1-1-2022

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Matt Townsley

Joshua Kunnath
Northern Highlands Regional High School

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Townsley, Matt and Kunnath, Joshua, "Exploring State Department Of Education Grading Guidance During Covid-19: A Model For Future Emergency Remote Learning" (2022). *Faculty Publications*. 5318.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/facpub/5318

Exploring State Department of Education Grading Guidance during COVID-19: A Model for Future Emergency Remote Learning

Matt Townsley
University of Northern Iowa
United States

&

Joshua Kunnath
Highland High School
United States

Abstract: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many United States brick-and-mortar schools in Spring 2020 rapidly transitioned to emergency remote learning. School leaders grappled with how grades ought to fit within the many unknowns of K-12 remote education. In some cases, schools modified their grading scales to give students greater flexibility to pass courses, and in other situations, schools offered *incomplete* grades in lieu of failures. During this time, state departments of education (DOEs) provided a variety of guidance documents to their school districts. The purpose of this study was to explore the components of state DOE grading guidance during the Spring 2020 school shutdown, along with the patterns of guidance across states. The researchers applied a grounded theory approach to systematically explore the equivalent of 1,444 pages of documents from 48 state DOE guidelines. The document analysis resulted in three primary categories that influenced state DOE

grading guidance: *guiding principles*, *student advancement*, and *determining grades*. The researchers conclude by presenting and discussing a three-category model for emergency remote learning grading guidelines for K-12 schools. In the event of another pandemic temporarily affecting the delivery of education to students, policymakers may use this model as a starting point for future recommendations.
Keywords: state department of education; grading; graduation; COVID-19; pandemic

Explorando la guía de calificación del departamento de educación estatal durante COVID-19: Un modelo para el futuro aprendizaje remoto de emergencia
Resumen: Debido a la pandemia de COVID-19, muchas escuelas de los Estados Unidos en la primavera de 2020 hicieron una transición rápida al aprendizaje remoto de emergencia. Los líderes escolares lidiaron con cómo las calificaciones deberían encajar dentro de las muchas incógnitas de la educación remota K-12. En algunos casos, las escuelas modificaron sus escalas de calificación para dar a los estudiantes una mayor flexibilidad para aprobar cursos u ofrecieron calificaciones incompletas en lugar de reprobar. Durante este tiempo, los departamentos estatales de educación (DOE) proporcionaron documentos de orientación a sus distritos escolares. El propósito de este estudio fue explorar los componentes de la guía de calificaciones del DOE estatal durante el cierre de escuelas en la primavera de 2020, junto con los patrones de guía en todos los estados. Los investigadores aplicaron un enfoque de *grounded theory* para explorar el equivalente a 1,444 páginas de documentos de 48 pautas estatales del DOE. El análisis de documentos dio como resultado tres categorías principales que influyeron en la guía de calificaciones del DOE estatal: principios rectores, avance de los estudiantes y calificaciones determinantes. Los investigadores concluyen presentando y discutiendo un modelo de tres categorías para las pautas de calificación de aprendizaje remoto de emergencia para las escuelas K-12. En el caso de otra pandemia que afecte temporalmente la entrega de educación a los estudiantes, los formuladores de políticas pueden usar este modelo como punto de partida para futuras recomendaciones.
Palabras clave: departamento estatal de educación; clasificación; graduación; COVID-19; pandemia

Explorando as orientação da secretaria estadual de educação sobre a classificação durante o COVID-19: Um modelo para o futuro aprendizado remoto de emergência
Resumo: Devido à pandemia do COVID-19, muitas escolas dos Estados Unidos na primavera de 2020 fizeram a transição rápida para o aprendizado remoto de emergência. Os líderes das escolas lutaram para saber como as notas deveriam se encaixar nas muitas incógnitas da educação remota K-12. Em alguns casos, as escolas modificaram suas escalas de notas para dar aos alunos maior flexibilidade para passar nos cursos ou ofereceram notas incompletas em vez de reprovações. Durante esse período, as secretarias estaduais de educação (DOEs) forneceram documentos de orientação aos seus distritos escolares. O objetivo deste estudo foi explorar os componentes da orientação de classificação do DOE estadual durante o fechamento das escolas da primavera de 2020, juntamente com os padrões de orientação entre os estados. Os pesquisadores aplicaram uma abordagem de *grounded theory* a para explorar sistematicamente o equivalente a 1.444 páginas de documentos de 48 diretrizes estaduais do DOE. A análise de documentos resultou em três categorias primárias que influenciaram a orientação de classificação do DOE estadual: princípios orientadores, avanço do aluno e notas determinantes. Os pesquisadores concluem apresentando e discutindo um modelo de três categorias para diretrizes de

classificação de ensino remoto de emergência para escolas de ensino fundamental e médio. No caso de outra pandemia afetar temporariamente a oferta de educação aos alunos, os formuladores de políticas podem usar esse modelo como ponto de partida para recomendações futuras.

Palavras-chave: secretaria estadual de educação; classificação; graduação; COVID-19; pandemia

Exploring State Department of Education Grading Guidance during COVID-19: A Model for Future Emergency Remote Learning

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many brick-and-mortar schools across the United States were forced in Spring 2020 to rapidly transition to emergency remote learning (Cahapay, 2020; Schwartz, 2020). Almost immediately, many superintendents reported a need to devise managerial logistics such as ensuring internet access for all families (Lochmiller, 2021). Several months into the pandemic, school leaders expressed concern in areas such as staff care and instructional leadership (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). One area of instructional leadership highlighted by major media outlets included the merits of schools changing their grading practices during the pandemic (Doyne & Gonchar, 2020; St. George, 2020). School leaders grappled with how grades ought to fit within the many unknowns of K-12 remote education. In some cases, schools modified grading scales to give students greater flexibility to pass courses; in other situations, schools offered *incompletes* in lieu of failing grades (Blume, 2020; Miller, 2020; Townsley, 2021). For example, one urban school board voted to award all students either *As* or *incompletes* for the spring (Westneat, 2020), while several districts in Minnesota waived penalties for late assignments and offered additional credit recovery options (Verges, 2021).

Background Literature

Grades are important because they significantly impact decisions that affect students' lives, including retention, college admission, and scholarships (Guskey, 2015; Marzano, 2000). Yet, the factors contributing towards letter grades have been a point of discussion within the literature. A century of research suggests grades have frequently represented a combination of content knowledge, class engagement, and perseverance (Brookhart et al., 2016). In turn, experts in the field have prescribed healthy grading practices that schools should consider, such as separating academic grades from non-academic grades (Guskey, 1994, 2020), abolishing the 100-point scale (Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2013; Reeves et al., 2017), and eliminating penalties for late work (O'Connor et al., 2018; Wormeli, 2011). Many experts in the field are now questioning how grading practices and policies might be influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the school closures from Spring 2020 (Guskey, 2021; Reeves & Feldman, 2020). One method of exploring this influence is to examine the guidance that state departments of education (DOEs) provided their local school districts.

State DOEs regularly distribute resources and regulate schools' adherence to state-approved legislation. Yet, some have noted they have "little control and no proximity" to the school districts they are trying to change (Lusi, 1997, p. 11). Because of their ongoing correspondence with local district leaders and legislators, DOEs are in a unique position to broker policies unique to the state's context. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, state DOEs provided guidance to their school districts on a variety of safety, academic, and other regulatory issues. In addition, they shared a variety of guidance documents to their school districts related to grading. This guidance greatly varied across states by its contents and specificity. Some guidance documents were a few

paragraphs in length, while others were multiple pages describing specific implications for groups such as high school seniors.

Our overall aim in the study was to explore the individual components of each state's DOE grading guidance during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 school shutdown, along with the patterns of guidance across states. By doing so, we aimed to produce a grounded theory of emergency remote learning grading guidelines to aid states and local education agencies (LEAs) in future policy creation. While uncertainty in schools' instructional delivery models remains due to the pandemic, grades will likely continue to be an unquestioned aspect of American education.

Townsley (2020) proposed three grading principles for pandemic-era learning in secondary schools: basing letter grades upon the level at which students have learned a prioritized set of course standards, reporting non-cognitive behaviors such as homework completion and participation separately, if at all; and implementing a grading system emphasizing what students have learned instead of when they have learned it. While these grading principles were informed by relevant literature (e.g., Knight & Cooper, 2019; O'Connor, 2017; Reeves et al., 2017), little appears to be known related to the grading practices implemented at the school setting. This study is significant because it will provide policymakers a framework for future recommendations and researchers with a line of empirical investigation.

Methodology

Study Design

We applied a pragmatist paradigm (Creswell, 2007) to a grounded theory approach with a goal of producing substantive theory. Three traditional stages of coding—open, axial, and selective––were employed inductively, which align to the methods described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Coding was conducted through a memo-writing process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and elements of document analysis, including Bowen's (2009) concept of using documents in "bearing witness to past events" (p. 29), were employed to analyze the numerous state DOE grading guidance documents.

Document analysis was important in this study as grading guidance documents were the sole data type collected and analyzed. Because the pandemic rapidly caused schools to close in an unprecedented manner, state DOEs provided guidance to schools in an expeditious and often iterative manner. As new guidance was released, previous guidance often became quickly outdated. As such, understanding the guidance of this historical event through document analysis may be helpful in drawing significant conclusions from the event. Accordingly, we systematically retrieved and analyzed emergency remote learning guidance documents from 48 state DOEs to formulate a theory to aid states and LEAs in future policy creation.

Data Collection

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of state DOE grading guidance during the spring of 2020, the researchers sought to retrieve guidance from all 50 states. The public nature of guidance from state DOEs allowed for data collection directly from state DOE websites, and when not available, we made public records requests.

We engaged in three stages of systematic web search suggested by Stansfield and colleagues (2016) to ensure a transparent and reproducible approach: 1) planning the search, 2) executing the search, and 3) screening records for relevance. First, we planned the search, which included determining the type of websites that would provide relevant information. We determined that all information must come from a state DOE website. One member of the research team conducted the initial web search. Next, as part of the execution stage, the researcher conducting the search

maintained a record of consistent predefined search terms. Specifically, during September 2020, the researcher used the Google search engine to locate policy and guidance documents available on state DOE websites. The researcher utilized Google to perform the web search because it has been shown to perform as well as or better than its major competitors in delivering relevant information within the first pages of results (Lewandowski, 2015; Wu et al., 2019). The researcher used the following search terms: "state DOE remote learning grading," "state DOE remote learning grading spring 2020," "[specific state name] DOE remote learning guidance spring 2020," "state DOE remote learning graduation requirements," "state DOE remote learning graduation requirements spring 2020," "[specific state name] DOE remote learning graduation requirements," and "[specific state name] DOE remote learning graduation requirements spring 2020." Following the initial search, an additional member of the research team utilized the same search terms to help ensure relevant items were not missed (Stansfield et al., 2016). This resulted in our retrieval of 45 states' guidance documents.

Stansfield and colleagues (2016) proposed the final stage of data collection, which included screening records for relevance and determining which results should be saved for relevance against inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria used were emergency distance learning guidance provided to schools between March 1, 2020, and May 30, 2020. Document formats included web page text, PDFs, word processor files, and PowerPoint files. Documents published before March 1 and after May 30 were excluded, as well as those without any implicit or explicit connection to grading policy guidance. We made a public records request to retrieve the remaining five states' guidance documents using an online form or via electronic mail to the communications contact person noted on the respective DOE website during October 2020. Within the public records query, we requested a copy of any emergency distance learning guidance provided to the state's schools between March 1, 2020, and May 30, 2020. Within one month, three state DOE staff members provided documentation in response to the public records requests. The remaining two states, Hawaii and New Jersey, did not respond to public records requests; therefore, we did not retrieve guidance from these states. As a result, the web search and public records request yielded the equivalent of 1,444 pages of documents from 48 state DOEs.

Data Analysis

One member of the research team initially conducted data analysis, which involved open, axial, and selective coding and included three types of reading presented by Bowen (2009) in his overview of document analysis: skimming, close reading, and analytical reading. The first type, skimming, consisted of scanning the data to gain a general understanding of the data found in the documents. The second type, close reading, entailed differentiating essential information from non-essential information. The third type, analytical reading, consisted of identifying emergent patterns within the essential information.

This researcher's analysis proceeded through a deliberate memo writing process. Throughout each round of memos, the researcher employed a constant comparison analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify similarities and differences within and across the state guidance policies until reaching data saturation. As the iterative analysis progressed, the researcher reread previous memos; added to running code, concept, and then category lists; and developed further memos to continue the analytic process until eventually leading to substantive theory.

Open coding included an initial round of memo writing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that was predominantly descriptive in nature and was used to gain a basic understanding of the documents collected from the 48 states of study. The researcher began by skimming and then close reading each document in its entirety. He then recorded grading-related notes and used the computer *copy* and *paste* functions to transfer all grading-related text from the guidance document to the memo. The

researcher also performed a general text search of each document using the *find field* function (the shortcut *control + F*) and the text "grad" (to ensure the terms *grade*, *grades*, and *grading* were included in the search) to guide the analysis and to ensure no passages explicitly addressing grading were overlooked. This first round of memo writing commenced the creation of a preliminary in-vivo code list (each code was inserted adjacent to the text in the memo and on a separate coding document), which was revised throughout the open coding process. The researcher wrote secondary memos by rereading each state guidance document, rereading the original memo, and then selecting essential passages from the original memo for further coding.

The second analytical stage, axial coding, consisted of a third round of memos that were produced through analytical reading and resulted in an initial concept list. This inductive process of concept creation occurred by using memos to analyze each code with previously collected data. More specifically, the researcher used constant comparison analysis (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) in which analysis progressed through the continual comparison of individual pieces of data of the larger data set. As the axial coding process progressed, the researcher used a memo-writing process to combine multiple codes into a single concept. This process continued until reaching a point of data saturation. At the final stage of analysis, the selective coding stage, the same researcher used memos to explain each element of the developing theory. This began by designating a core category that was deemed integral to the other established categories. Afterward, the researcher used a memo-writing process to link the other established categories around the core category, creating a substantive theory. This process continued until a point of data saturation and to a state in which the researchers felt the theory adequately addressed the topic of study.

Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, one researcher led the data analysis, and the second researcher confirmed the credibility of the analysis by "checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 5). In addition, we established trustworthiness through peer debriefing. An emeritus university professor with expertise in qualitative research and grading acted as a peer debriefer by reviewing the documents and qualitative findings. The peer debriefer provided valuable feedback on the themes to both refine and redirect the interpretation process (Erlandson et al., 1993). For example, we added additional details to the tables to better communicate the number of states that provided each dimension of guidance within the concepts identified. In addition, we added summary statements for each concept to strengthen the analysis.

Results

Through a systematic analysis of the guidance documents with grounded theory methods, we found that the Spring 2020 state DOE grading guidance displayed three overarching categories. The first category, *guiding principles*, represents the primary factors that state DOEs seemed to consider when giving grading guidance to local school districts. These include concepts of *continuity of learning* in the pandemic, *equity considerations* for grading, various degrees of *flexibility,* and *local control* for schools to implement these recommendations. The second category, *student advancement*, represents the emphasis placed on advancing students through the educational system during and after school closures. This category includes the concepts of *high school graduation*, *grade promotion*, and *remediation.* The third category, *determining grades*, constitutes the various forms of grading guidance provided by state DOEs. This category includes specific grading practices that may be described in the literature as "traditional," "alternative," or options that included a blending of both (Kirschenbaum et al., 1971; O'Connor, 2018). Further, states provided this guidance along a continuum of prescription, ranging from suggestions to requirements. Each of these categories is

displayed in Table 1 and described in detail below. A total of 31 state DOEs were represented in all three categories, and seven state DOEs were represented in a single category.

Table 1

Emergent Categories and Concepts from Data Analysis

Categories	Concepts	States represented
Guiding Principles	Continuity of learning, equity considerations, flexibility, local control	46
Student Advancement	High school graduation, grade promotion, remediation	36
Determining Grades	Traditional grading practices, alternative grading practices, blending of traditional and alternative practices	37

Guiding Principles

Overarching grading guiding principles consisted of the concepts of *continuity of learning, equity, flexibility*, and *local control,* and they were present in 46 state DOE guidance documents. Our analysis revealed dimensions within this category that included *major, moderate*, and *minor emphasis* of each guiding principle. We defined major emphasis as a case in which a state DOE referenced the guiding principle multiple times in its guidance, explicitly or implicitly, and emphasized its importance primarily through its implementation detail and specificity. Alternatively, we defined a minor emphasis as a case in which a state DOE referenced the principle minimal times, but at least once, and explicitly or implicitly minimized its importance, often evidenced by a lack of specificity. Between these two dimensions, we defined a moderate emphasis that was lesser than major, but greater than minor. Table 2 displays state DOE representative statements for each guiding principle at the *major* and *minor* dimension.

Continuity of Learning

Continuity of learning, which represented the idea of ensuring that students continued to learn throughout school closures, was one of the most common principles that state DOEs considered ($n = 46$) in their guidance. The concept included a great deal of variation, with some states placing great emphasis on the principle and others placing little to none. But regardless of the level of emphasis, the concept appeared to be an important influencing factor on emergency learning grading guidance. States such as Nebraska, Rhode Island, and Utah placed a major emphasis on the concept and directly addressed it in their guidance. For example, the Utah DOE guidance stated, "Grading should focus on the continuation of learning and prioritize the connectedness and care for students and staff." Alternatively, states like Missouri, Ohio, and Iowa displayed a minor emphasis on learning in their guidance. This was evidenced, for example, by Iowa's DOE guidance providing districts options about whether to expect all students to learn during closures: "The approach a district or nonpublic school takes will fall into one of two primary approaches: voluntary enrichment opportunities and required educational services." Because we identified the concept *continuity of learning* in nearly every state, this suggests the vast majority of DOEs emphasized students' continued learning throughout school closures.

Table 2

Concepts within the Guiding Principles Category

Concept (*n* = states represented)	Dimension	Representative statements
Continuity of Learning (*n* = 46)	Major emphasis	"As a state, we have two clear objectives during the time we are implementing Distance Learning: 1. Ensuring that Learning Continues: While we know that learning will look different during this time, we remain fully committed to ensuring that students continue to learn new ideas and reinforcing what has already been taught. 2. Prioritizing Genuine Connections with Students and Families." (Rhode Island)
	Minor emphasis	"Districts and schools should try to make a good faith effort, within available capabilities, to support continued learning outside of school and determine how best to issue grades and provide feedback to students during the coronavirus-related ordered school-building closure." (Ohio)
Equity (*n* = 39)	Major emphasis	"Before moving forward with any determinations on grading, districts and schools must consider whether all students have had equitable access to learning opportunities during this closure." (Vermont)
	Minor emphasis	"Districts and charter schools should ensure that the evaluation of student work and assignment of grades be applied fairly and consistently and focused on student proficiency." (Texas)
Flexibility (*n* = 36)	Major emphasis	"Students' grades must not be negatively impacted during remote learning. Assessment should be ongoing to promote equitable environments. The mode at which a student provides evidence of learning needs to be differentiated based upon student circumstances." (Illinois)
	Minor emphasis	"This guidance statement from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is intended to help superintendents, school officials, and boards of education make crucial policy decisions in this time of crisis that requires flexibility and the capacity to adapt to a new and unanticipated set of circumstances." (Connecticut)
Local Control (*n* = 38)	Major emphasis	"Course grades and class promotions are determined by school board policies and not by state requirements. Districts have latitude in determining what grades to award, if any, for coursework, and what coursework is required for credit attainment." (Wisconsin)
	Minor emphasis	"Although campuses are closed, school is still in session and students are still earning grades. Districts will incorporate the process for assigning student grades in their instructional continuity plans." (Florida)

Equity

Equity was also a primary guiding principle in the documents that were analyzed. All 39 states that addressed the concept seemed to recognize the importance of equity in remote learning, but the level of priority and focus within the grading guidance varied. Some states, such as Illinois, displayed a major equity focus by directly referencing the significance of varying levels of resources available at students' homes: "We understand that resources vary for students to fully engage in a remote learning environment and that current events may be distressing to students. There is a wide range of needs demonstrated by our learners." Similarly, states such as Oregon and Nebraska provided specific references and resources to support educators to implement equitable grading practices. Alternatively, states such as South Dakota, North Carolina, and California showed a moderate equity emphasis in their guidance by making assertive statements about the concept but providing few specifics in terms of implementation and resources. One of California's grading guidance documents provide an example of this by explaining that when considering grading during the Spring 2020 pandemic, "LEAs should weigh their policies with the lens of equity and with the primary goal of first, doing no harm to students." Meanwhile, states like Virginia and Missouri displayed a minor equity emphasis as they mentioned equity in their guidance with little specificity for implementation. For instance, Virginia schools recommended to keep in mind "the considerations regarding equity and a thoughtful approach to instruction, and the impact of alternative measures of achievement and mastery, including the possibility of offering 'pass' or 'fail' as a final grade." Similarly, the Missouri DOE cautioned, "Grading of work that requires resources that are not available to all students can deepen inequities."

Flexibility

Flexibility, another important guiding principle, consisted of the willingness of educators to adjust curriculum and instruction in accordance with students' needs during remote learning in 36 states. This concept included the commonly used terms *grace* and *understanding*, and like the concepts of continuity of learning and equity, there were varying levels of emphasis across state guidance documents. The Oregon DOE's major emphasis on this concept was similar to Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, as evidenced by the statement, "Districts have the responsibility to offer extended learning and flexible credit-earning opportunities to any student who receives an 'Incomplete' (or local equivalent) during the extended school closure." States like Mississippi, Maryland, and Arkansas displayed a moderate emphasis on the guiding principle by helping schools focus on the idea of flexibility; however, they provided no specific guidance on how to do so. For example, Mississippi DOE guidance stated, "The local school board has the authority to amend the local school board policy for the promotion/progression/retention of students (Process Standard 21) and uniform grading policies." Still other states such as New Hampshire, New York, and Connecticut showed minimal focus on flexibility in their grading guidance, often due to brevity and lack of detail. In this example from a New Hampshire document, the DOE recommends "embracing flexibility around timelines, daily schedules and due dates, as students and families navigate uncertain and changing circumstances."

Local Control

A final concept within the guiding principles category is local control. This concept represented the principle of allowing local school districts in 38 states to make some, most, or all of the decisions related to remote learning. One of several examples indicating a major emphasis on local control comes from the Montana DOE, which stated, "Montana is a local control state. Local school boards and local health departments have the legal authority to determine how schools will operate in light of the COVID-19 outbreak unless overridden by directives from the Governor."

The New Hampshire DOE also displayed its strong emphasis on local control by stating, "The importance of local control cannot be overemphasized. The individual circumstances of each community will differ, and local districts need to be responsive to their communities." The Virginia DOE, like the states of Texas and North Dakota, showed a more moderate local control emphasis in its guidance that "the authority to award grades and determine grade point averages rests with local school divisions." Meanwhile, states such as Maine, Michigan, and Washington maintained a minimal local control emphasis, shown, for example, in the Michigan DOE guidance: "Additionally, although grading policies are the purview of the local districts, we strongly urge districts to consider adopting a credit/no-credit policy." This example statement acknowledges the authority of Michigan LEAs to make decisions about grading policies, but it emphasizes its recommendation to grade in an alternative manner.

Student Advancement

Student advancement was the second category to emerge from data analysis, and it refers to the common state DOE focus on students' progression throughout the educational system during school closures. It includes the concepts of graduation, promotion, and remediation. These ideas were found in the grading guidance documents of 36 states (see Table 3). Dimensions of each concept are described below, as they varied across concepts.

Table 3

Concepts within the Student Advancement Category

Concept (*n* = states represented)	Dimension	Representative statements
High School Graduation (*n* = 33)	Major emphasis (separate guidance)	"Seniors who are on track to graduate and in good standing as of the 3rd nine weeks reporting period will be considered "as meeting the graduation requirements" for the state of Arkansas." (Arkansas)
	Major emphasis (integrated guidance)	"Most districts have graduation requirements that far exceed the state-required 15 credits. . . Each district determines what requirements are necessary to grant a high school diploma beyond the 15 credits required under state law." (Wisconsin)
	Minor emphasis (integrated guidance)	"LEAs and charters may allow graduating seniors to pursue credits beyond the minimum State Board of Education graduation requirements but may not require more than the state minimum requirements for graduation through June 30, 2020." (North Carolina)
Grade Promotion (*n* = 9)	---	"With the extension of remote learning through the end of the school year, we want to expand on this recommendation to encourage districts and schools to promote students to the next grade level, an action supported by research." (Massachusetts)

Concept (*n* = states represented)	Dimension	Representative statements
	---	"The local school board has the authority to amend the local school board policy for the promotion/progression/retention of students (Process Standard 21) and uniform grading policies (Process Standard 21.1). The amendment(s) shall be applied equitably to all students." (Mississippi)
	---	"NCDPI strongly recommends that districts/schools only consider retention of students if the retention consideration process was already well underway for a student prior to NCDPI.5.5.20.SSC 8 March 13, 2020, including communication and collaboration with the student's parent/family." (North Carolina)
Remediation (*n* = 36)	Past Learning	"LEAs should provide support for students who are failing a course as of March 13, 2020 and provide them the opportunity, to the extent feasible, to demonstrate learning in the subject matter of the course and receive credit for the course." (Pennsylvania)
	New Learning	"Every effort and intervention must be made to reach and support every student in danger of failure and to offer multiple and varied opportunities for students to complete work." (Michigan)
	Seniors	"Seniors who were not on track must be given the opportunity for credit recovery immediately, rather than waiting until summer programs" (Alabama)

High School Graduation

At the time that many schools pivoted to remote learning in mid-March of 2020, one reporting period was often incomplete (*e.g.*, third quarter), and a final reporting period had not been started (*e.g.*, fourth quarter). This led to many concerns regarding high school graduation, and it subsequently became a popular focus of DOE guidance (*n* = 33). Like the *guiding principles* category, the high school graduation concept included major and minor emphasis dimensions, and the same definitions apply here. However, the moderate emphasis dimension was omitted because it was not applicable.

In a majority of states, the DOEs integrated graduation guidance within a comprehensive remote learning guidance document. In a few states like Wisconsin, Louisiana, and Colorado, graduation guidance comprised much of the emergency grading guidance provided by the state. In these states, the presence of senior and graduation guidance along with the relative absence of other grading guidance seemed to imply the importance of graduation guidance. For instance, Colorado guidance comes mostly from a webpage entitled "Considerations for 2020 Colorado High School Graduates as a Result of Covid-19," and it suggests school district leaders consider, "Are there local

graduation requirements that students must meet to demonstrate their readiness to graduate? Are there ways for students to show these demonstrations via remote learning?" The Colorado DOE communicated these guiding questions despite a statement on a different Colorado DOE webpage providing information about COVID-19 and schools declaring that the "CDE [Colorado Department of Education] will be leaving decisions on grades and grade-level promotion to local districts." In other states like Indiana, Maryland, and Nevada, a major emphasis on high school graduation was evidenced by its use of a graduation guidance document separate from other emergency guidance. The Nevada DOE (NDE) coached districts in the following way:

> If LEAs have graduating seniors who are unable to complete their classes due to issues related to COVID-19, the NDE suggests the LEAs use local discretion to determine whether the students have completed sufficient course content to consider the units complete.

This policy displays an emphasis on the guiding principles of flexibility and local control in its graduation guidance. This type of guidance was especially common in states that emphasized district local control.

Conversely, states such as North Carolina, West Virginia, and Delaware displayed a minor high school graduation emphasis, exemplified by the Delaware DOE guidance that stated, "Districts and charters have the authority to adjust existing local graduation policies." This common policy emphasized the importance of districts being flexible with credit and community service requirements, final exams, and individual student circumstances to minimize the negative impact of school closures on student graduation. However, the lack of detail and specificity implied a lesser emphasis than the states described above.

Grade Promotion

State DOEs noted promoting students to the subsequent grade level as another important student advancement consideration within state DOE guidance (*n* = 9). Unlike other concepts, states showed little variation in their emphasis on student promotion, so this concept does not include dimensions. In other words, states that addressed the concept in their grading guidance seemed to consistently treat the topic as a significant influencing factor in the grading guidance. For example, one Oregon document guided schools such that "student promotion to the next grade level shall not be based on performance during the period of school closure." This guidance included the notion of *do no harm,* which conveys the idea that students' performance during school closures should have no impact on students' final semester grades. Pennsylvania guidance was similar in stating, "No student should be restricted from completing their current year course requirements due to the pandemic of 2020." In a similar but more focused way, the Ohio DOE remarked,

> Teachers and principals should make decisions to promote or retain students while keeping the best interest of the child in mind. If, in the judgement of the teacher and principal, a student is prepared, given the student's demonstration of knowledge and skills in the particular context of the ordered school-building closure to participate successfully in the next higher grade, then the child should be promoted. The general standards for promotion decisions should be discussed jointly between a school's teachers, counselors, principal, and parents.

Remediation

Remediation was a third emergent concept within the category of student advancement. This concept consisted of a focus on student learning deficiencies. Two common ways that state DOEs

addressed this area, which comprise two of the three dimensions within this concept, were 1) using the school closure period as an opportunity to remediate students for deficiencies of past learning that occurred before school closures or 2) providing intervention and support for new learning during school closures. Utah, like states such as Pennsylvania and Louisiana, utilized the former focus, as it essentially required school districts to provide remediation: "All students should have the opportunity to redo, make up, or try again to complete, show progress, or attempt to complete work assigned prior to the remote learning period in that time frame." States such as Arkansas, Michigan, and Utah displayed the latter type of focus, which closely aligns with the continuity of learning guiding principle, as seen in this Arkansas DOE guidance:

> The emphasis for schoolwork right now is on learning, not compliance. All students should have extended opportunities to redo, make up, or try again to complete, show progress, or attempt to complete work assigned prior to and during the remote learning period.

A third dimension within this concept was focusing remediation efforts, whether they were on past or current learning, on seniors. State DOEs such as Alabama and North Carolina focused their remediation guidance on seniors and graduation, as shown in this statement in a North Carolina DOE document: "If the student has an F as of March 13 for graduation requirements, districts/schools shall provide remote learning opportunities for the student to improve to a passing grade." Overall, state DOEs strongly emphasized the student advancement category, likely due to the school year ending only a few months after the onset of the pandemic.

Determining Grades

Perhaps the most publicized type of information that state DOEs provided in their grading guidance was the recommendations about how to create report card grades. This category was addressed in 32 states, and our analysis revealed that states recommended three major avenues of guidance: alternative grading, traditional grading, and/or options that included a blending of both.

Alternative Grading

The most prevalent form of report card grading guidance was alternative grading ($n = 28$). In the context of emergency school closures and remote learning, we defined alternative grading as grading practices that result in report card grades other than traditional letter grades such as A, B, C, D, and F. Examples of this type of report card grading include credit or no credit, pass or no pass, pass or fail, and the use of incompletes. Within this category, state DOE guidance ranged along a continuum from *suggesting* alternative grading to *requiring* these practices. States that required alternative practices were fewer in number, including states such as Oregon and North Carolina. North Carolina's DOE explained that for grades K-5, "Instead of a final grade, teachers will provide year-end feedback for students regarding learning from the full academic school year, using a format determined locally," and for middle school, "Students will receive a Pass "PC19" or Withdrawal "WC19" for the final course grades." States such as Michigan, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts provided strong recommendations for alternative grading, but they fell short of requiring them. The Massachusetts DOE asserted, "If districts and schools have not already implemented policies regarding credit-bearing courses (determining credit for academic work at home), we strongly recommend that academic content be graded as "credit/no credit." This type of recommendation was a more common form of alternative grading practice guidance. At the other end of the continuum, state DOEs such as New Mexico and Connecticut gave recommendations about alternative grading practices. The Connecticut DOE stated, "We suggest that schools adopt a locally guided Pass/Fail protocol for grading while providing continued educational opportunities."

Table 4

Concepts within the Determining Grades Category

Concept (*n* = states represented)	Dimension	Representative statements
Alternative Grading Practices (*n* = 28)	Requirement	"As a means to promote learning and award credit, all districts in Oregon shall move from letter grades to Pass/Incomplete (or local equivalent) for students enrolled in high school courses for the remainder of the 2019–20 school year." (Oregon)
	Suggestions	"PED is encouraging schools and districts to adopt a pass/fail grading system for the last grading period." (New Mexico)
Traditional Grading Practices (*n* = 4)	---	"All credit-bearing courses should follow the requirements of the Uniform Grading Policy (UGP), with numerical grades recorded. This will help to maintain equity across schools and districts for scholarship considerations." (South Carolina)
	---	"Due to the long-term negative implications on grade point averages (GPAs), Oklahoma's Promise, NCAA eligibility, and other scholarship opportunities, it is strongly encouraged that traditional A-F letter grades continue to be issued in lieu of Pass/Fail (P/F) grading" (Oklahoma)
Blending Traditional and Alternative Grading Practices (*n* = 12)	Suggestions	"As has always been the case, school districts can determine the form (e.g. letter grade, pass/fail, etc.) of student grades." "Equity-centered approaches to consider: . . . Using "Pass" or "Incomplete" instead of traditional numeric or letter grades." (Nebraska)
	No suggestions	"Option A) Process grades as normal. All setups are currently in place for this procedure. Semester grades will be processed as normal. Grades will be submitted for the fourth 9 weeks as normal during a typical grading period. No eSchool changes necessary. Option B) Schools may opt to carry the third 9 weeks grade to fourth 9 weeks and average the two 9 weeks grades to provide the semester grade. This process will require setup changes. A district's eSchool admin should seek assistance from APSCN Field Support Technicians. Option C) Pass/Fail option. The district may issue a Pass/Fail type grade. The parameters of the pass/fail grade option will be defined by the district." (Arkansas)

Traditional Grading

Traditional grading, defined here as grading practices that result in report card letter grades of A-F, was the least common form of DOE grading guidance. Four states — Georgia, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Texas — provided report card grading guidance that mostly or completely

aligned to traditional grading practices. Because so few states fall into this category, our analysis focuses more on the similarity of the guidance rather than the differences (dimensionality). Georgia showed its emphasis on traditional grading by reiterating the state requirement that "each state containing grade 9-12 shall record and maintain numerical grades of students in all courses in which credit is given in those courses." South Carolina emphasized traditional grading by adding, "The semester grade should be composed of all third quarter grades, as well as those grades deemed appropriate by the district to assure competency or provide remediation." While the Texas DOE guidance seemed to allow for alternative grading, it also contained strong statements that aligned to traditional grading like stating that districts "must require a classroom teacher to assign a grade that reflects the student's relative mastery of an assignment" and "A final grade of incomplete should not be noted on the student transcript as the student did not complete the course."

Blending Alternative and Traditional Grading

A third method of providing report card grading guidance blended alternative and traditional grading practices by providing districts with multiple options for creating report card grades. The most common options that states provided to school districts were alternative grading methods, but every state within this group also provided at least one traditional grading option. In addition to offering different types of options, states also varied in the type of recommendations they gave about these grading options. Some states such as California, Arkansas, and Alabama simply provided the options without any type of recommendation. For example, Alabama provided districts with six grading options, including both traditional and alternative varieties, without an apparent emphasis on any option. Similarly, California provided districts with a "non-comprehensive list" of six different methods to produce final grades, including a blend of traditional and alternative grading practices. Other states such as Kentucky, Nebraska, and Illinois provided district options along with a recommendation—whether explicit or implicit—for at least one grading practice. Illinois, for example, strongly recommended alternative practices, as evidenced by the statement "Grades for the current term should be reported on a pass/incomplete basis (recommended)," but later in the document it added, "Local districts may decide to use a traditional grading structure (A-F) for students who would benefit from grades other than pass/incomplete."

Perhaps most unique in its report card grade guidance was Washington, as it *required* a blending of traditional and alternative grading methods. The state DOE declared,

> Student grades will not be negatively impacted as a result of the March 17 building closures or of continuous learning through the end of the 2019–2020 school year. Districts will continue using grades as a means of communicating student progress and determining high school credit . . . However, no student will receive a failing grade for any class during the COVID-19 closure period.

The Washington DOE added an option of using incompletes for students not on track for course completion or for those below proficiency during the school closures.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the individual components of each state's DOE grading guidance during the Spring 2020 COVID-19 school shutdown to produce a grounded theory of emergency remote learning grading guidance. If future pandemics or other world events disrupt the normal school environment, states and local schools may utilize this theory in policy creation. Previous research in the United States has focused on grading reliability, grades and educational outcomes, the composition of grades, teachers' grading practices and perceptions, and standards-

based grading (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). While several authors generated policy briefs and conceptual recommendations following the Spring 2020 pandemic (see Brookhart, 2020; Castro et al., 2020; Townsley, 2020), we systematically explored state DOE guidelines that provided school leaders decision-making guidance and authority. Resulting from this document analysis, we offer a three-category model for emergency remote learning grading guidelines for K-12 schools, which is shown in Figure 1.

A Model of Emergency Remote Learning Grading Guidance

The model of emergency remote learning grading guidance (Figure 1) displays the relationship between three key categories of emergency remote learning guidance: guiding principles, determining grades, and student advancement. We identified guiding principles as the central category that state DOEs considered when creating grading guidance. For this reason, it was designated as the core category in this model, and it sits atop of Figure 1 over the determining grades and student advancement categories. Four guiding principles—continuity of learning, equity, flexibility, and local control—comprised the core category and permeated throughout state grading guidance documents. The principles likely had a significant influence in the initial creation of each state document and the decision-making efforts of DOE officials. Each guiding principle represents a different dimension of the state DOE grading guidance, and while not all states applied all dimensions, each state seemed to apply at least one. The model applies one or more of these principles in guidance for determining grades, whether it was in the form of traditional grading, alternative grading, or a blending of the two. The model also applies principles in guidance on student advancement, including senior graduation, grade promotion, and remediation. Finally, grading guidance was directly connected to student advancement guidance, whether it was for graduation, promotion, or remediation. The various patterns of these relationships across the states, explained below, may be helpful to further understanding this model.

Figure 1

A Model of Emergency Remote Learning Grading Guidance
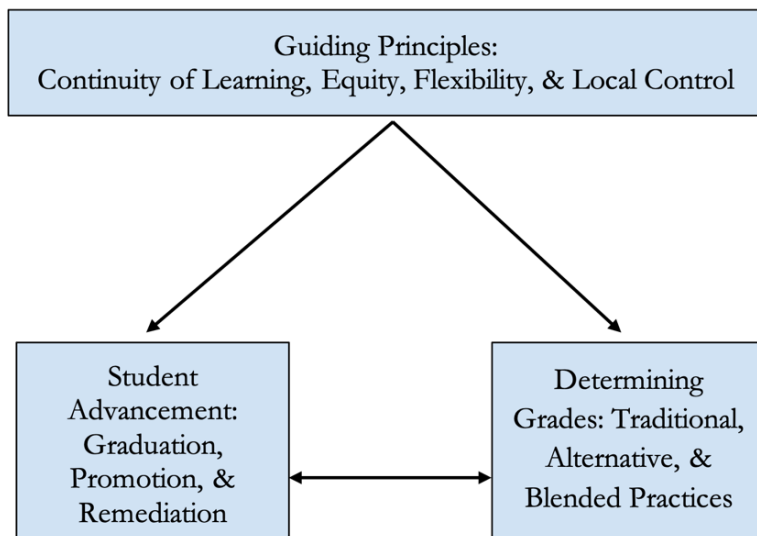
Guiding Principles and Determining Grades

State DOEs commonly employed multiple guiding principles within their grading guidance documents. Specifically, states often recommended practices and policies that were influenced by some combination of continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility; however, states that applied the principle of local control tended to do so without other guiding principles or occasionally in conjunction with the flexibility principle.

The dimension of continuity of learning represents a focus on learning throughout school closures, and states that included this principle also guided LEAs in creating grades that included student learning during this time. Conversely, it can be argued that states that did not emphasize continued learning in their emergency guidance likely had more teachers within LEAs creating grades that had little to do with learning. As a result, the effects of "hodgepodge grading" practices––defined as grading that combines effort, attitude, and achievement into a single mark (Brookhart, 1991)—that grading experts so often warn against would likely be exacerbated due to the decreased role of achievement in grades. While previous literature has documented and expounded upon the detrimental side effects of this problematic classroom practice (Cizek et al., 1996; Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017), the numerous physical and mental stressors that students faced at home during emergency remote learning only highlights a greater need for grades to emphasize student learning. Using achievement rather than a combination of factors to determine grades during the pandemic is also a policy recommendation by experts in the field (Brookhart 2020; Reeves & Feldman, 2021; Townsley, 2020).

For the most part, state DOEs that displayed a strong emphasis on continued learning also provided strong recommendations for alternative grading practices, suggesting a positive relationship between alternative grading practices and student learning as shown in several previous studies (e.g., Haptonstall, 2010; Pollio & Hochbein, 2015). Conversely, states that promoted traditional grading practices appeared to show less of an emphasis on learning during this time, similar to historical literature showing that teachers' grading practices inconsistently communicate learning (Brookhart et al., 2016; Cizek et al., 1996). Future quantitative studies may be useful to verify such relationships.

Interestingly, grade meaning and purpose seemed to change during distance learning for many states that emphasized continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility. Many states recommended alternative grading practices such as pass/incomplete or similar reporting methods, and grades seemed to evolve to communicate whether students reached a minimum level of proficiency for a small number of essential learning outcomes. The concept "less is more" was a common phrase used within such documents, signifying the focus of many LEAs on helping students to learn a minimum number of essential learning outcomes. For many states, it was the first time that LEA grading guidance aligned to the recommendations of grading experts (O'Connor et al., 2018; Reeves et. al., 2017). However, state LEAs that emphasized local control tended to recommend traditional grading practices or to have no particular grading policy at all.

Guiding Principles and Student Advancement

Student advancement, in the form of senior graduation, grade promotion, and remediation, was a common DOE focus, regardless of the guiding principles, and senior graduation was the most common type of student advancement in these documents. We found a strong-to-moderate graduation emphasis to be connected to a state's strong local control emphasis. Even states that provided little grading guidance often provided guidance about seniors and graduation. States that had balked at violating traditions of LEA autonomy may have considered the potential dire

consequences of low senior graduation rates as reason enough to provide this minimal LEA guidance. The most common form of senior graduation guidance began with reminding LEAs about the number of required credits for graduation and that their own requirements were often higher than the minimum requirement. Sometimes state guidance implied that LEAs could reduce the required number of credits by stating that LEAs make the local decisions about graduation requirements (this was often the case with minimal guidance), while other states declared that LEAs could or should reduce the requirements to the minimal level. The connection to grading is less direct than in other parts of DOE guidance, but there is a clear connection between the number of credits required to graduate and students passing or failing each class—particularly in their senior year.

Grade promotion was most connected to the equity and flexibility guiding principles, as the primary emphasis for this dimension of student advancement was in ensuring that students were not prevented from advancing to the next grade level due to school closures. This focus seems to have overridden even a strong emphasis on continuity of learning, showing that state DOEs that applied the guiding principles of continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility were generally unwilling to sacrifice equity and flexibility in the name of continuity of learning. Additionally, remediation was seen to have strong connections to continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility, whether the remediation focus was on past learning, new learning, or seniors. However, when the focus was on senior remediation, a connection was also seen with the guiding principle of local control as in the connection between local control and senior graduation. This former relationship is likely because of a subsequent relationship between remediation of learning deficiencies and senior graduation. Further quantitative studies are needed to determine any substantive relationship here.

Student Advancement and Determining Grades

As previously noted, senior graduation was a common DOE focus, and we noted this across all types of grading guidance: traditional, alternative, and blended. In states that recommended traditional grading practices, senior graduation was often the only type of student advancement guidance provided. This connection was likely due to the strong influence of the local control guiding principle, explained above. State DOEs that recommended alternative or blended grading practices often showed a focus on grade promotion and remediation and, to a comparatively lesser extent, senior graduation. The guiding principles of continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility largely influenced this relationship. In practice, the focus on grade promotion would likely lead to many teachers and LEAs willing to overlook student learning deficiencies to avoid the use of the "fail," "no pass," "no credit," or similar grade to promote students to the next grade level.

The strong connection between student remediation and alternative and blended grading practices displays the influence of the continuity of learning, equity, and flexibility guiding principles within these states. States recommending alternative and blended grading practices that also emphasized remediation efforts commonly did so for either past learning (before school shutdowns) or present learning (during shutdowns). Either focus would likely lead to a greater number of students receiving "pass," "credit," or similar grades, but the meaning of the grade would likely differ depending on the type of remediation that was recommended and implemented. State DOEs recommending remediation of past learning would more likely result in grades communicating student learning that occurred before school closures, while states recommending remediation of present learning would communicate student learning that included learning during closures. States that recommended traditional grading practices often emphasized senior learning remediation—if they focused on any type of remediation at all. This focus may have had the effect of decreasing the number of Ds and Fs for many students in these states, resulting in higher graduation rates.

Limitations

Limitations of this document analysis study design include the potential of low retrievability and insufficient detail (Bowen, 2009). While we aimed to retrieve all guidance documents provided by state DOEs, it is possible some documents were only publicly available for a short period of time. This study also includes a few limitations related to the researchers' biases and assumptions. One author has experience as a high school teacher using non-traditional methods of grading and as a district administrator facilitating systematic grading changes. While he does not have personal K-12 experience teaching in a remote setting, his graduate students frequently bring these realities to life during course discussions. The other author, primarily responsible for data analysis, serves as a high school teacher and department chair. His classroom experience includes remote learning and grading reform, but he lacks experience as a school administrator. Collectively, the researchers set aside their own experiences while analyzing and discussing state DOE policy guidance, which allowed them to produce a grounded theory of emergency remote learning grading guidelines.

Implications

Educators ought to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the pandemic to challenge the status quo (Sahlberg, 2020; Trombly, 2020; Zhao, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic offered schools a chance to rethink grading practices, and some schools' modified practices may be outlasting the learning challenges presented in Spring 2020 (Townsley, 2021). While the theory presented in the current study offers a model for an unthinkable future pandemic, a potential policy window is now open. Considering Kingdon's (2010) multiple streams framework, favorable conditions for policy change may be present now that school leaders are more likely to recognize the grading problem and have been provided potential solutions in the form of state DOE guidance. Policymakers might consider building upon a century of grading research suggesting "the dimensions on which grades are based should be defensible goals of schooling and should match students' opportunities to learn" (Brookhart et al., 2016, p. 836). In the unfortunate event of another pandemic temporarily affecting the delivery of education to students, policymakers may use this model of emergency remote learning grading guidance as a starting point for future recommendations. This model for emergency remote learning grading guidance, although based upon guidance created extemporaneously by policymakers, involves three interdependent categories; therefore, state DOEs should consider all three categories collectively rather than separately.

Finally, the results of this study provide researchers with several lines of empirical investigation. DOEs required or suggested that LEAs make changes to their grading practices during Spring 2020. While several experts offered grading policy recommendations for pandemic-era learning (Brookhart, 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Townsley, 2020), understanding the extent to which these new grading practices remain in LEAs beyond the COVID-19 crisis, regardless of the instructional delivery model, is a future line of inquiry. Research and commentary have emerged describing educators' perceptions of the emergency transition to remote learning in Spring 2020 (Beese & Mlakar, 2020; Leech et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020); however, future studies should examine schools' implementation of grading guidance provided by their DOE including the students' and teachers' perspectives of the grading guidance. While no educators desire to repeat the challenges' experienced during Spring 2020, the model of emergency remote learning grading guidance described may provide policymakers and educators with a framework to accelerate their decisions in the future.

Acknowledgements

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About the Authors

Matt Townsley
University of Northern Iowa
matt.townsley@uni.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5550-8838
Matt Townsley is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Northern Iowa. His research focuses on educational leadership, assessment, and grading. He is co-author of *Making Grades Matter: Standards-Based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work* (2020, Solution Tree) and author of *Using Grading to Support Student Learning* (2022, Routledge).

Joshua Kunnath
Highland High School
joshkunnath@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5535-5480
Joshua Kunnath is an English teacher and department chair at Highland High School in Bakersfield, California. He also works as a researcher, teacher coach, and educational consultant in the areas of grading, assessment, and feedback. He serves as editor of the open-access academic journal *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*.

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