

## **The Retrograde Pendulum: Reversing Course on Standards-based Grading**

Jay C. Percell

*Illinois State University, USA*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

This commentary details one large, suburban school district that, after a decade-long commitment to implementing standards-based grading (SBG), reversed course, abandoned the initiative, and returned to traditional grading. This article provides a postmortem of the ambitious reform effort, drawing upon previous research and recent district survey data from teachers and parents. Among the factors leading to the reform's reversal are that, despite a carefully planned, multi-year rollout, the initiative was unable to resolve persistent concerns about implementation inconsistency, student motivation, and the technology reporting platform. Internal pressures were exacerbated by external turmoil, including personnel turnover and the COVID-19 pandemic, and district leadership ultimately acquiesced to widespread faculty and staff dissatisfaction with reporting measures, grade inflation, and ineffective communication of student progress. This district's experience offers important lessons for school leaders, emphasizing that systemic change requires fidelity of implementation accompanied by cultural adoption, long-term resilience and adaptability measures, and a commitment to instructional integrity.

**Keywords:** standards-based grading, grading reform, educational leadership, grading practices

---

For over a century, the A-F grading system has been the primary language of academic achievement, one deeply embedded in school culture, and one that informs the identities of students and teachers alike (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). It is against this backdrop that modern grading reform efforts, such as standards-based grading (SBG), have sought to shift the focus from accumulating points to providing specific, equitable feedback on student learning (Mehra, 2024; O'Connor, 2018). While SBG adoption has become widespread, the path to sustainable implementation remains challenging.

This commentary provides a postmortem of one such effort in the "Diamond Ridge School District" (pseudonym)—a large, diverse district previously featured as a case study during its initial SBG rollout (Percell & Meyer, 2021). After investing 10 years of time, research, and resources, district leadership abandoned its SBG grading reform and returned to traditional grading, prompted by dissatisfaction from parents, students, and teachers. This story highlights a critical lesson: For systemic change to endure, a well-intentioned plan must be accompanied by a profound and authentic shift in school and local community culture. Without deep cultural adoption, even the most promising reforms can fail.

### **INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR POTENTIAL PROMISE**

Diamond Ridge leadership's decision to implement SBG reform was made through a deliberate, thoughtful, and patient process. Aware of the shortcomings of traditional grading methods and knowing a wide-reaching reform effort would take multiple years to implement correctly, district administration began to lay the groundwork for a strong foundation of understanding, open communication, and community support. These efforts included conducting district-wide book studies, hosting several parent-teacher information sessions, and creating a teacher-administrator task force charged with analyzing district grading practices and identifying leveled learning targets. Informational and professional development offerings on SBG began in 2014, two years before any actual reform implementation in Diamond Ridge schools. This development was undertaken to open community discourse on issues related to traditional grading practices and to communicate information regarding anticipated upcoming changes (Percell & Meyer, 2021).

After these informational offerings, Diamond Ridge initiated the grading rollout in a bottom-up manner, beginning with one district-wide subject area, elementary mathematics, piloting SBG in 2016. Teachers were given the option to implement SBG into other subjects as well, but it was not required. Year two of the rollout expanded SBG to all elementary-level subjects, and year three expanded SBG to all four of the district's middle and junior high schools. By year five, it was anticipated that the two Diamond Ridge high schools would also begin adopting SBG. However, leadership realized it might take more time to implement across all departments at the secondary level.

Despite careful planning and attempts at transparent communication of the reform's rationale, the SBG rollout faced resistance at every step. The district partnered with educational researchers, including the author, who collected longitudinal data from teachers, administrators, and parents throughout the implementation. It was this group that studied the Diamond Ridge reform effort as a case study, identifying common frustrations with SBG and making recommendations for potential resolutions (Percell & Meyer, 2021). Among them, five primary issues arose: teacher buy-in; logistical challenges of SBG gradebooks; securing parental buy-in; anxieties related to college acceptance; and student motivation. Many district teachers initially adopted a "wait-and-see" approach to SBG and never seemed to fully embrace the reform and its underlying rationale. Furthermore, district reporting platforms were initially designed for traditional grading and were ill-suited for reporting SBG.

Additionally, parents and local community members expressed confusion about SBG and a lack of trust in a system that removed the well-known, traditional A-F letter grades. They expressed uncertainties and fears that SBG would demotivate students and lead them to minimize effort, fumble genuine learning opportunities, and ultimately hinder their college and career readiness. One article highlighted the community's resistance at the time, citing general confusion and perceptions that SBG failed to individualize learning (Denham, 2019). While the case study sought to provide meaningful insight and potential resolutions for SBG issues, the ultimate decision to reverse course demonstrates that these challenges proved more lasting than initially anticipated.

## **MATRICULATING REFORM AND EXTERNAL DISRUPTIONS**

The SBG reform initiative in Diamond Ridge faced more than just internal resistance; it also encountered a barrage of simultaneous external disruptions. As the rollout was just beginning in schools, district leadership changed. The Diamond Ridge superintendent resigned in 2019, and in the months that followed, several other key leadership positions turned over, including assistant superintendent, director of secondary schools, and chief financial officer. Diamond Ridge filled most of these roles with individuals who maintained a desire to see the grading reform through and still believed SBG was the most effective method for reporting students' specific skills related to learning targets and content standards, especially given the district's investment in the initiative to that point.

In addition to personnel changes, Diamond Ridge also switched to a new student information system (SIS). In 2019, the contract with their previous SIS provider expired. While the new SIS was not selected solely because of the ongoing SBG initiative, it likely played some part in the decision to choose an SIS touted as more closely aligned with SBG reporting than the previous system. As with any new software, integration and familiarity with new processes take time, and every piece of district information was affected by this change, not solely the teachers' learning management system and how their grades were imported.

Furthermore, amid this multi-layered reorganization, Diamond Ridge—along with the rest of the world—was blindsided by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many other districts, the pandemic halted face-to-face learning environments across Diamond Ridge and necessitated quickly pivoting to online instruction at every level—a pivot that district faculty and staff were not necessarily equipped to make, and one that the district was not necessarily prepared to facilitate. Nonetheless, like countless schools and districts across the country, the Diamond Ridge administration, faculty, and staff threw themselves heroically into meeting these challenges and doing their best to support their students, colleagues, and communities during a time of global crisis.

On a national level, the forcible move to remote and hybrid learning also exposed the authenticity of traditional grading, and best practices relating to grading in a time of crisis were called into question (Blackwelder, 2020). Many districts adopted "do no harm" approaches to grading, focusing on grace and flexibility over punitive measures (Hatch, 2020). While philosophically aligned with the inherent equity goals of SBG, this chaotic period likely added to the confusion in Diamond Ridge, blurring the lines between intentional, standards-based assessment and emergency-driven leniency.

## **RETURN TO NORMAL: A TRADITIONAL RESURGENCE**

The return to in-person schooling did not bring a return to normalcy in Diamond Ridge so much as it brought unprecedented levels of teacher and student burnout and anxiety, along with a collective feeling of uncertainty about the very purpose of school. In this emotionally turbulent time, the desire to continue the complex and seemingly confusing grading reform initiative had cooled considerably. The logistical demands of communicating and understanding students' progress through a complicated LMS became burdensome for teachers, parents, and students throughout the district. The call to return to more traditional forms of grading intensified, as the local community sought to regain a measure of familiarity amid an overwhelmingly complex time.

Diamond Ridge administration held several meetings with the NEA-affiliated teachers association, and the district agreed to revisit the grading initiative. As part of a community strategic planning survey, public opinion was sought from parents, teachers, and certified staff members on a range of topics they felt Diamond Ridge should prioritize in its strategic planning over the next five years. The district administration designed the survey, and results were posted in a publicly accessible online space; well over 2,600 individuals responded. Although parental reactions to questions about the clarity of district grades and SBG were relatively neutral, there was a distinct consensus when asked about interest in forming an SBG focus group—an overwhelming 77% responded “no.”

## **DATA OF DISSENT: TEACHERS REPORT SBG FAILINGS**

The survey instruments for faculty and certified staff sought more specific feedback about the practical implementation of SBG across the district, and the responses were also very consistent. Teachers and staff voiced widespread dissatisfaction with how the SBG initiative was working. The most common note of disapproval concerned grade inflation. They felt that SBG was leading to rampant grade inflation, that their grades did “not accurately reflect what a student knows,” and that grades were “not accurately displaying student academic performance.”

Similarly, teachers were frustrated with the district gradebook and the way SBGs were being reported. Teachers overwhelmingly felt that letter grades associated with the SBG reports calculated by the district gradebook were not accurate reflections of students' abilities and sometimes were not even accurate reflections of their own entered SBG scores. One teacher respondent explained that the gradebook “does not seem to have the ability to correctly calculate grades in a SBG format.” The teacher went on to voice their concern that “it is destroying student motivation and generally not achieving the goals that were set forth with this method of reporting.”

One quantitative survey question asked whether teachers felt the summative standards-based grade in the district gradebook accurately reflected students' achievement, to which 60% responded negatively. Furthermore, nearly half of all teachers (49%) felt that a traditional gradebook would allow for more specific feedback regarding students' strengths and weaknesses related to learning standards (see Figure 1).

Teachers remarked that the enduring confusion and misunderstanding about SBG among parents, students, and even some teachers was leading to decreased faculty morale and disengagement from the surrounding community. One teacher remarked, “Parents don't understand it.” They further explained, “Especially parents who had negative experiences in public schools, themselves. If they don't understand their kids' grades, then they feel even more detached from the learning process, which hinders our equity goals.”

Furthermore, not only did teachers largely admit that SBG practices were being implemented inconsistently among departments and/or individual teachers, but that the entire grading system was negatively impacting students' academic achievement. Teachers argued the system was counterproductive, as students had “little understanding of how their grade was calculated” and became less engaged. One noted that the gradebook, whose “sole purpose is to clearly communicate student achievement,” was instead holding back that communication. The teacher went on to say, “The SBG instruction and assessments have made solid improvements to our classes, but the reporting has been broken, flawed, and actively hurting students since we started doing it.”

To that end, teachers and staff largely expressed continued belief in standards-based instruction, the fourth-highest category in teachers' qualitative responses. One such response conveys this belief: “I think the ideas behind SBG are good—targets, reassessments, minimization of formative assessments, but I cannot state enough how much I dislike SBG reporting.”

Some teachers even reiterated their belief in SBG; however, the inconsistency in how the initiative was applied and the confusion it engendered outweighed any instructional benefit. One teacher stated,

I wholeheartedly believe in standards-based teaching and standards-based assessment but cannot wrap my head around the ineffective attempt at standards-based reporting. The work we have done over the past 10 years to implement standards-based teaching and assessment has allowed us to focus on essential skills, making courses and assessment more consistent.

This teacher then continued,

We are doing everything we can to implement SBG in a way that is best serving our students. However, the reporting aspect is beyond our control. [The gradebook] is incredibly overwhelming for students and parents. They do not have a clear picture of how to improve or in what areas they are deficient—and that’s what the rubrics are for.

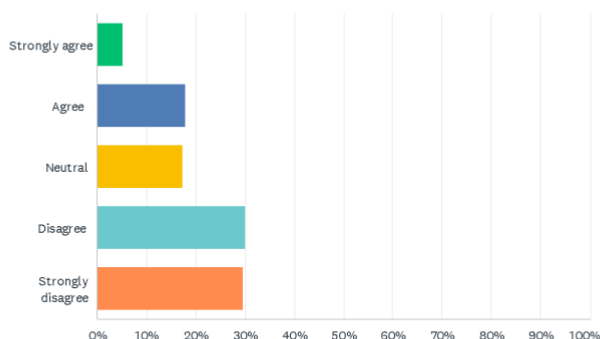
Figure 1

### High School Teacher Survey Responses on Grade Accuracy

HS Instruction, Assessment, and Reporting Survey

Q38 When I enter ratings in a standards based grade in [the district gradebook], the summative score accurately represents my students' achievement.

Answered: 213 Skipped: 10



| ANSWER CHOICES    | RESPONSES |     |
|-------------------|-----------|-----|
| Strongly agree    | 5.16%     | 11  |
| Agree             | 17.84%    | 38  |
| Neutral           | 17.37%    | 37  |
| Disagree          | 30.05%    | 64  |
| Strongly disagree | 29.58%    | 63  |
| TOTAL             |           | 213 |

Finally, the teacher added, “I truly hope these surveys are being read and taken seriously. We have felt discouraged at the performative attempts seeking feedback that never actually result in trusting the teachers’ expertise.”

### MESSAGE RECEIVED: THE DECISION TO REVERSE COURSE

The Diamond Ridge leadership was indeed listening, and they took the teacher and staff feedback seriously. An ad hoc grading task force was convened in the summer of 2024 to pore over the survey data and determine a path forward. The task force recommended ending the SBG initiative, and the district administration ultimately agreed, despite having invested a decade’s worth of time and resources in fostering grading and assessment reform.

Beginning that fall, secondary departments were allowed to select their preferred grading format, either returning to a traditional gradebook or continuing with SBG. It was recommended that all teachers in the same department use the same grading format to maintain consistency, especially after the previous confusion and turmoil. In both high schools and all four junior high schools, every department throughout Diamond Ridge elected to return to traditional grading. As one teacher suggested, “Please consider giving teachers a choice of how they decide to report grades. I gave SBG reporting an

honest try over the last 8 years or so, and I honestly believe I was doing it better (using all the SBG tenets) prior to being forced to use SBG reporting.”

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERSHIP**

The story of Diamond Ridge is not necessarily a moratorium on standards-based grading. At the time of reversal, district leadership and most teachers still believed in the merits of standards-based instruction and standards-based assessment. Instead, this story speaks to the enormous challenge of enacting systemic change, especially during times of complex uncertainty, and it offers powerful lessons for other district leaders to consider.

#### **Implication #1: Implementation Fidelity vs. Cultural Adoption**

A plan can be executed perfectly, but if it fails to win the "hearts and minds" of the community, it cannot last. Such was the case with Diamond Ridge. The reform was well-intentioned and executed with a thoughtful, purposeful plan. However, it was never able to completely shift the prevailing culture among community members and even within the schools themselves. This impasse is emblematic of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), which asserts that individuals progress through predictable stages of concern when faced with a new initiative (Hall & Hord, 2020). District parents remained stuck in the highly personal stages of concern, focused on how SBG reform impacted their own children's GPAs and college readiness. Meanwhile, although district leadership provided information and rationale, they were unable to lead stakeholders to higher-level concerns, such as the reform's consequences for deeper student learning. This shows that communication must be a reflexive process that proactively identifies and addresses the specific concerns of each stakeholder group to help them move through deeper levels of adoption (Coburn, 2003).

#### **Implication #2: Major Reforms Must be Built for Resilience, Not Rigidity**

The already-stressed SBG initiative could not withstand the external shocks of a pandemic and the subsequent burnout crisis. It behooves district leaders to ensure that any complex reform efforts are designed with flexibility in mind. As Fullan (2007) deduced, sustainable reform efforts require adaptability. In a volatile educational landscape, initiatives need built-in "off-ramps" or points for modification that allow districts to scale back or adapt during periods of systemic stress without abandoning the project entirely. The Diamond Ridge vote to return to traditional grading was a vote for simplicity in a time of chaos. At the same time, a more resilient reform effort might have envisioned alternative variations or initiative modifications to curtail a complete course reversal.

#### **Implication #3: Pedagogy Must Drive Technology, Not the Reverse**

The widespread dissatisfaction with the district's mandated gradebook was a primary catalyst for the SBG reform's failure. This highlights a critical lesson: a reform is only as strong as the tools that support it. District leaders must ensure that technology effectively supports the instructional needs of their schools, and decisions about adopting technology tools must involve significant input from the teachers who will use them daily. Imposing a cumbersome or misaligned platform can create a constant source of friction that erodes teacher buy-in and turns pedagogical allies into frustrated adversaries.

### **CONCLUSION**

The decision by Diamond Ridge School District to revert to traditional grading after a decade-long commitment to comprehensive SBG reform is a sober reminder of the gap that can exist between a reform's promise and its practical implementation. This district's experience underscores that successful, sustainable change is about more than just adopting a new model; it is a relentless process of communicating a vision, fostering a culture, managing resources and technology, and adapting to a constantly changing educational landscape. For other districts, the story of Diamond Ridge should not be a deterrent to pursuing equitable grading practices, but rather a roadmap to the very real and profound challenges that must be navigated to ensure such important work is sustainable, especially during times of uncertainty.

## REFERENCES

- Blackwelder, A. (2020, May 24). Grading in the new normal w/ Jay Percell. *Grow Beyond Grades*. <https://growbeyondgrades.org/blog/episode-20>
- Coburn, C. E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032006003>
- Denham, R. (2019, December 11). New grading model met with confusion, pushback in unit 5 high schools. *WGLT.org*. <https://www.wgl.org/show/wglts-sound-ideas/2019-12-11/new-grading-model-met-with-confusion-pushback-in-unit-5-high-schools>
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change (4th ed.)*. Teachers College Press.
- Guskey, T. R., & Brookhart, S. M. (Eds.). (2019). *What we know about grading: What works, what doesn't, and what's next*. ASCD.
- Hall, G. E., & Hord, S. M. (2020). *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes (5th ed.)*. Pearson.
- Hatch, K. (2020, April 17). How do we grade during the shutdown? “Do no harm” is the answer. *Association of Washington Principals*. <https://awsp.org/connect/blog/blog-detail/how-do-we-grade-during-the-shutdown-do-no-harm-is-the-answer/>
- Mehra, A. (2024, June 4). There's a more equitable way to grade: Districts should invest in it. *Edsurge*. <https://edsources.org/2024/theres-a-more-equitable-way-to-grade-districts-should-invest-in-it/713086>
- O'Connor, K. (2018). *How to grade for learning: Linking grades to standards (4th ed.)*. Corwin.
- Percell, J. C., & Meyer, B. B. (2021). Resolutions for a new paradigm: Addressing common issues in standards-based grading. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 57(4), 185–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2021.1968692>

---

**JAY C. PERCELL**, EdD, is an Associate Professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. His major research interests are comprised of disciplinary and digital literacies, alternative grading, secondary teacher education, and AI Literacy in the secondary classroom. Email: [jpercel@ilstu.edu](mailto:jpercel@ilstu.edu)

---

Manuscript submitted: **September 30, 2025**

Manuscript revised: **January 23, 2026**

Accepted for publication: **January 26, 2026**