding team</p>	<p>Voices heard and unheard: Staff perceived different sources of decision-makers</p>	<p>Invite all stakeholder groups (e.g., teachers, parents, students) to discuss and create grading policies.</p>
<p>Develop vision and strategy</p>	<p>Teachers understood the “why,” but struggled with the “how”</p>	<p>Create a clear, simple definition and rationale for grading practices. Communicate this purpose with all stakeholders at every opportunity.</p>
<p>Communicate for change</p>	<p>Voices heard and unheard: Staff perceived different sources of decision-makers</p> <p>Various degrees of buy-in</p>	<p>Use as many channels as possible to communicate with stakeholders. Then, double your efforts.</p> <p>Create multiple avenues for stakeholder feedback. Make it clear which decisions were a result of such feedback.</p> <p>Leverage the middle-of-the-spectrum group to be part of key decisions and get others on board.</p> <p>Validate teachers’ values and expertise by communicating what will</p>

not change and explaining how new policies can uphold long-held beliefs.

Empower action

Teachers understood the “why,” but struggled with the “how”

Macro-level wins exposed micro-level barriers

Provide a framework of progressive action steps for teachers, including identifying priority standards, creating proficiency scales, designing standards-based assessments and reassessments, aligning instruction with standards, and revising classroom expectations and procedures.

Establish ongoing time and support (formal and job-embedded) for teachers to plan and implement desired action steps.

Provide systems-wide support, such as reteaching and reassessment during an intervention period, to help teachers manage new grading expectations.

Provide avenues for consistent two-way communication.

Get feedback from multiple stakeholder groups while designing grading scales. Then, pilot the scales in all content areas, continuing to solicit feedback.

Generate short-term wins

A bell curve of buy-in

Celebrate small wins as teachers progress through the desired action steps.

Consolidate gains	A bell curve of buy-in	Explicitly connect new actions with recent successes to generate buy-in among cautiously compliant teachers.
Anchor new approaches in the culture	A bell curve of buy-in	After ample support and two-way communication, provide those not on board with an exit plan.

Quality two-way communication is at the heart of the first four steps, laying the groundwork for meaningful change. While school leaders may need to catalyze a sense of urgency by establishing deadlines, additional stakeholders must be intimately involved with creating, communicating, piloting, and revising the vision and action steps. Communication between administrators and teachers remains essential as teachers shift from talk to action, and administrators must provide deliberate time, support, and affirmations while working towards new cultural norms. As a result of understanding the experiences teachers and administrators in the midst of transitioning to standards-based grading practices at Central High School, we offer three further recommendations for school leadership teams considering a similar journey.

## BLOW OFF THE COBWEBS AND GET STARTED

According to Peters and Buckmiller (2014), implementing standards-based grading must be purposeful, well communicated, and done within a reasonable timeline. Despite teachers' sense of panic towards the impending implementation deadline, it appears to have enhanced the sense of urgency to change in a way that resonated with teachers. Although it was already a requirement for teachers to assess and report based on standards, formerly complacent teachers began complying with this expectation once a deadline was communicated. Without the implementation deadline established by administrators, Central may have continued the trend of "dipping in" their toes and then "pick[ing] a different toe."

Central's unique multiple year piecemeal implementation approach created a context in which teachers did not appear to be surprised that SBG was eventually an expectation, yet the impending administrator-issued deadline still created tension among some teachers. While "blow off the cobwebs" leadership is needed to establish a firm implementation timeline, administrators should demonstrate reciprocal accountability (Elmore, 2004) in that for every expectation placed upon teachers, leaders have a responsibility to provide support and consolidate wins towards that end.

## UNDERSTAND STAFF NEEDS AND PROVIDE TEACHER SUPPORT

Previous studies document the need for schools to go slow in order to go fast while providing ample support for teachers along the way (Townesley, Buckmiller, & Cooper, 2019; Ulrich, 2012; Weaver, 2018). One potential temptation for leaders is to feel as though the “job is mostly done” once the vision has been shared and a guiding coalition has been established (Kotter, 2012). However, school administrators must stay in tune with staff needs throughout each step of the implementation journey (Ulrich, 2012; Weaver, 2018), not only as a means of celebrating short-term wins, but also to help teachers successfully transition from “why” to “how.”

Rinkema and Williams (2019) provide a Know, Understand and Do (KUD) framework for implementing standards-based learning that could be used as a progressive checklist for supporting teachers. Although Central High School provided a similar list of action steps and outlined a professional development plan to help teachers meet each requirement, stronger two-way communication will be needed to make the vision stick and ensure newly adopted grading practices become the norm. For example, Central High School teachers expressed frustration over not being able to move forward with redesigning assessments, a time-consuming task, until the grading committee agreed upon the building-wide proficiency scale. In the eyes of teachers, the administrator-imposed full-implementation deadline continued to grow closer while holding off on a key decision impeded progress. Adept principals and district office leaders will keep both hands on the wheel to understand staff needs and turn teacher crises into quickly resolved opportunities to celebrate small wins. In the meantime, it would behoove leaders to embrace the frequency discomfort that comes from leading second-order change.

## BE COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

Central's change actions appear to have been well-received by teachers in relation to Kotter's (2012) earliest steps. Through increasing urgency, building a grading team to guide the change, getting the right vision and communicating for buy-in, teachers and administrators understand the intended purpose behind standards-based grading. While a number of macro-level barriers at the building level have been addressed, teachers expressed overcoming several key classroom-level issues to be a strong bottleneck. One administrator lamented that high school teachers are accustomed to grading with points and percentages, a potential encumbrance exasperated by literature suggesting teachers are used to making grading decisions in isolation with few expectations of building-wide consistency (Link, 2019). In addition, SBG implementation details at the high school level are often amplified due to unique factors such as grade point average, class rank, and athletic eligibility (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). As such, high school administrators should be comfortable with being uncomfortable as they navigate often uncharted territory. Because younger teachers tend to view SBG more favorably when compared to their more experienced colleagues (Hany et al., 2016; Hill, 2018), astute principals may consider creating “critical friend groups” (Bambino, 2002) to increase

teacher-to-teacher support opportunities and expedite common implementation question response time.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study substantiate the need for future research in two areas. First, the current case study addressed the successes and challenges of a high school in the midst of its standards-based grading implementation process. The long-term success of Central's grading changes is to be determined, therefore we recommend future studies follow a school from the beginning to the end in order to provide practitioners with implementation steps and pitfalls across all of Kotter's (2012) stages of organizational change, particularly the final two: don't let up, and make it stick.

Finally, school leaders struggle to close the gap between recommended grading practices and teachers' "long-held belief systems" (Knight & Cooper, 2019, p. 4), therefore we recommend future researchers attempt to understand the conditions in which teachers feel most and least comfortable with this change. Previous research has documented the barriers secondary school administrators anticipate when transitioning to standards-based grading (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Townsley et al., 2019; Weaver, 2018), however understanding the sequence of professional development content needed to change teacher belief and practices has yet to be determined.

## Conclusion

Central leadership has established a strong vision for SBG, built a guiding coalition to support the work, and started to empower action with the intent of celebrating short-term wins. While not perfect nor necessarily linear, Kotter's framework appears to be a step in the right direction for high school leaders desiring to make change stick with standards-based grading.

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