

Introduction to the Special Issue: Exploring Current and Future Classroom Grading Practices in K-12 Schools

Matt Townsley
Special Issue Guest Editor
University of Northern Iowa, USA

Since its inception in 2016, the *Journal of School Administration Research and Development (JSARD)* has focused on a range of topics within school leadership and administration, including grading and assessment. In this special issue, *JSARD* readers will benefit from understanding where the field of grading has been in the past ten years and where it may be headed in the future. Through invited and contributed manuscripts, *JSARD* continues to position itself as an established open-access journal empowering researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to improve K-12 schools.

BACKGROUND OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Grading in K-12 schools is one of the most private experiences for teachers and has been called “the third rail” in education because it is so deeply rooted in tradition (Erickson, 2010). Brookhart and colleagues (2016) reviewed over a century of grading research and found that “grades assess a multidimensional construct containing both cognitive and non-cognitive factors reflecting what teachers value in student work” (p. 803). In response to these all-encompassing grading practices, Link and Guskey (2022) have reported that more schools are implementing standards-based grading to better communicate how well students have mastered academic standards. A search within the Institute of Education Sciences ERIC database suggests that the number of researchers investigating standards-based grading practices has sharply increased in the past 10 years.

Since 2016, when Brookhart and colleagues published their summary of grading research in *Review of Educational Research (RER)*, the world has experienced a global pandemic that induced emergency remote learning for schools across the globe. Stemming from these rapid changes to the student educational experience, state departments of education provided guidance to districts on their guiding principles, student advancement, and how to determine letter grades (Townsley & Kunnath, 2022). During the peak of COVID-19, some schools enacted “do no harm grading” practices that provided students with more flexibility in their submission deadlines and grace in the learning process (Townsley, 2020). A strong focus on equity within grading has emerged (Feldman, 2019; 2020), with a number of schools changing their grading practices in line with other more equitable educational practices and policies (Candelaria, 2022; King, 2022). While preliminary research suggests many of these emergency-influenced grading shifts may be temporary, flexible grading practices appear to remain relevant beyond the pandemic (Kunnath et al., 2026). Celebrating the tenth anniversary of *JSARD* and one decade following the publication of Brookhart and colleagues’ *RER* paper, the current issue provides insights on the condition of K-12 grading practices in 2026 and beyond.

EXPLORING CURRENT AND FUTURE GRADING PRACTICES IN K-12 SCHOOLS

This special issue includes research articles, scholarly and critical essays, and commentaries that explore the challenges and opportunities in the field of K-12 grading over the past 10 years and in the years ahead. The articles in this special issue also offer practical knowledge and guidance for school leaders and provide researchers and policymakers with an enhanced theoretical understanding of grading practices in K-12 schools.

In the feature article of this special issue, renowned assessment and grading scholar Susan Brookhart presents an essay exploring additions to the grading research literature observed in the decade since the comprehensive review in 2016 (Brookhart et al., 2016). Researchers in the field will appreciate this update as an opportunity to consider the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a continued focus on standards-based grading within the literature, and future directions for grading research. I am personally grateful to Dr. Brookhart for contributing this timely essay describing a growing interest in grading practices, while also challenging researchers to continue exploring this important topic empirically.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue illuminate the promise and persistent challenges of grading reform. Link and colleagues (2026) add a broad stakeholder perspective to the conversation through survey data from more than 20,000 participants across 10 school districts, revealing substantial gaps among administrators, teachers, parents, support staff, and students regarding the role of behavior in grades. Their findings highlight the need for greater stakeholder alignment, student voice, and a continued focus on equity-centered grading policies. Examining grading practices from a different perspective, Kollman and colleagues (2026) analyze high school gradebook data and find frequent discrepancies between students' summative assessment performance and final course grades, with grade inflation occurring more often than grade deflation. Their results raise important questions about the accuracy and fairness of traditional point-based grading systems. Beyond K–12 classrooms, VanDevender (2026) investigates how undergraduate teacher education programs prepare future educators for standards-based grading, proposing a continuum that ranges from exposure to fully aligned programmatic integration. Together, these articles underscore the interconnected nature of grading reform, spanning policy, classroom practice, and educator preparation.

The special issue also explores implementation, innovation, and alternatives to traditional grading systems. Percell (2026) offers a cautionary case study of a district that abandoned standards-based grading after a decade-long effort, demonstrating how even carefully planned reforms can falter when implementation challenges, communication difficulties, and technological limitations undermine long-term support. Carney and Shume (2026) contribute a conceptual analysis of methods used to determine proficiency on individual standards, comparing literature-informed approaches and introducing Boolean Logic Gates as a novel framework for communicating student learning. Piantaggini (2026) examines the notion of grade “weaponization” through a practitioner-research lens, documenting how ungrading, self-assessment, flexible deadlines, and retake opportunities may reduce the harmful effects of permanent grades and better support student learning.

Finally, *JSARD* editor-in-chief Josh Kunnath and I (2026) propose a 5-P framework for school leaders to start and sustain grading reform. Our framework starts with establishing a guiding coalition that develops an understanding of why grading needs to change, followed by a multi-step process of establishing grading policies, implementing these grading policies over time, and providing sustained support through feedback loops. We believe school leaders will benefit from this framework as they guide educators in their local context with practical steps beyond attending a grading workshop or participating in a book study.

Collectively, the eight articles in this special issue advance the field's understanding of grading reform by addressing fundamental questions of equity, accuracy, implementation, and teacher preparation, while offering empirical evidence and practical pathways for reimagining how grades can better support student learning in 2026 and beyond. I hope you enjoy reading this special issue that explores current and future classroom grading practices in K-12 schools!

REFERENCES

- Brookhart, S.M. (2026). Changes in K-12 grading research since 2016. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 54-62. <https://doi.org/10.32674/yvxznm80> *
- Brookhart, S. M., Guskey, T. R., Bowers, A. J., McMillan, J. H., Smith, J. K., Smith, L. F., Stevens, M. T., & Welsh, M. E. (2016). A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 803-848. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316672069>
- Candelaria, E. (2022, November). APS dips its toe into equitable grading. *Albuquerque Journal*. <https://www.abqjournal.com/2552844/ex-pilot-program-focuses-on-the-students-mastery-of-a-subject.html>
- Carney, S., & Shume, T. (2026). Boolean logic gates: A new method of grade calculation for standards-based grading. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 121-130. <https://doi.org/10.32674/6j6j7f90> *
- Erickson, J.A. (2010). Grading practices: The third rail. *Principal Leadership*, 10(7), 22-26.
- Feldman, J. (2019). Beyond standards-based grading: Why equity must be part of grading reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100(8), 52-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719846890>
- Feldman, J. (2020). Taking the stress out of grading. *Educational Leadership*, 78(1), 14-20.

- King, G. (2022, November). Fewer D's and F's at Liberty High with equitable grading. *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. <https://www.thegazette.com/k/fewer-ds-and-fs-at-liberty-high-with-equitable-grading/>
- Kollman, A., Sinner, E., Nurmi, H., & O'Shea, C. (2026). A matter of standards: Addressing inconsistencies in grading practices in high school English, mathematics, science, and social studies courses. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 105-120. <https://doi.org/10.32674/ftm8de57> *
- Kunnath, J., Townsley, M., & Radunzel, J. (2026). Silver lining or missed opportunity? A mixed methods study of COVID-19 school closures and grading reform efforts in K-12 schools. *Journal of School Leadership*. Online First. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846261428221>
- Link, L. J. & Guskey, T. R. (2022). Is standards-based grading effective? *Theory into Practice*, 61(4), 406-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2022.2107338>
- Link, L. J., Simonds, R. M., & Navarrete-Burks, L. A. (2026). Disrupting the hidden costs of behavioral grading: Uncovering stakeholder perceptions to advance equity. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 74-83. <https://doi.org/10.32674/1db46k56> *
- Percell, J. (2026). The retrograde pendulum: Reversing course on standards-based grading. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 84-89. <https://doi.org/10.32674/7an6dt57> *
- Piantaggini, L. (2026). De-weaponizing grades through teacher tinkering and student insight. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 131-141. <https://doi.org/10.32674/bs6x1g46> *
- Townsley, M., & Kunnath, J. (2022). Exploring state department of education grading guidance during COVID-19: A model for future emergency remote learning. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30,(163). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.7448>
- Townsley, M., & Kunnath, J. (2026). The 5 P's of starting and sustaining grading reform. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 63-73. <https://doi.org/10.32674/q6wpb124> *
- Townsley, M. (2020). Grading principles in pandemic-era learning: Recommendations and implications for secondary school leaders. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 5(S1), 8-14. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jsard.v5iS1.2760>
- VanDevender, K. J. (2026). From fragmented to aligned: A standards-based grading continuum in teacher preparation. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 11(S1), 90-104. <https://doi.org/10.32674/zar92s63> *

*Denotes an article published in this special issue

MATT TOWNSLEY, EdD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership in the Department of Learning, Leadership and Community at the University of Northern Iowa. His current research interests include educational leadership and classroom grading practices. Email: matt.townsley@uni.edu
