

## **ABSTRACT**

JONES, LAURA NICOLE. A Program Evaluation of Standards-Based Grading and Its Impacts on Teacher Morale and Retention. (Under the direction of Dr. Timothy Drake)

Traditional grading practices using letter grades and numeric scores remain the norm in most U.S. public schools. However, legislation and research over the past several years have called these practices into question, highlighting their limitations in effectively supporting student learning and achievement. Standards-Based Grading (SBG) offers an alternative approach that allows educators and students to better understand academic standards and individual progress. An SBG model allows teachers, students, and families to more clearly understand what students know and are able to do, facilitating more targeted instruction and meaningful feedback.

This study presents a program evaluation of a middle school piloting a SBG model within its district, with a specific focus on how the transition has impacted teacher morale and retention. Perspectives from teachers and administrators at Pilot Magnet Middle School were examined alongside data from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey to provide a comprehensive view of the implementation's effects.

Using Hatch's (2002) framework for data organization and analysis, findings indicate that district-level support, ongoing professional development, and a functional learning management system are critical to effective implementation. Additionally, the transition to SBG fostered improved teacher collaboration, stronger relationships with students and families, and deeper content knowledge among educators.

Perceptions of SBG and Its Impacts on Teacher Morale and Retention.

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## DEDICATION

As I worked through this experience, there are so many people that have served as my supporters. I am grateful to each of them. However, there are two individuals that were my “why” throughout my writing process.

Liam and Scarlett, this dissertation is dedicated to you, my greatest joys, and my strongest motivation. From the very beginning of this journey, you have been my driving force, the reason I pushed forward even in the most challenging moments. Your humor, your curiosity, and your endless capacity for wonder remind me daily of what truly matters in life.

I want you both to know that anything is possible when you believe in yourself and put in the effort. There will be obstacles, moments of doubt, and times when the road ahead seems uncertain, but I hope this work stands as proof that perseverance and determination can turn dreams into reality. Never let fear or uncertainty keep you from reaching for the extraordinary.

Everything I do, I do with you in my heart. You are my inspiration, my strength, and my greatest achievement. May you always chase your dreams with passion, work hard with purpose, and know that I will always be here, cheering you on every step of the way.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Laura Jones is a dedicated educator with fourteen years of experience in the field of education. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Science Education and a Master of School Administration, both from North Carolina State University.

Since 2017, Laura has served as a school administrator. Her leadership focuses on creating a positive and collaborative educational environment that encourages both academic excellence and personal growth among students and staff.

Beyond her professional responsibilities, Jones remains committed to lifelong learning and the continuous improvement of educational practices. She strives to make a meaningful impact on the field of education through research, leadership, and advocacy for teachers and students alike.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In most cases, parents' primary indicator of their students' academic success comes from the grades their students receive through their school issued report card (Peters & Buckmiller, 2015). While these report cards are effective in illustrating a synopsis of students' academic standing in their classes, there is no significant detail provided to the student or their parents explaining what specific standards students are excelling in versus those that they require additional support or intervention (Guskey, 2001). That is, a single letter grade or numeric score does not inform students or their parents of the specific standards students have mastered and/or the standards that require additional intervention (O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011).

### **Statement of Problem**

Just as parents and students are unable to gain meaningful direction from the single grade printed onto a quarterly report card, teachers cannot gain relevant information about their students from the traditional reporting system (Guskey & Bailey, 2011). As a result, the traditional grading system fails to provide teachers with an accurate picture of students' mastery of standards and skills, hindering their ability to proactively intervene to support students in their classrooms (Vatterot, 2015). Teachers must also allocate valuable time to assess students in order to gain insight on a student's academic standing prior to their time spent instructing them (Scriffiny, 2008). As teachers are left to navigate a traditional grading system for students and figure out how to make data-driven decisions on how to best serve their students, they also receive little formal professional learning on best practices associated with grading student work (Cox, 2011). This lack of formal professional development creates a significant variation in teachers' approaches toward grading, even within the same school community (Townsend & Buckmiller, 2016). As a result, some conclude that the current K-12 grading system continues to

require significant improvement with respect to how grades are utilized by teachers to shape their instructional decision making (Townesley & Buckmiller, 2016).

In contrast, a Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is an instructional approach where student learning is measured by progress toward clearly defined academic standards rather than by cumulative point totals or averages. It allows for students, teachers, and parents to work more closely on the individual needs of students within the context of a specific content standard (O'Connor & Wormeli, 2011). SBG facilitates a more reflective planning process for teachers as they work to gain a better understanding of how standards are interrelated and what methods of instruction and assessment work best for their students (Iamarino, 2014). SBG systems also allow teachers and students to focus on specific content associated with a course standard. Teachers use standards to create assignments with detailed explanations of how students can demonstrate mastery (Scriffiny, 2008). As teachers implement SBG, they create formalized parameters of content mastery by using detailed rubrics that highlight what students can do with the information being covered within a given curriculum standard, while creating structures to provide feedback on the effort that students put toward the successful completion of their assignments (Shippy et al., 2013). The process of standards-based reporting provides more meaning to the feedback and score that a student receives on a given assignment. This more descriptive, personalized feedback allows teachers, students, and parents to identify specific areas of strength and targeted areas of growth for each standard being covered (Heflebower & Hoegh, 2014).

The research on the implementation of SBG suggests that students have a more personalized learning experience, both in terms of the content that they engage with and in terms of the feedback that they receive from their teachers (Twyman, 2014). Teachers have shared that

a transition to SBG has allowed them to engage with students about what actions need to be taken to master an entire content standard, rather than focusing on a score associated with a single assignment (Scarlett, 2018). SBG has been shown to make grades a more accurate reflection of student learning, helping to shift the focus from compliance to mastery. (Hochbein & Polio, 2016). Researchers have found that as teachers have the opportunity to make the transition to a SBG system, they note an increase in the quality of information they are able to gain in reviewing feedback on student work (Ulrich, 2012). The standards-based system provides more in-depth information on what the student knows and in what contexts they are able to apply that knowledge (Ulrich, 2012).

While research has provided insight on the positive aspects of a school making the decision to transition to a standards-based reporting model, it fails to include a perspective on corresponding levels of teacher morale and retention. Though SBG seems to provide a more descriptive feedback system that allows students and relevant stakeholders to gain an increased understanding of what a student knows and is able to do, it does not consider the significant responsibility that SBG places on the teacher. More specifically, under SBG, teachers become responsible for providing an in-depth summary of how every student they serve is doing on every standard associated with their curriculum (Tomlinson, 2005). What's more, teachers are expected to implement SBG without the guarantee of additional time for planning and grading or specialized professional learning opportunities to build their capacity (Adrian, 2012).

Teacher satisfaction and retention are important foci for school leaders as they work to establish and maintain positive cultures within their school communities (Boyd et al., 2011). Additionally, student achievement is impacted by teacher retention (Ronfeldt et al., 2011). National rates of teacher attrition average at 8% annually, with 55% of teachers reporting job

dissatisfaction as the primary reason for their decision to leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In their research, Ingersol (2001) asserts that teacher retention is impacted largely by school factors such as a lack of support from administration, a lack of shared decision-making, and poor relationships amongst colleagues. As school leaders focus on decreasing rates of teacher turnover, it can contribute to their ability to fine tune a shared mission and vision among their faculty and staff, which will allow them to focus on increased student success (Ingersoll, 2001).

In this dissertation, I will seek to evaluate the impact of transitioning to a SBG model on teacher retention and morale at a magnet middle school in a large, urban district. To do so, I will use a working conditions survey and teacher and staff focus groups and interviews. The school that has been selected for this dissertation serves as the pilot program for SBG at the middle school level within the school district. It began implementing SBG during the 2018-19 school year.

I ask:

1. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to a standards-based grading model and teacher morale?

2. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to standards-based grading model and teacher retention?

This dissertation will contribute to the scholarly research literature by cultivating a deeper understanding of the relationship between SBG and teacher morale and rates of attrition. The findings presented here will facilitate deeper reflection for district and school leaders on how to best support the needs of their teachers during transitions to grading and feedback systems, in order to maintain positive school culture and minimize rates of teacher attrition. Middle school

serves as a particularly important context for this study, as it represents a critical developmental period for students and a complex instructional environment for educators. Research indicates that middle schools should be developmentally responsive, empowering, and equitable to effectively meet the diverse needs of young students (Cook, Faulkner, & Howell, 2016). The information presented in this dissertation will also provide district leaders with additional information to consider when they are discussing plans to expand the SBG model beyond the current middle school where the program is being piloted.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study is to explore administrators' and teachers' perceptions of the relationship between transitioning to a SBG and reporting model and teacher morale and retention. This study will examine how educators at a magnet middle school respond to the demands, challenges, and benefits of SBG, focusing on how these experiences influence their morale and retention within the teaching profession.

By focusing on a school that has served as a district pilot for SBG, this study seeks to understand the experiences of teachers who have engaged in this shift over multiple years. Through working conditions surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the study will gather insight on how the implementation of a SBG model has affected teacher morale and retention.

The goal of this research is to inform school and district leaders of the potential implications that major instructional policy shifts, like reforms to traditional grading systems, can have on teachers. The findings will contribute to research focused on SBG while highlighting its impact on teacher morale and retention.

## Statement of Significance

As school districts across the country continue to assess traditional grading practices, SBG models provide a clearer, more actionable feedback system for teachers, students, and families. While this shift has been associated with improved student outcomes and more targeted instructional practices, much of the existing research focuses primarily on student achievement and academic reporting. Focus should be given to how these grading reforms impact the educators responsible for implementing them, specifically in regard to teacher morale and retention.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the teacher experience within a school that has transitioned to a SBG model. Understanding educators' perspectives on this shift is critical, as their well-being, motivation, and sense of efficacy impact quality of instruction, student success, and school culture. Teacher retention remains a pressing issue in education, with high turnover rates negatively affecting student learning.

By focusing on how SBG is connected to teacher morale and retention, this study will provide valuable insights for school and district leaders who are considering or currently implementing SBG practices. Middle school environments, in particular, present unique challenges that can impact teacher retention, including the demands of supporting early adolescent development and managing interdisciplinary teaching teams (Jackson, 2016). The findings from this study will help inform decisions about how to support teachers during transitions and contribute to more sustainable, teacher-centered reform efforts. In doing so, this dissertation aims to support the development of systems that not only benefit student learning, but also create professional environments in which teachers feel valued, supported, and motivated to remain in the profession.

## **Limitations**

When collecting and reviewing data for this dissertation, it will be important to note that I served as an assistant principal at the school during the period of data collection. While I created protocols to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing information for the purpose of research, the position I held may still have impacted their responses. To help mitigate this potential bias, a third-party staff member from Pilot, who does not hold an evaluative role over participants, was selected to facilitate the focus groups. This approach aimed to promote more open and honest dialogue among participants.

At the time of the study, the school being examined was the only middle school in its district implementing SBG, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, teacher retention data from the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years may have been influenced by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Delimitations**

The focus of this study is the educator's perceptions of a school's transition to SBG. As such, student and family perspectives were not included in the data collection process. The research draws specifically from teacher and administrator voices in order to capture both the experiences of classroom educators and the views of those leading the implementation. I chose to pursue this research to better understand how the shift to SBG has influenced teacher morale and retention, while also considering how school leadership supported the process. The scope of the study was also limited to one school site, which allowed for a deeper exploration of context-specific implementation and outcomes.

## **Positionality Statement**

I began my tenure at Pilot Magnet Middle School during the 2017–2018 school year as an assistant principal. As a member of the school’s administrative and instructional leadership team, I was deeply involved in supporting students and staff through the transition to an SBG model. My vested interest in understanding the implementation and impact of this grading reform stemmed from both my professional responsibilities and my desire to assess the effectiveness of the new feedback system at Pilot.

During my time at Pilot, I made every effort to support students and staff while remaining mindful of the dual roles I held, as both an administrator and a researcher. In order to evaluate the implementation of standards-based grading, I engaged in qualitative data collection to gain clarity on the successes and challenges of the program. I recognized that my positional authority could influence participants’ perceptions and responses, and I took intentional steps to address this.

To address potential bias and encourage open dialogue, I enlisted the support of a staff member outside of the administrative team to facilitate the focus groups. In recruiting participants, I conducted face-to-face conversations with teachers to explain the purpose of the study, emphasizing that it was being conducted outside of my role as assistant principal. I assured each participant that their feedback would remain confidential and would not be shared with the administrative team without their explicit permission. These assurances were reiterated in follow-up emails that expressed appreciation for their participation and restated key aspects of our discussions. Additionally, I collaborated with the focus group facilitator to establish group norms that fostered a safe environment for honest conversation.

In January 2024, after completing the data collection process, I transitioned to a new position as an assistant principal at another school within the district. Although I no longer serve at Pilot, the relationships I built there and my prior involvement in the implementation of SBG informed my understanding of the school context and provided valuable perspective throughout the research process.

The information gained from this study is intended to support continuous improvement at the school and district levels. By capturing teachers' perceptions of how the shift to standards-based grading influenced their morale and retention, this research offers insights that may guide future implementation efforts and support systems for educators. As the only middle school in the district piloting SBG at the time, Pilot's experience provides a unique lens through which to examine the broader implications of grading reform on teacher experience and workforce stability.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### ***Standards-Based Grading***

SBG measures student achievement by assessing student growth in specific course objectives. This assessment is conducted over the entire duration of a course, rather than a specific marking period (Carberry et al., 2012)

### ***Grades***

Grades define the learning process and give an idea of the learner's progress in a given content area (Guskey, 1994).

### ***Teacher Retention***

Keeping teachers at the same school, from one year to the next (Cochran, 2006).

***Teacher Morale***

A teacher's professional interest and enthusiasm displayed towards the achievement of individual and group goals in their school community (Govindarajan, 2012, p. 57).

***Program Evaluation***

Serves to provide summative and formative data to facilitate program improvement (Worthen et al., 1997, p.2).

## **Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature**

### **Introduction**

In working to build a framework for the evaluation of Pilot Magnet Middle School's new grading system, a review of related literature is essential in identifying any existing theories that may support the school's transition to a grading system and how it may be impacting staff morale and retention. This literature review is divided into three primary sections: a review of SBG, teacher morale, and teacher retention.

In reviewing SBG, the first section will focus specifically on literature associated with SBG, looking specifically at what this learning looks like at the middle school level, and how teachers facilitate learning through integrating standards in their instruction. The second section of the review will focus on teacher morale. The literature review will seek to identify the positive and negative impacts that a SBG model has had on teachers and their attitudes toward working in a school that implements SBG. The final section of the literature review will focus on teacher retention and will seek to identify any significant impact that a transition to a SBG system may have on a teacher's willingness to remain at a school site.

### **Framework**

The framework for this study is grounded in the work of Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (1998), who developed a model to explain how school reform is interpreted and implemented by educators within the unique social and organizational contexts of their schools. Their framework emphasizes that educational change is not simply a matter of policy adoption, but rather a complex process influenced by the beliefs, relationships, and experiences of the individuals enacting the reform. The success and sustainability of any reform, including the transition to a SBG model, depend on the extent to which educators accept change, shift their practices, and

feel supported throughout the process. By applying Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan's framework (1998), this study seeks to uncover how the implementation of SBG at a middle school impacts teacher morale and retention.

The Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (1998) framework is widely used in educational reform research because it provides a comprehensive lens for examining the complex, context-dependent nature of school change. Unlike models that focus solely on policy or structural shifts, this framework emphasizes the critical role of human interactions, social networks, and local contexts in shaping the success or failure of reform efforts. It recognizes that educational change is not a linear process, but rather one deeply influenced by the relationships, beliefs, and professional norms of those implementing the reform. This makes it particularly valuable for studies like this one, which aim to understand the impacts of SBG on teacher morale and retention. The framework's emphasis on organizational structures, individual agency, and social networks allows for a nuanced analysis of how teachers and administrators at Pilot Magnet Middle School navigated the transition to SBG. This approach has been successfully applied in various contexts, including studies on curriculum reform (Spillane, 1999), teacher professional development (Coburn, 2001), and district-wide instructional changes (Honig, 2006), demonstrating its versatility in capturing the lived experiences of educators working within complex educational systems. By grounding this study in the Datnow framework, this research aims to capture the interconnected influences of policy, practice, and professional relationships that shape teacher experiences during grading reform.

### **Purpose of Grading**

Students receive grades on assignments and assessments as a means of measuring progress and achievement on their academic abilities within a content area (Marzano, 2000).

Teachers are able to utilize student grades as a way to manage student behavior (Knight & Cooper, 2019), support instructional planning (Ulrich, 2012), communicate with parents (Jung & Guskey, 2007) and to provide feedback to students (Marzano, 2000). While many educators feel that grades can be utilized as a motivating factor for growth with academics and behavior (Knight & Cooper, 2019), there are also educators who believe that a traditional grading system does not consistently inform and motivate students to perform at a higher level (Scarlett, 2018).

### **History of Grading**

Harvard University has a record of some of the earliest forms of grading given to students by way of a degree in the mid-17th century (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Schinske & Tanner (2014) noted that in the 1800s, the university transitioned to utilizing student grading as a means of publicly ranking students as a way to motivate students to perform at higher levels.

As student population numbers began to increase in public schools throughout the late 1800's, schools began to utilize grading as a means of organizing and grouping classes (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). As enrollment in high schools began to increase in numbers and in ranges of abilities, schools began to group students based on their ability levels as a means of differentiating instruction (Gutek, 1986). As early as 1918, teachers began to utilize a letter grading scale, assigning an A for excellent work, B for good work, C for average work, D for poor work, and F for failing work, as a method of providing feedback to their students (Guskey, 1994). The traditional grading system has become a norm in K-12 schools; however, research shows that this system does not give the best depiction of a student's achievement (Cain et al., 2022).

## **Criticism of the Traditional Grading System**

Through the utilization of a traditional grading system, student performance can be inaccurately portrayed when non-assessment items, such as completion and participation grades, are factored into a student's class average (Cain et al., 2022). As teachers are given autonomy to determine how grades are weighted and how assessments are scored within their courses, there is a lack of consistency for students as they transition from one teacher to the next (Dochy, 2009). Criticism for a lack of consistency among teachers has been noted by district leadership from the early 1900's (Rugg, 1918). Rugg (1918) notes a study from 1915 where grades are collected from 400 teachers, serving at seven different colleges and thirty-nine different high schools. The grades were found to be largely skewed toward a positive end of a grading bell curve. Rugg (1918) noted that the teachers in the study presented large levels of variability due to a lack of a common grading scale for teachers.

The numeric 100-point grading scale is a flaw within the traditional grading system (Reeves, 2004). Reeves (2004) questions this numeric scale, asking what score is given to a student who fails to submit any work. In most cases, when students receive a zero for a missing assignment, that score becomes a punishment for behavior, rather than an assessment of their comprehension of content (Dueck, 2014). Utilization of this grading system can also lack reliability as teacher perception or opinion can play a factor in a student's grade (Brimi, 2011). In a 2002 study of 900 elementary school teachers, McMillan et al. (2002) found that teachers reported using non-academic factors when providing students with grades. Teachers reported that they considered a student's effort and improvement as a component of the score that a student received, rather than assessing solely on a student's accuracy or comprehension (McMillan et al., 2002). By using effort and improvement as factors for student scores, high achieving and low

achieving students are receiving the same numeric scores on assignments (Brookhart, 1993). By adapting practices where students are graded on effort rather than accuracy, a large variation in grading practices and policies exists among teachers (McMillan, 2002).

A traditional grading system remains an integral part of a school's communication vehicle with students and families in regard to a student's academic experience (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). While understanding the value of a numeric grading system, there continues to be a large variation in how grades can be interpreted to support student success (Brookhart, 2011).

### **Alternatives to the Traditional Grading System**

In large part, there have not been significant changes made to the grading system used across schools and districts in the United States. Guskey (2004) highlights a practice of replacing zeros with "I" for incomplete grades on numeric scales in order to lessen the impact that a zero has on a student's average. Students who receive the incomplete grade would then report to a work session outside of school hours to make up the zero, allowing for a meaningful consequence, as opposed to a student simply accepting a zero as a grade (Guskey, 2004).

Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) integrated the use of contract grading to support students in a first-year writing course. Within the class, students are provided with a rubric that details responsibilities of all involved parties. As students review the expectations outlined in the rubric, they have a keen understanding of what provisions they must uphold to receive the grade outlined in the course contract (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009). Throughout the duration of the 14-week course, Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) utilization of contract grading increased student-teacher discourse around expectations for assignments and decreased inconsistent grading practices (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009).

### *A Transition to Standardization*

Published in 1983 *A Nation at Risk* created a sense of crisis that called for reform of public education in the United States (Scott, 2011). The report asserted that the nation's current public education system was failing to create a competitive workforce (Scott, 2011). This publication led to the first national educational summit, led by President George H.W. Bush (Scott, 2011). *A Nation at Risk* placed an emphasis on creation of rigorous course standards nationwide and increased accountability for teachers as it relates to student achievement (Denning, 1983). President Bush and state governors laid the groundwork for the 1999 Education Summit, facilitated by President Bill Clinton, to ultimately create the *America 2000: Excellence in Education Act* (Scott, 2011). In response, schools began to place greater weight on standardized test performance and academic benchmarks, which in turn influenced grading practices, shifting the focus from individual student growth to performance metrics tied to accountability measures. President Bush and state governors laid the groundwork for the 1999 Education Summit, facilitated by President Bill Clinton, to ultimately create the *America 2000: Excellence in Education Act* (Scott, 2011). The *Excellence in Education* legislation created structures and reform in hopes of "reinventing the nation's school system" (Scott, 1993). The *Excellence in Education* legislation created structures and reform in hopes of "reinventing the nation's school system" (Scott, 1993). The act outlined expectations for school choice, national testing, and the creation of a new type of school (charter schools) as an option for families (Scott, 2011). The report assessed the relationship between student achievement and college admissions as it sought to understand how to meet the needs of all students across the nation (Denning, 1983).

### ***No Child Left Behind***

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation, passed in January 2002, was a “noteworthy congressional attempt to improve student achievement and otherwise reform elementary and secondary educational programs in the United States” (Simpson et al., 2004). The NCLB legislation mandated uniform school improvement goals nationwide and set sanctions for schools that failed to meet them (Goertz, 2005). Through the legislation, each state adopted updated academic standards to assess student performance through state-specific performance indexes (Simpson et al., 2004). State-level departments of instruction were forced under the legislation to identify what specific state course standards students would be assessed on for math and reading and how to effectively assess students with disabilities for those same course standards (Goertz, 2005). Under *No Child Left Behind*, schools began to focus on aligning instruction to state standards to increase student achievement on state assessments (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). The NCLB legislation increased levels of accountability for classroom teachers for all students, regardless of their educational background or ability (Goertz, 2005). As a result of higher levels of accountability, schools and teachers increased their focus on identifying achievement gaps and addressing the needs of underperforming students (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). Despite its intentions, NCLB also faced criticism for its overemphasis on high-stakes testing, narrowing of the curriculum, and pressure on educators to “teach to the test,” which in many cases negatively impacted instructional creativity and comprehensive approaches to student learning. This shift in focus toward standardized assessments and data-driven instruction began to influence grading practices, prompting educators and policymakers to question whether traditional grading methods accurately reflected student mastery of academic standards.

### ***Every Student Succeeds Act***

Under President Obama, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015. The ESSA legislation prioritizes student equity practices in all classrooms, as it works to ensure that all students, regardless of racial and/or socioeconomic background, have an opportunity to graduate from high school, college or career-ready (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017). It also created new means of accountability for all schools to ensure that students across all ability levels had access to highly qualified instructors and schools that were working to facilitate instruction and support programs that would ultimately increase student engagement and achievement levels across all student subgroups (Adler-Greene, 2019). ESSA legislation mandated statewide assessments in reading, math, and science in designated grades as well as annual English language proficiency assessments for students identified as English language learners (Plans, 2015). In conjunction with the state assessments, ESSA mandates that all states utilize rigorous academic standards as a part of each grade level and/or course curriculum (Adler-Greene, 2019). While this legislation continues to shape the way that educators support and assess student achievement, legislators did not change traditional grading systems. ESSA's emphasis on equity, consistent academic standards, and valid measures of student learning prompted many schools and districts to reexamine traditional grading practices, leading to a growing interest in SBG as a way to align classroom assessment with ESSA.

### **Standards-Based Grading**

SBG allows for student achievement to be measured by assessing student growth in specific course objectives. This assessment is conducted over the entire duration of a course, rather than a specific marking period (Carberry et al., 2012). The integration of SBG in a classroom allows teachers and learners to gain a new understanding of the deeper relationship

that exists between curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Scarlett, 2018). Utilization of this model allows teachers to report on individual elements of a student's learning and abilities to ultimately increase student achievement in the classroom (Jung & Guskey, 2007).

SBG equips both teachers and students with a deeper understanding of what students know and understand and what they are able to do with that knowledge. Further, teachers can use the data collected from a student's work as a means of profoundly communicating with a student about their academic progress (Ulrich, 2012). Through the utilization of a SBG model, both formative and summative assessments are broken down into well-defined standards allowing both students and teachers to hone in on what information is being covered and what performance tasks must be effectively completed to meet expectations for that specific learning standard (Bostic, 2012). In assessing student work, teachers must acknowledge that a student's grade is deeper than a calculated numeric value; a grade should center on feedback specific to the student, should be consistent among classes, and should promote additional student learning (O'Connor, 2007).

Heflebower and Hoegh (2014) noted that when an elementary school community in Missouri made the decision to shift to a SBG system, there was a notable shift in the learning culture within the school. The school's leadership team noted that students began to take more ownership of their learning as they knew precisely what areas they had mastered and what specific standards they needed additional support from their teachers to reach mastery (Heflebower & Hoegh, 2014). In a study conducted across grades K-12, Guskey, Swan, and Jung (2011) worked collaboratively with district and school leadership to create a standards-based report card, one for K-5 and a second for 6-12. The redesigned report cards were distributed to 2,093 families across all grade levels (Guskey et al., 2011). Following the distribution of the

report cards, surveys were distributed to the participating teacher (Guskey et al., 2011). Of the participating teachers, 59% returned completed surveys back for review (Guskey et al., 2011). The data from the surveys showed that the participating teachers found that SBG allows for more specific insight into how a student is performing and provides clarity on what support a student might need to be successful in a course (Guskey et al., 2011).

### ***Facilitating Standards-based Grading***

With the successful facilitation of standards-based instruction in a middle school, teachers and their professional learning teams are able to analyze student data deeply to shape instruction. This analysis allows for teachers to isolate specific standards where students may need additional instruction, enrichment, or remediation and can integrate this into their facilitation of content to students (Ulrich, 2012). A transition to a SBG system shifts an educator's mind to planning instruction based on what they expect students to learn and what they expect students to do with the knowledge gleaned from their instruction rather than teaching to a specific assessment (Bostic, 2012). Standards-based instruction encourages students to be assessed on their overall performance and encourages students to have access to multiple opportunities to master a standard throughout the duration of the course. Similarly, this instructional model does not penalize a student for a missing assignment with a zero; instead, a student should continue to have access to submit evidence of mastery throughout a grading period. This instructional strategy shifts stakeholders away from utilizing a grade as a punishment and encourages grading to promote student mastery (O'Connor, 2007).

With report cards being a primary focus for educational stakeholders (O'Connor, 2017), a transition to a SBG system will result in report cards that have significantly more information about a student's academic abilities in their classes. Stakeholders can access this data as a way of

further supporting growth and achievement for students as they transition into new courses (O'Connor, 2017). In a study conducted by Lehman, De Jong, and Baron (2018), the authors compared five middle school sites in the Heartland Community School District, four of the middle schools selected implemented a traditional grading system and one school site implemented a SBG system. The middle school implementing SBG is identified as a Title One school, with 98% of students receiving free or reduced lunch (Lehman et al., 2018). Lehman, De Jong and Baron (2018) utilized a “non-experimental, causal-comparative, ex-post facto research design,” and found a positive correlation in middle grades math teachers who utilized standards-based reporting and their students’ scores on a standardized math assessment (Lehman et al., 2018). The participants noted that they were able to design more personalized instruction for their students, based on the detailed feedback given from their students’ previous teachers, as well as their profound understanding of how students were performing during the duration of their course. Participants noted that they were able to more effectively communicate with students and families about how each student was performing and were able to identify where students might need additional support (Lehman et al., 2018).

### **Summary**

This section of the literature review provides a brief explanation of the purpose and history of grading in the United States. The section also provides an explanation of what SBG is and how it can be successfully implemented into classrooms. The literature cited in this section shows that a SBG system is an alternative option to the traditional grading systems. Educators can utilize SBG as a means of communicating with students and their parents, as a tool for planning and facilitating meaningful instruction and as a resource in increasing student achievement. The literature above provides explanation to grading practices in the United States,

but the literature does not include studies of teacher morale and attrition. The next section of the literature review serves to analyze what literature states regarding teacher morale and attrition and how they are impacted by the utilization of SBG systems.

### **Teacher Morale**

Teacher morale can be defined as the “professional interest and enthusiasm a person displays towards the achievement of individual and group goals in a given job situation” (Govindarajan, 2012, p. 57). Ultimately, teacher morale is shaped by the way an organization works to meet a teacher’s personal and professional needs within a school community (Mackenzie, 2007). An individual’s mindset and performance are impacted by the way their school acknowledges their individual needs (Mackenzie, 2007). School leaders must continue to prioritize teacher morale within their school buildings, as there is a connection between teacher morale and student achievement (Thomas, 1997). Teacher’s morale is impacted by their levels of work-related stress, their overall job satisfaction, level of teacher efficacy, and school climate (Collie et al., 2012).

Work-related stress is a reflection of negative emotions, as a result of job-related tasks (Collie et al., 2012). In their study, Boyle, Borg, Faizon, and Baglioni (1995) worked with 81 schools and surveyed teachers with an anonymous questionnaire regarding their levels of stress at work. Through the analysis of 844 returned surveys, the team found that poor colleague relations and student misconduct are contributors to a teacher’s levels of work-related stress (Boyle et al., 1995).

Job satisfaction is related to the degree to which an individual feels that their working needs are being met (Collie et al., 2012). Teachers that experience job satisfaction offer a higher quality of instruction and provide more support to their students (Kunter et al., 2013). Toropova,

Myrberg, and Johansson (2021) explored the role that job satisfaction has on student achievement through an analysis of 8th-grade math teachers and their responses to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Through data analysis, responses for job satisfaction were connected to school working conditions and teacher characteristics (Toropova et al., 2021). The study found that “school working conditions, teacher workload, teacher cooperation and student discipline were most important for teacher job satisfaction” (Toropova et al., 2021, p.92).

Teacher efficacy is defined as “judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated” (Collie et al., 2012, p.1190). In a study where 342 teachers were surveyed, Guskey and Passaro (1994) found that teachers that were self-reported to have higher levels of efficacy were also teachers that felt that they had an increased impact on the overall well-being of their school and student performance. The research from this study found that teacher efficacy plays a role in a teacher's sense of well-being in their school (Guskey & Passaro, 1994).

School climate is considered to be the overall quality and character of a school (Cohen et al., 2009). Maria Cristina, Viotti, Guidetti, and Converso (2016) conducted a study where 337 teachers were surveyed to determine the impacts that school climate had on teacher morale. Their study found that there was a negative correlation ( $r=-.17$ ) between teacher morale and school climates with excessive work demands placed on teachers (Maria Cristina et al., 2016). Tubbs and Garner (2008) reviewed the impact that building climate has on teacher morale through a study conducted on a public elementary school in Georgia. The study included administering an anonymous survey that included 27 Likert scale questions and 3 open-ended questions to the 42 faculty members (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). The results found in the study,

informed Tubbs and Garner (2008) of the staff perception that the negative climate that existed within the school was a factor in overall teacher morale as well as a decline in student achievement.

### ***Standard-Based Grading's Positive Impacts on Teacher Morale***

A transition to SBG allows for teachers to have a more profound understanding of how their students are performing (Mackenzie, 2007; Noschese, 2011; Thomas, 1997). This deeper understanding allows for teachers to become more intentional with the assignments they are giving to assess student learning, decreasing the amount of unnecessary grading of assignments that are not aligned to course standards (Noschese, 2011). By utilizing a SBG system, teachers can spend less time sorting through irrelevant student data and hone in on what are the most important contributors to a student's success in their classroom and focus primarily on those items (Guskey, 2019). Hill (2018) found in working with teachers that implemented SBG in their schools felt that they were better able to reach their students through SBG, as they had a deeper understanding of the content they were teaching to students as well as what specific standards students were thriving and which standards students needed additional instructional support (Hill, 2018). The transition to a SBG system also lends teachers the opportunity to engage more collaboratively with their students, as students begin to gain a meaningful understanding of how they are performing in a specific class (Iamarino, 2014).

The transition to SBG has had a positive impact on levels of teacher collaboration within the school community. Selby (2012) examined the work of secondary teachers in a Midwestern school. Participants were interviewed to gain an understanding of what levels of support they needed during their transition to a SBG system (Selby, 2012). Participants shared that the transition to SBG transitioned to teachers working in teams to identify what standards to assess

and how (Selby, 2012). Selby (2012) noted that teachers shared that in this process, they began to create more meaningful collaboration with their building colleagues. This creation of a network of support is essential in helping teachers succeed in their classrooms and contributes to building a positive school culture and climate (Selby, 2012).

Through a study analysis including 38 different studies of K-12 schools, Guskey (2019) reported that teachers noted that utilization of a SBG system allows for a streamlined approach to feedback within a school system. Guskey (2019) references a study where 1,483 secondary school teachers in Virginia were surveyed to gain insight on their opinions of grading systems at their respective schools. Responses from educators noted that students had a better understanding of what was expected of them in each of their classes, allowing teachers to focus on providing meaningful instruction, rather than spending time interpreting grading expectations to students (Guskey, 2019). Similarly, in schools where SBG is being implemented with fidelity, teachers are provided with additional information on their students' abilities as they enter their classes for the first time, allowing teachers autonomy to proactively plan for needed intervention and/or enrichment opportunities to best increase student achievement (Hill, 2018).

### ***Standard-Based Grading's Negative Impacts on Teacher Morale***

During a transition to a SBG system, many teachers noted the significant amount of time that it has taken them to transition away from their traditional grading system (Hill, 2018). Teachers also shared a lack of opportunities for professional learning to assist them in their transition to using standards to assess student work as this system forces educators to create and revise grading rubrics to align closely with course standards (Hill, 2018). In a study including 162 secondary school teachers regarding perception of the impact that grading systems have on students, Guskey (2019) noted that teachers had a negative perception of student work

completion when transitioning to a SBG system. Teachers shared through questionnaire responses that the removal of numeric and letter grading from their classes also caused students to lose motivation in turning in work on time and a general loss of academic motivation (Guskey, 2019). Teacher perception is largely that students are most motivated by their numeric score on an assignment, as compared to their peers (Guskey, 2019). Many teachers perceive that a traditional grading system adds an additional layer of behavioral management to their classrooms as they are able to leverage grades with students to maintain behavioral expectations (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Veteran teachers verbalize the largest downward shift in transitioning to a SBG system as they feel that the transition to a new grading system forces them to change their instructional practices completely (Hill, 2018).

In a qualitative study involving 30 secondary school teacher participants, Hill (2018) collected data through individual interviews. Through an analysis of interview data, Hill (2018) found that teachers that have experienced a transition to a SBG system noted that there is a strain on parental support for students as they do not fully understand how their student is progressing throughout a course when using SBG. (Hill, 2018) Parents are used to seeing a traditional grading scale in hopes of knowing whether their student is passing or failing a class, and teachers are spending an increased amount of time supporting parents in navigating a new grading system (Hill, 2018). Knight and Cooper (2019) utilized a phenomenological methodology to gain insight into how teachers are impacted by utilizing SBG. Through a study of seven teachers serving across five different high schools in the Central U.S., Knight and Cooper (2019) found that educators operating under the SBG system are finding themselves spending time with families to balance what the community feels they know is best with what their district or school has mandated they implement in their classrooms (Knight & Cooper, 2019).

## **Teacher Retention**

It is estimated that nearly half of all new teachers leave the classroom within their first five years of the profession (Martinez et al., 2010). In the 2021 “US Teacher Survey” administered by the Rand Corporation, 25% of teachers stated that they intended to leave the classroom at the end of the school year and pursue careers outside of education (American University School of Education, 2022). Within the survey, participants noted professional burnout, low pay, lack of professional respect from the public and parents, and stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic as reasons for considering leaving the profession (American University School of Education, 2022). Karge and McCabe (2014) noted the significant role that school leadership plays in teacher retention. Through surveys of 124 education graduates from California State University, all of whom had been in the classroom for ten years (Karge & McCabe, 2014). Participants noted that the support that they received from their administration at their respective schools played a factor in their decision to remain in their schools, noting that support within their building helped to build the professional confidence that is required to remain in the teaching profession (Karge & McCabe, 2014).

Teacher retention is currently at a crisis level in the United States and while there are multiple reasons for low teacher retention in schools across the nation, many teachers attribute their decision to leave the classroom to their inability to manage the stress that coincides with their profession (McLaurin et al., 2009). Perryman and Calvert (2020) sought to understand why teachers were leaving the profession at such high rates. In surveying 3,500 students who graduated from Initial Teacher Education programs within the past five years, participants noted a “discourse of disappointment” in the teaching profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Perryman and Calvert’s (2020) data also showed that participants noted a challenging workload

and a lack of work/life balance as primary reasons for leaving the classroom permanently. Schools that experience high levels of teacher turnover lose the relational ties to their surrounding communities that allow them to maintain norms for familial involvement, staff professional conduct and student behavior (Miller & Young, 2021). When school communities face high levels of educator turnover, it becomes increasingly difficult for building leadership to facilitate and maintain initiatives that benefit student achievement and growth (Podolsky et al., 2016).

Teacher retention plays a key role in the success of a SBG system (Garland, 2021). In a study including six district leaders, three principals and three teachers, participants were interviewed to gain their perspective on a district wide rollout of SBG, Garland (2021) found that consistency in staff played a key role in the success of a school's transition to SBG, particularly as it pertained to maintaining high levels of integrity in the larger vision of a shift in grading practices (Garland, 2021).

### ***Standard-Based Grading's Positive Impacts on Teacher Retention***

When SBG becomes a part of the instructional culture, teachers are able to invest more intentionally in the success of their students (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). This sense of ownership over student growth and achievement can be a contributing factor to a teacher's decision to stay in the same school for multiple years (McLaurin et al., 2009). Through a qualitative study, Cox (2011) interviewed sixteen high school math teachers through focus groups and individual interview sessions to determine their perception of how SBG impacted their instruction. Cox (2011) found that in instances where teachers feel that they have a strong understanding of how to successfully implement SBG within their classrooms, they find that they have a deeper understanding of how to focus their instruction to meet the needs of their students (Cox, 2011).

As teachers feel an increased sense of impact in their students' ability to learn and succeed academically, they are more likely to remain within a school community for longer periods of time (Makenzie, 2007).

With the utilization of a SBG system with a school community, there is an increased level of teacher collaboration to ensure that standards are being assessed consistently (Iamarino, 2014). Educational researcher Jonathan Doherty notes in his text that teacher turnover rates remain low at schools where teachers have access to supportive colleagues within their community (Doherty, 2020).

### ***Standard-Based Grading's Negative Impacts on Teacher Retention***

A transition to SBG results in teachers having to make significant changes to the way they facilitate instruction in their classrooms. This significant shift leads to teachers, particularly those that are considered to be veteran teachers, looking to teach in schools that operate under a traditional, numeric grading system (Hill, 2018). Hill (2018) found that veteran teachers preferred to work in schools where the workload associated with grading was less than that of schools that utilized SBG. Similarly, teachers feel that transitioning to standard-based grading has caused them to focus a significant amount of their time on building capacity in parent understanding of how to interpret the new feedback and grading system (Knight & Cooper, 2019). As teachers feel that building expectations deplete their resource of time, they are more likely to step away from teaching within that school community and pursue additional options for employment (Makenzie, 2007).

Building leadership plays an integral role in the transition to a SBG system. When school leaders fail to provide teachers access to professional learning opportunities and support to

teachers as they adjust to a new reporting system, teachers are more likely to step away from their current teaching assignment (Townesley, 2019).

### **Summary of Chapter Two**

This chapter serves to summarize a review of literature related grading. By first exploring the purpose and history of grading, there can be a deeper appreciation of where grading first originated, versus where it stands today. SBG serves as an alternative to the traditional grading systems most educators have become accustomed to. By providing teachers, students, and families with a more detailed description of what a student knows in a given content area, instruction can become more personalized to best suit the needs of learners and can make a positive impact on student achievement. A shift to a new grading system does require time and effort of school staff and as such, staff morale and retention must be considered. By reviewing the literature associated with staff morale and retention as they relate to SBG, it is easier to appreciate the impact that a transition to SBG can have on a school community.

The review of literature presented in this chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the core themes central to this study: SBG, teacher morale, and teacher retention. While existing research highlights both the potential benefits and challenges of implementing SBG, there remains a gap in understanding how such transitions affect the educators who are central to their success. The studies examined suggest that teacher morale and retention are critical factors in instructional reform, yet few have explored these dimensions in the context of a long-term grading shift at the middle school level. To address this gap in research, the following chapter outlines the methodology used to investigate administrator and teacher perceptions at Pilot Magnet Middle School. Chapter Three describes the mixed-methods

approach used to collect and analyze data, detailing how these methods were selected to explore the connections between grading practices and teacher morale and retention.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The method of research used to complete this study included both quantitative and qualitative approaches with the purpose of evaluating the SBG program within a public middle school. The goal of the study is to identify any links between teacher morale and turnover and the implementation of SBG at the middle school level. Data collection for this study of Pilot Magnet Middle School included a review of teacher retention and turnover data as well as an exploration of the staff perspectives through the facilitation of focus groups and interviews. The exploration of the information gathered in this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of connections between rates of teacher morale and turnover and SBG in a way that may support building leaders in their implementation of similar grading practices in their respective schools. Through a review of teacher working conditions surveys, teacher turnover, and retention data as well as information gleaned from interviews and focus groups I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to a standards-based reporting model and teacher morale?
2. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to standards-based reporting model and teacher retention?

### **Site Selection**

During the 2018-19 school year, Pilot Magnet Middle School (PMMS) made the decision to transition from a traditional grading model to SBG model. This decision was made collaboratively between the school's Leadership Team and the school district's Academics Team, with approval from the School Board. PMMS is the first middle school in their district to

make the transition to SBG. At the time of the school's transition to this new system, the school principal had served the school community for three years. During her leadership, Pilot had become a restart school, allowing leadership additional autonomy in decisions made for the school. The restart school model came to fruition as a component of North Carolina's Race to the Top movement in 2010 (North Carolina General Statute §115C-105.37B). The statute allowed for low-performing schools to close and reopen under the governance of an outside organization (Anrig, 2015). In North Carolina, public schools did not take advantage of this restart option, and in 2015 North Carolina Department of Instruction sought to create a new policy to support low-performing schools across the state (CereNC, n.d.) Through the creation of the NC Restart policy, low-performing schools were granted flexibility away from state regulations, while still remaining a part of their district (NCDPI, 2017). The increased flexibility given to the NCR schools aligned with the ESSA legislation guiding principles, that local school leadership should be in charge of making decisions to impact school improvement.

PMMS is identified as a Title One school, serving 51.5% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The student population is diverse, the student population is currently comprised of: 37.8% White, 30% Black/African American, and 24.8% Hispanic/Latino. The school staff includes approximately 90 teachers, 10 of whom are classified as Beginning Teachers (teachers within their first three years in the profession). In the 2017–2018 academic year, Pilot employed six teachers with over 15 years of service at the school, 30 teachers with 10 to 15 years of experience, 44 teachers who had been at the school for 5 to 10 years, and 20 teachers with less than 5 years of tenure. During the 2021-22 school year, the principal resigned as a result of burnout from the COVID pandemic. A new principal was identified to serve the school in March 2022.

## **Research Design**

As PMMS piloted a new form of grading and feedback, it is essential that research is done to determine how the system impacts the staff at the school. “Program evaluations serve to provide both summative and formative data to facilitate program improvement” (Worthen et al., 1997, p.2). As the district and school leadership utilized PMMS as a pilot site for a new SBG system, a program evaluation was necessary to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The data collected within the evaluation can assist district leaders in determining whether a SBG system should be implemented in other district middle schools and what aspects of the program need altering to best serve the needs of other school communities. Vedung (2017) refers to program evaluation as a *systematic reflection*. Through the utilization of a mixed methods approach, the data collected will provide a comprehensive understanding of what is working well and what needs improvement within Pilot’s grading system as it pertains to teacher morale and retention. This systematic reflection will allow educational leaders at the school and district levels to gain insight into how to best support teacher morale and retention in schools utilizing SBG.

## **Program Evaluation**

For the purpose of this research, a single school’s program of SBG was evaluated. This evaluation was based on a review of quantitative and qualitative data for Pilot. The data in review focused on teacher morale and overall retention as they relate to the school’s standards-based reporting model. As the pilot middle school for their district’s new reporting model, Pilot was the most appropriate site to conduct this specific evaluation. Currently, there is an abundance of research literature about best practices for SBG in the elementary level (Adrian, 2002; Iamarino, 2012; McMillan et al., 2002). This study is unique in that it provides the

educational community and the corresponding leadership with new research literature about how SBG is impacting middle school educators. To ensure teachers felt comfortable sharing their honest perspectives on the school's transition to SBG, focus groups were utilized, and were facilitated by a non-supervisory colleague.

The Teacher Working Conditions Surveys from Pilot were an important component of this evaluation. I reviewed these surveys prior to drafting focus group and interview questions, identifying areas where teachers expressed notable levels of concern or satisfaction. This initial analysis helped guide the creation of targeted, relevant questions for my interviews and focus groups. After conducting the focus groups, I revisited the Teacher Working Conditions survey data to assess how participant responses aligned with broader trends identified in the survey results, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between teacher perspectives and survey data.

In their research, Ansay, Nelson, and Perkins (2004) found that focus groups offer a way to discover more in-depth responses from participants. Their research found that program evaluations utilizing focus group responses as a means of collecting data, uncovered genuine perspectives on how participants were impacted from a youth advocacy program (Ansay et al., 2004). Utilizing a focus group structure supported a more open dialogue and helped to create an environment of trust among participants.

In addition to individual and small group interviews, Pilot's teacher turnover rates and responses from their Teacher Working Conditions survey were reviewed. The Teacher Working Conditions Survey is a statewide survey designed to capture educators' perceptions of their school's working environment. For the purposes of this study, particular attention was given to

teacher responses in the areas of professional learning communities, curriculum alignment, and family engagement.

### **Data Collection**

Within this study, three methods of data collection were utilized: (1) quantitative data analysis of retention results and teacher survey responses from the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years as compared to the 2017-18 school year; (2) individual interviews and (2) focus group interviews of current and former PMMS staff members consisting of four teachers each. The staff selected included school leadership from the 2018-19 school year as well as a sample of classroom teachers from each of the years. The review of school retention data and teacher survey responses was reviewed first, in order to shape the questions that would be asked in interview sessions and to note any trends that were present in the available data.

In conducting interviews and small group sessions, I created a representation of current staff members at Pilot as well as of staff members who have left Pilot since the school has transitioned to its new grading system. Individual interviews were completed with school administrators, versus focus groups with teacher participants. Interviews with administrators were conducted to gain insight on their perspective of how teachers were supported at the district and school level, and how they viewed those supports impacting teacher morale and retention. The teachers that participated were working at the school as classroom teachers during the 2018-19 school year. I made the decision to separate school leadership from teacher participants to allow teachers to feel comfortable being completely transparent with their responses to questions.

All participants received an email inviting them to participate in an interview or focus group (Appendix A/B). In that correspondence, I gave them an option of meeting either in

person, or virtually, to best suit the needs of the individual. Once participants agreed to participate, interview times were scheduled to best suit the participants. Once focus group participants confirmed their willingness to participate, a survey was sent out to identify the best time to conduct the focus group sessions. All participants received a copy of the questions that were discussed in their respective sessions (Appendix D/E) as well as an Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) prior to the session. Focus groups and interview sessions were scheduled to be no longer than two hours and were recorded to be transcribed. All transcriptions were coded to protect participant confidentiality.

### **Application of Framework**

This study is grounded in the conceptual framework of Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (1998), which illustrates how organizational structures, individual agency, and social networks interact to shape school reform implementation. This framework was selected because it provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how teachers' experiences and responses to reforms are influenced by both systemic and interpersonal factors.

In this study, Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan's (1998) framework shaped the analysis of qualitative data by structuring the coding and theme development process around the three areas: school structure, culture and teacher agency. Utilizing this framework allowed for a deeper understanding of how and why the transition to SBG influenced teacher morale and retention.

### **Data Analysis**

Hatch (2002) defines analysis as a "means of organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories" (p. 148). Hatch's

approach to effective data analysis informed the process used to examine data collected from PMMS. This analysis was guided by a systematic review of responses to identify recurring themes related to how teachers perceived the impact of standards-based grading on their morale and retention. In reviewing data collected through school report cards, staff retention data, interviews, and focus groups, I assessed the impact the school's new reporting system has had on teacher morale and retention at the school.

I was able to make interpretations of quantitative data in reviewing Pilot's report card and their teacher turnover data from the 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years as compared to the 2017-18 school year to identify shifts in teacher retention at Pilot since the transition to a SBG model.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with a portion of this timeframe and likely contributed to challenges in teacher morale and retention due to concerns like increased staff absences and instability in school environments, participants did not reference COVID-19 during focus groups or interviews. Instead, their responses remained focused on the school's transition to SBG and its impact on their experiences at Pilot. While the broader context of the pandemic may have been an influencing factor on school culture, it was not explicitly identified by participants as a factor in their perceptions of morale or retention.

Following the guidance of Creswell's (2016) steps for qualitative research, I prepared data from interviews into transcripts in order to code participant responses into themes based on participant perception of their experiences utilizing SBG. Coding responses in this way allowed me to identify themes and make connections from the transcribed data (Creswell, 2016). The qualitative data collection from both interviews and focus groups allowed further understanding and explanation of what went well with the school's new reporting system and what can be

altered to improve morale and retention. To analyze the qualitative data gathered from interview and focus group transcripts, I employed a deductive coding approach and conducted four rounds of coding. The first round involved summarizing the data to gain a general understanding of participant responses. In the second round, I identified and labeled initial categories based on recurring ideas and concepts aligned with the research questions. During the third round, I refined these categories into broader themes related to factors influencing teacher morale and turnover. Finally, in the fourth round, I examined the relationships and connections between themes to better understand the complex dynamics contributing to teacher experiences at PMMS. Through the utilization of classical content analysis, I hope to code the data collected from focus groups and interviews to identify themes in participant responses to understand how teacher morale has been impacted since Pilot's transition to a SBG system.

### **Validity**

According to Heale and Forbes (2013), the triangulation of data adds to the depth of conclusions that can be drawn from data analysis. As multiple forms of data collection are utilized, commonalities that are highlighted across contexts carry a heavier weight for the researcher (Heale & Forbes, 2013). In reviewing data to assess Pilot's grading system, a review of focus group and interview data was compared against data collected from the school report card and the results of Pilot's Teacher Working Conditions survey.

During the time of data collection and coding, I was a current staff member at Pilot. As such, I had to be cognizant of the personal stake I had in the success of the school and its programming. Researcher Ronald Chenail discusses the importance of researchers recognizing their bias and stresses the importance of creating and maintaining open-ended questions throughout the interviews and data collection (Chenail, 2011). Each question utilized in

interviews and focus groups followed this standard. As I interpreted the results, I had to be sure to remain impartial, identifying what the data actually shows, rather than what I envisioned for the success of Pilot's grading program.

### **Role of Researcher**

My role as the researcher for this program evaluation had to be very structured and intentional. During data collection, I served as one of the assistant principals at Pilot, so, I had to remain cognizant of my role within the Pilot Community and how it might have impacted a participant's willingness to be interviewed or might have altered their openness with the responses to interview questions. I also had to remain cognizant of my own personal bias as I reviewed retention data as well as the responses from the Teacher Working Condition surveys.

As an assistant principal at PMMS during their transition to SBG, I had a personal stake in the success of the grading system as well as how this system is impacting teacher morale, and ultimately, teacher turnover. While there is rich literature discussing both teacher turnover and SBG, it is my hope that this study of Pilot's relatively new grading practices will help to highlight any existing relationships between the two entities. As a former member of the school community, I have a rich historical knowledge and understanding of where the Pilot community has come from and where its stakeholders hope to see the school go. Additionally, as a former member of the school community, I have the benefit of the working relationships that have been developed over time and can leverage these relationships to gain more transparent perspectives from participants during the evaluation. Similarly, I am aware that my former role as a school leader may cause current staff members to be hesitant in providing negative feedback regarding the school's grading system. While working with current staff, I was conscious of my role as a

leader in the building and how it may impact an individual's willingness to engage in interviews or focus groups as a part of this evaluation.

### **Summary of Chapter Three**

Chapter Three outlined the research design used to explore how the transition to a SBG model at Pilot has influenced teacher morale and retention. By combining quantitative data from teacher working conditions surveys and retention records with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews, this approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of teacher perceptions within the school's evolving grading framework. The strategies for data collection and analysis were chosen to ensure both depth and credibility, drawing on established research methods to identify themes that reflect the lived experiences of educators navigating this instructional shift. In Chapter Four, I present the key findings that emerged from this analysis, organized around the study's central research questions and framed by the themes of school structure, teacher agency, and school culture.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

In chapter four, I present the findings from the following research questions: “How do school structure, teacher agency, and school culture affect teachers' perceptions of teacher morale during the transition to a SBG model in middle school?” and “How do school structure, teacher agency, and school culture affect teachers' perceptions of teacher retention during the transition to a SBG model?” Data were gathered from multiple sources, including teacher working conditions survey responses from the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 school years; individual interviews with school administrators; and focus group interviews of current and former staff members. Hatch (2002) discusses analysis as a means of identifying themes through the organization of data to find meaning through data. Using Hatch’s framework, I organized the data to illustrate the various themes from interviews with school administrators as well as current and former staff members. To establish credibility, I utilized classical content analysis to identify emerging themes (Stemler, 2001). I reviewed the interview and focus group transcripts, notes I took during the interviews and focus groups, average, school-level teacher working conditions survey responses, and teacher retention rates. I triangulated the information gathered from these sources to ensure that the most appropriate themes from the study were highlighted to provide an accurate depiction of staff and teacher perception of SBG at Pilot.

### **Presentation of Findings**

I drafted interview and focus group questions to reflect Pilot’s transition to a SBG system by assessing the school’s overall structure, culture, and agency (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 1998). Becker and Grob’s (2021) show that a school’s investment in well communicated school structures and prioritizing school culture is necessary to retain highly qualified teachers. Similarly, when teachers feel they have agency within their working environment, they are more

invested in the school they work in and have a deeper sense of purpose and passion for the classroom (Bosso, 2017). In consideration of the connections between school structure, culture, and agency, I gathered data from four sources: former school administrators, former teachers, current teachers, and teacher working conditions surveys. All research participants were associated with PMMS's transition to a new grading system and were directly involved with the school's implementation of the new system. While interpreting the data collected from participant interviews and focus groups, I have considered the participant's role within the school community and responses have been categorized into themes associated with either structure, culture, or agency. The chart below provides a pseudonym and background information for each participant involved in the study.

<b>School Administrator Participants</b>	
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Background Information</b>
Rebecca	Rebecca served the Pilot community for 7 years as a school administrator. Rebecca advocated strongly for Pilot's transition to a new grading system. She spent time working with district leadership in the office of academics to support the school's transition away from a traditional grading system.
Benjamin	Benjamin served the Pilot community for 7 years as a school administrator. Benjamin played a key role in collaborating with district academics specialists to create effective rubrics for each course offered at Pilot.
Anthony	Anthony served the Pilot community for 2 years as a school administrator. Anthony joined Pilot after the initial rollout of SBG.

### **School Administrators on Structure**

Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan (1998) discuss the importance of structure as a component of success for educational reform. The structural forces that are put into place at the classroom, school, and district level contribute to the success of a new system. These structures can include

budgetary support for schools to provide professional learning, instructional resources for teachers, and schoolwide expectations for professional learning communities (Datnow et al., 1998). When speaking with school administrators regarding the impact that SBG had on teacher morale and retention, I asked each participant questions about what processes were put into place to support the school's transition from the school and district level, and what structures might have benefited from revision to better support classroom teachers in hopes of gaining a better understanding of how administration hoped to preserve teacher morale and maintain retention during their transition to SBG.

Responses from school administration formed two primary themes. The first theme that arose in speaking to school administrators was around the need for support from the district. Participants believed that the success of a new grading system at Pilot required support from the school district. School administrators shared that they felt that some of the barriers that arose during the first years of implementation could have been avoided if the school district had provided more direct support to Pilot during their transition to a new grading system. The second theme that arose from school administrators was for the need for a functioning learning management system. Participants stated that the success of SBG at Pilot necessitated teachers having a learning management system that met their instructional needs.

***Theme 1: Administrators believed the success of a new grading system required greater support from the school district.***

In speaking with each of the school administrators regarding their feelings about how their staff was impacted during the school's transition to SBG, each of the participants remarked on the need for district support in order for the school to be successful with their shift to a new grading system. During their interviews, administrators shared that they would have benefitted

from district-led professional development, support from the district Office of Academics to assist in writing course rubrics, support from the district's Technology Services in managing a new learning management system, and support from the district Communications Office to ensure that incoming families were receiving messages regarding Pilot's shift to a SBG system.

Rebecca shared that collaborative efforts between administration and the Office of Academics and Office of Student Information Systems at the district level were critical in supporting a rollout of a new grading system at PMMS. She noted,

We spent countless hours working collaboratively to iron out all of the details. The district supported communication with stakeholders to ensure that families were able to process such a significant change regarding how student progress was being evaluated. The district's Office of Academics supported Pilot through revisions of completed course rubrics to ensure they aligned with district and state standards, while the Office of Student Information Systems worked to create a platform that would support the needs of PMMS as they implemented a SBG system. With the district allocating support in the creation of course rubrics that outlined each course's competencies, the school's administrative team was able to focus on their plans for communicating their new grading system to the community, while also being provided autonomy in making sure that the grading system was aligned to meet the needs of staff, students, and families. Specifically, the transition to standards-based grading was intended to ensure that staff, students, and families have a deeper understanding of what students know and what they can do with that knowledge.

While school administrators initially felt support from the district, staff and families still needed additional support from teachers as the rollout of the new grading system continued. A participant noted the ongoing struggle for relevant, meaningful professional learning

opportunities, both for school administration and teachers. A member of the administrative team, Benjamin shared,

Teachers would often share that the [district] required professional development was not useful for them, because it often did not fit the needs of what our school was working to do. We were isolated. It was difficult to send a teacher away from their classroom for a training that was not connected to the work we were doing at Pilot.

School leaders noted that with the amount of teacher turnover that existed at PMMS--17.91% at the close of the 2017-18 school year, 33.33% at the end of the 2018-19 school year, and 26.36% for the 2019-20 school year—it would have been beneficial to have the district’s support in onboarding new staff prior to the start of the school year. School administrators noted that they would have benefitted from financial support to pay teachers to attend training sessions over the summer and would have liked to see the district representatives assist with facilitating professional learning opportunities. Rebecca shared,

As we planned for the second school year [implementing SBG], I had to find ways to pay new teachers to come in for onboarding. Initially, I asked [the district] to allocate funds to us for this purpose and was told no. I had to find other ways to compensate teachers to cut their summer short for time to onboard, and I could not make this mandatory...The extra funding would have incentivized teachers to sacrifice time for additional professional learning.

School leaders stated that they felt that professional learning opportunities became a task that they were left to facilitate without support from the district. Anthony stated,

It felt like we were on an island. I wanted to support teachers in the best way possible, but I did not always feel that I had the resources to give them... We would go to our own

professional development, and it would be the same experience. What we were being provided did not apply to Pilot.

Anthony's responses mirrored the concern of the other administrative team members. While there was a consistent desire to build capacity to implement SBG among school administrators, PMMS was not provided with the appropriate amount of support from the school district needed to assist with the initial rollout of a new grading system to teachers and staff.

In speaking with school administration, there was a clear need for a partnership to exist between the larger school district and the individual school. In their responses, school administrators shared their hopes for the district to participate in professional learning opportunities for school staff, both with financial and in-person support. While Pilot received support during their initial phases of rolling out the new grading system to their community, the administrative team felt that they would have benefitted from ongoing support, particularly in continued professional learning tailored to implementing SBG for both administration and their teachers. School administrators stated that district support would have been beneficial in their efforts to create schoolwide structures for professional learning for teachers as a strategy to maintain positive teacher morale and decrease teacher turnover during the school's transition to a new grading system.

***Theme 2: Administrators believed that effective learning management systems were essential for the transition to a SBG system to be effective.***

School structures play an important role in supporting teacher morale and retention by providing staff with appropriate resources. Learning management systems are an integral part of the learning experience for teachers, students and families as they provide a platform for teachers to share curriculum resources, provide grading and feedback to students, and allow a channel of

communication between teachers, students, and families (Turnbull et al., 2020). Effective learning management systems allow for stakeholders to effectively engage in the learning process from a variety of stages and provide resources to support student learning (Kulshrestha & Kant, 2013). In our conversations, each administrator highlighted the value of identifying an effective learning management system to support all teachers, students, and families during Pilot's transition to SBG. They noted that the school had to make the decision to move away from the management system adopted throughout the district to find a better platform to facilitate the teaching and learning being done at PMMS. Rebecca shared:

The district wanted us to use [the district's standard LMS]. That platform works for schools utilizing traditional grading, but it just was not providing our teachers with the tools they needed to give effective feedback to students and their families.

In their interviews, all school leaders shared that Pilot made a commitment during the initial roll out of SBG to have a deeper understanding of how students were performing in all of their classes. Rebecca stressed that "a numeric average does not tell [students] what they know. We want students to visualize not only what they know, but what they can do with what they know."

Pilot's principal was able to secure an alternative to the district's standard learning management system; however, school leaders shared that this new management system created different concerns for teachers. Anthony shared that teachers had concerns with the significant learning curve that accompanied the rollout of a new learning management system. They stated,

The new system had a lot of great features, but our school was given such limited professional learning on how to really use the system that I found myself struggling to support students and staff with navigating the system. It became a source of frustration for teachers and for me. I could not support my team in the way I needed.

All of the school leaders shared in their interviews that it was difficult to identify a learning management system that met the needs of the school. While their new management system had the functionality that the teachers needed, many of the staff expressed frustration to school leaders about the interface being difficult to use. Benjamin noted the frustration that was felt across all stakeholder groups. They stated,

[The new management system] had a lot of positive aspects to it. Teachers could push assignments, share feedback, and track data all in one place. The problem was that it was so difficult for parents, and sometimes teachers, to navigate, that I often wondered if the cost outweighs the benefit. I feel that I spent more time explaining the ‘behind the scenes’ of the system over anything else.

There was a consensus among school leaders regarding the value of a functional learning management system. Similar to concerns with professional development, the uniqueness of the SBG system at Pilot became a barrier for administration to face as they worked with the school community. School administrators shared that during the initial rollout, staff members gave a large amount of time and resources to educating staff and families about how to utilize the new management system and how to track student progress. During the first semester of PMMS utilized their new LMS, Rebecca reflected,

Parents were so accustomed to [the district’s standard LMS]. We had to educate families on how to use [our new system] and combat their desire to revert back to what they were more comfortable with...While [our new system] had a different interface, we needed that shift to capture how students were progressing within their course standards. [The district’s standard LMS] was not meeting our needs.

School administrators noted that it was an “all hands on deck” approach to educating families about how to utilize the system, and even with the dedicated focus on educating staff, students, families, and feeder elementary schools, administrators continued to receive communication from families and staff that their new system was still not meeting the needs of the school community. Administrators reflected on the amount of families that expressed frustration with their difficulty with navigating the new management system and their difficulty with viewing their student’s progress in a given class. The confusion that came from families required administrators to dedicate additional time into educating families on how to successfully navigate the school’s LMS, rather than supporting teachers with parent communication about student progress. Anthony reflected on conversations he had with Pilot families,

Parent conferences became about defending [Pilot’s] choice to use [the LMS] rather than about how their child was actually doing. I felt torn as the assistant principal because I wanted families to feel heard, but I also knew that my teachers were there to discuss their students, not [the LMS]. That wasn’t something they had control over...teachers were trying to do the best with what they had.

School administrators all commented on the concerns brought to the school from families, because Pilot was the only school utilizing this new system. Many families were frustrated with having to learn how to navigate the new system, particularly when they had students attending other schools that utilized a learning platform adopted by the entire school district. Benjamin commented,

We spent so much time trying to educate families about [the LMS] and we still had families that struggled. There were so many parent meetings that were overtaken by teaching them how to navigate [the management system]. I really had to work to marry

the needs of navigating the system with trying to keep families focused on their student progress instead of complaining about [the LMS] during our meetings, that was a hurdle we had to deal with, too.

In addition to working to support staff with meeting their professional learning needs, PMMS's leaders had to navigate how to increase teacher, student and parent capacity with a learning management system that proved to be difficult for users to navigate while also working to ensure that teachers, students, and families understood their reasoning for moving away from the platform that was being utilized across the district. Access to an effective LMS is critical for teacher morale and retention as it can reduce workload for administration and teachers, allowing individuals to focus on the work being done in classrooms instead of dedicating time to navigating a difficult learning management system.

### **School Administrators on Culture**

A positive school culture plays a role in influencing teacher morale and retention during times of transition, as a school's culture impacts a teacher's experiences and willingness to respond positively to changes. Changes made within a school community are implemented more successfully in school's where a strong positive culture is present (Louis & Smith, 1991). As school leaders work to restructure teaching and grading practices for staff, it is important that the changes coincide with a shared vision between the administration and teachers (Gericke & Torbjörnsson, 2022). During their interviews, school leaders stressed the importance of ensuring that all teachers understood the "why" behind the school's transition to SBG and more importantly, that the teachers agreed with the school's transition away from the traditional grading system that teachers were accustomed to.

Interviews with school administrators formed two significant themes associated with the culture of Pilot. During the transition to SBG, school administrators found that there was a renewed focus on engaging families around how students were performing in schools. Administration shared that they saw a shift in the way families were beginning to communicate with their student's teacher, school counselor, and grade-level administrator, initially to better understand how to interpret the school's new learning management system, then ultimately to discuss how their student was performing. The second theme that arose in speaking to school administrators was around the increase of instructional awareness that teachers began to have in their classrooms. Administration noted that Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings began to be a time where teachers collaborated to share best practices, align instruction to course standards, and review student data.

***Theme 3: Administrators believed that SBG led to increased family engagement.***

Family engagement positively impacts teacher morale through an increase of teacher-parent communication and improved family appreciation for teachers, creating more supportive relationships for teachers and families (Rudo & Dimock, 2017). Administrators at PMMS stressed the value of family engagement throughout their interviews.. Each administrator recognized the role that family buy-in plays in the success of any new school-based initiative. During their interview, the principal of Pilot discussed the intentional steps that school and district leadership took to engage and inform families of changes being made at PMMS. Administrators noted the six community information sessions that they utilized to give families an opportunity to understand the vision that the administrative team had for the school and to have a forum to ask questions and share concerns. During these sessions, administrators and teachers presented information to families, including a brief explanation of what SBG is, and

provided some examples of what teacher feedback should look like for their students.

Administrators explained how athletic eligibility would be calculated and how eighth grade teachers would work with their students' high schools to make course recommendations.

Teachers shared how Pilot hoped that standards-based grading would positively impact a student's self-advocacy skills. In his interview, Anthony noted,

Family communication was a huge component of the success of this rollout. We had to be strategic about how and when we were engaging families because without them, this work would not be successful....We had more families present in our building that summer for our sessions than for any other event we hosted. Parents were curious, students were curious...it was important to have everyone in the same room, having the same conversation. I know we still had work to do to get stakeholders on board, but it was nice to start the school year with so many of our families having a basic understanding of the work we were trying to accomplish that year.

Administrator interviews highlighted much of the proactive work that school administration did, and the positive impact they believed it had on the success of the school's transition. Each of the interviews noted the benefits of parent partnerships. Administrators shared that parents were becoming more engaged in not only what grades their child was receiving, but what specific content their student was learning. They noted that the transition to SBG "reestablished the types of conversations" that were occurring between school staff and families. Benjamin reflected on parent conferences, sharing,

The types of conversations we were able to have with students and families really did begin to shift in that first year. Teachers and students both had a more profound understanding of what they knew and what they needed additional support with...Families

were really partnering with us and our targeted intervention efforts because they could see the areas that their students needed help with. Receiving personalized feedback helped to shape conversations with families. Conferences became about what could be done to support the student moving forward, as opposed to placing blame.

Pilot's transition to SBG caused a shift in the way that school staff was able to partner with families. School administrators noted that they began to see a positive shift in their Teacher Working Conditions survey as well, with the percentage of teachers agreeing that “Teachers provide parents/guardians with useful information about student learning” increasing from 85% prior to the school’s transition to SBG to 90% after the integration of SBG (NC TWC Survey, 2024). Administration shared, “[SBG] opened a door for families to have positive experiences with our staff, they saw our deep understanding of how their child was performing. They saw the relationships that were there. They saw that we viewed their child as more than a number on a piece of paper. Increased family engagement at PMMS created a culture of support between teachers and families, leading to a positive impact on teacher morale and retention.

***Theme 4: Administrators believed that the implementation of a SBG system created a positive shift in the efficiency of Professional Learning Communities at Pilot Middle School.***

In their research, Harris and Jones state, “well-constructed professional learning communities can contribute to system-wide improvement” (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 173). As teachers begin to see how their work is positively shifting their school environment, they begin to have a larger sense of ownership over the success of their school and are more likely to remain in their profession from year to year. Administration at Pilot noted that prior to their shift to SBG, they had dedicated much of their professional learning to facilitating effective professional learning communities (PLCs) within their school. School leaders noted that the culture of PLCs

centered on unit planning and sharing frustrations with one another versus assessing student achievement data to inform instruction. The interviews conducted with administration highlighted a shift in the discourse being covered at weekly professional learning meetings. PLC meetings became less about what test they were giving and when, and more about how they were planning a unit, based on how course standards fit together. Benjamin noted,

Within that first year we saw an almost immediate shift in the conversations teachers were having. I could walk into any [PLC] meeting and teachers were talking about the standards. They were using standards as a road map to guide instruction rather than picking activities just because they liked the lesson.

A shift to SBG facilitated a renewed focus on instructional standards, teachers began to focus more on mapping course units based on what standards connect with one another as opposed to planning a unit based on their preferred activities. Administrators reflected that the PMMS teachers had a deeper understanding of what students need to know and more specifically, what students should be able to do with what they know. Teachers were able to calibrate their weekly meetings to better meet the instructional needs of their students, and the school community at large as teachers began to appreciate the vertical alignment that exists between their course and the prerequisite and subsequent classes that students might experience during their time at Pilot and beyond. They shared that the school's Teacher Working Conditions Survey began to note this increase in collaborative work as well, with a 5% increase in teachers noting that they “work in professional learning communities to develop and align instructional practices” (NC TWC Survey, 2024). Rebecca shared their vision for PLCs being one where teachers would build capacity in their understanding of how the standards they were teaching vertically aligned to other grade levels and further aligned with other courses being taught to students. They stated,

Under the new model, teachers began to see how their content standards tied to other courses. They began to identify ways to facilitate cross curricular collaboration with colleagues. For the first time since I had been at Pilot, I saw teachers collaborating with other content areas all in the hopes of deepening student learning.

Throughout each of their interviews, administration spoke to the cultural shifts occurring with collaboration. Administrators noted the renewed tone to PLC meetings, where teachers had a much more profound understanding of what gaps existed for each student individually, as well as for entire classes. They noted that they were able to observe more teacher conversations about what students need and how they could shift instruction and design intervention to meet the needs of every learner. Anthony noted the new emphasis on intervention, they stated,

Walking into weekly meetings with teachers has a completely different atmosphere under a SBG model. Teachers are analyzing their assessments with integrity...they are dedicating time in their meetings to identifying what standards might need to be retaught, highlighting students who may need to utilize intervention time, and when other staff might need to be brought in for support...Teachers were beginning to use data associated with their content standards to drive PLC discussion.

Through the lens of Pilot's administrative team, their transition to a SBG model has deepened their teacher's professional capacity to meet the needs of their students. Teachers were able to utilize their collaborative teams to design and facilitate instruction and intervention aligned to course standards with a better understanding of the content they should be teaching in classes to a deeper understanding of how every student in their classrooms were performing on each standard. Administrators at PMMS believed that transitioning to a SBG system led to a positive shift in the culture of PLCs. Administrators noted a positive change in teacher collaboration,

communication, and instructional practices, ultimately creating a more supportive environment for teachers. As a result, the shifts in PLCs have positively impacted teacher morale and retention by reducing workload stress and fostering a sense of shared purpose and achievement.

### **School Administrators on Agency**

The agency of educators within an institution contributes to the way that a system is able to make lasting reform (Datnow, 1998). As school administrators facilitate significant changes within a given school community, acknowledging the agency that exists within stakeholders can support the transition that the school undergoes (Datnow, 1998). As teachers begin to have an increased sense of ownership over the decisions being made within their schools, levels of teacher retention will increase. During their interview, the principal noted the value of engaging teacher leaders from across the school throughout the process to ensure that staff would be fully supported during the first year of the new grading system.

During interviews with school administrators, two themes arose. Administrators felt the success experienced during the first year of the grading system's rollout was due to the onboarding of the grading system during the summer. Administrators shared that this time allowed for teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of a SBG system and to give feedback regarding their instructional experiences with it. Administrators shared that their hope was for teacher leaders to take the information learned during their summer learning sessions to share back with their PLCs as an additional means of support during the transitional school year. By using the skills gained from their summer learning sessions, teacher leaders would be able to support their PLCs in creating standards aligned instruction. The second theme that came from speaking to Pilot administrators was a need to increase staff agency through ongoing professional learning opportunities throughout the school year and beyond. This professional

learning would support returning staff members in their mastery of the SBG system and as a means of onboarding new staff members that were joining the PMMS community.

***Theme 5: Administrators felt that teachers need access to onboarding to successfully implement SBG.***

Opportunities for new staff to engage in discourse and training with their colleagues reduces an educator's likelihood of leaving the profession during their first year in the classroom (Schroepfer, 2021). Similarly, increased opportunities for teacher collaboration promote positive work culture and boost morale (Tubbs & Garner, 2008). During each of their interviews, Pilot administrators noted the value of the professional learning that took place during the summer before the 2018-19 school year for new Pilot teachers. Rebecca discussed the opportunity to create a shared vision among the staff to help increase teacher buy-in going into the next school year. They stated,

Our summer work session was integral to that first year's rollout. We were able to engage in open discussion about where [Pilot] had been, and what our vision was for its future...I was able to facilitate discussion about the role that SBG would play in our future.

During Pilot's summer work session, teachers were able to engage collaboratively in the creation of course rubrics for every class being offered at the school. Administrators shared that during this onboarding time, teachers had the chance to work with their colleagues and receive real time support from the district's Office of Academics. This professional development opportunity gave teachers a better understanding of how SBG would function within the school community at large, and more specifically, how they would facilitate SBG in their classrooms. Benjamin reflected on this time, stating,

The summer work session was an ‘aha’ moment for teachers. They were looking at their course content in a more profound way than ever before... We had a teacher share with the group that this was her first time in her twenty-year career that she fully grasped her content standards.

At the start of the 2018-19 school year, PMMS administrators saw a shift in the instructional planning that took place for teachers. Rebecca noted that “professional learning communities began to focus their instruction on how to unpack course standards for student learning...shifting from maintaining an instructional status quo of the same, mundane student assignments.”

Administration felt that the Teacher Working Conditions Survey showed this shift as well, with 95% of teachers agreeing that the school’s curriculum is aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NC TWC, 2024). With administration feeling the need for ongoing support, they felt that teachers were likely feeling a sense of frustration with mastering all of the components to the new grading system as well, with the 2018 Teacher Working Conditions survey reporting that 28.57% of teachers reporting that they do not feel that administration considers teacher concerns regarding professional development (NC TWC, 2024).

### **Summary of Findings for School Administrators:**

<b>Summary Of Findings</b>		
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Impact on Teacher Morale</b>	<b>Impact on Teacher Retention</b>
Administrators believed the success of a new grading system required greater support from the school district.	Lack of district support with professional learning and family communication created frustration among teachers.	Insufficient support led to some teachers considering leaving.
Administrators believed that effective learning management systems were essential for the	Difficulties with learning management platforms caused stress and decreased confidence for teachers.	The lack of a user-friendly system contributed to teacher dissatisfaction, decreasing retention.

transition to be effective.		
Administrators believed that SBG led to increased family engagement.	Increased communication with families improved teacher satisfaction and motivation.	Greater family involvement fostered a sense of community, positively influencing retention.
Administrators believed SBG improved Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).	Increased PLC collaboration led to more teacher-teacher support and boosted morale.	A positive PLC culture provided a support system that encouraged teachers to stay.
Administrators felt teachers needed onboarding to implement SBG successfully.	Lack of onboarding created stress and resistance to change.	Insufficient training made teachers feel unprepared, leading some to leave.

Administration shared that their experience, SBG had shifted how teachers facilitate instruction in their classroom. While there is a strong need for ongoing support from the school community and larger school district, administrators shared that teachers at Pilot shared that they were positively impacted by the school's transition to a SBG system. Administrator noted an increased engagement from families. They reflected that they are able to focus more intentionally on student achievement data and have opportunities to lead within their professional learning communities and the larger school community, giving teachers an increased sense of purpose and ownership at PMMS.

School administrators play an integral role in reforming the structures within a school (Good, 2008). At PMMS, school administrators played a key role in the school's transition to a new grading system. During their interviews, the leaders stressed the importance of structure, specifically from the school district to support SBG through assistance with professional learning and onboarding initiatives. Administrators stressed their frustration with the learning management system, noting that it was difficult for teachers and families to use and required a

lot of time to be dedicated to supporting families and students with navigational aspects of the LMS, rather than focusing on student performance. Administrators hoped that a user-friendly learning management system would reduce stress for teachers by allowing them to spend less time on managerial tasks, and more time on instruction and building relationships with their colleagues and students. Administration also spoke to the importance of building culture where teachers had higher levels of instructional efficacy and where families were more engaged with how their student is performing across all academic contexts. Their hope was that the transition to SBG would create a culture that empowered teachers to be leaders within Pilot and increase their connectedness to the school community. Administration shared that an emphasis on educator agency, specific to continuing professional learning opportunities and ongoing onboarding for new staff will ultimately increase the success of the school's transition to SBG. Administration hoped that an increase in agency among PMMS teachers might positively impact teacher morale through an increased sense of ownership over the instructional shifts occurring at the school, ultimately increasing teacher retention as teachers became more invested in their new grading system.

### **Teachers on Structure**

In their research, Johnson and Fargo (2010) discuss the value that meaningful professional learning has on school reform. They note that when teachers are provided with appropriate professional tools, they are able to become better agents of change within their school communities. As teacher empowerment increases within a school, teacher morale and retention improve with teachers becoming more invested in the mission and vision of their school. PMMS teachers noted the need for consistent, ongoing support from both district

leadership and school administration. Teachers hoped for a professional learning from leadership that would help build their capacity of implementing a new grading system for their students.

Responses from teacher focus groups resulted in two primary themes related to structure. Similar to leaders, teachers shared that there was minimal district support during the school's transition to a SBG model, which resulted in ongoing frustrations with the school's learning management system. The lack of a highly functioning grading platform resulted in teachers investing ample time into learning systems that were not meeting their needs, as well as an increase in time spent communicating with parents as they were attempting to interpret their student's progress in their classes. Teachers were spending more time assisting parents with navigating the platform than they were discussing their student's performance in class. Teachers also stressed the need for school administrators to create and facilitate consistent, targeted professional learning for staff. Teachers noted that this was an area for improvement at Pilot, with only 31.11% of Pilot Staff reporting that they have a voice in the school's professional learning, as compared to the district's rating of 82.08%, according to the 2018 TWC results (NC TWC, 2024). They noted a sense of frustration with the professional learning that was given, noting that the few professional learning opportunities contributed to an increase in their depth of knowledge on successful integration of SBG into their previous instructional practices.

<b>Teacher Participants</b>	
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Background Information</b>
Nathan	Nathan served as a 7th grade math teacher at Pilot for 3 years. He supported the school on their School Improvement Team. During his focus group session, Nathan shared the positive impact that the new grading system had on his teaching practices.

Daniel	Daniel served as a 7th and ELA teacher at Pilot for 5 years. He worked closely with the school's intervention team to support tiered instruction at PMMS. In his focus groups, Daniel advocated for a more structured transition to SBG for teachers.
Rachel	Rachel served as a 6th grade Social Studies teacher at Pilot for 15 years. During her time at Pilot, she served as a member of the school's instructional leadership team. In focus group sessions, Rachel stressed the importance of administrative support for teachers during their transition to SBG and noted the positive impact on student engagement.
Lauren	Lauren served as an 8th grade science teacher at Pilot for 5 years. She supported the school on their School Improvement Team. In focus group sessions, Lauren stressed the importance of the impact that the school's LMS had on her experiences with SBG.
Emily	Emily served as a 7th grade ELA teacher at Pilot for 12 years. In her sessions, Emily highlighted the need for ongoing professional learning to support teachers with SBG.
Allison	Allison served as an 8th grade social studies teacher at Pilot for 6 years. In focus groups, Allison shared that she felt that SBG helped with family engagement and also stressed the need for vertically aligned professional learning for teachers.
Samantha	Samantha served as an 8th grade ELA teacher at Pilot for 3 years. In focus group sessions, Samantha shared that the school's transition to SBG required a large dedication of time from teachers. She also shared that SBG supported content mastery for students.
Vanessa	Vanessa served as a 6th grade math teacher at Pilot for 5 years. In focus group sessions, Vanessa highlighted the increased teacher collaboration that came alongside the school's transition to SBG.

***Theme 6: Teachers needed opportunities for ongoing professional development and new teacher onboarding.***

Effective school reform is supported through relevant, meaningful professional development for teachers, where they are offered support to build teacher confidence (King, 2014)c. A common support structure teachers mentioned was meaningful professional learning opportunities to support their transition to SBG. As the only middle school in the district that

was implementing SBG, teachers noted that they were “leading the charge” in this new grading system amongst their middle school colleagues, and they felt that they would have benefited from a structured professional development series to support this work. Rachel noted that administration encouraged teachers to embrace an instructional planning shift to “Backward Design” to better support their utilization of SBG. She noted that additional learning opportunities on this planning model would have benefited teachers during their first year implementing SBG. Emily remarked on the professional learning that was provided, making note of the deeper understanding they had of their content due to the initial professional development that was provided to staff, and shared that she felt teachers would have benefitted from continued professional learning opportunities to continue deepening their professional capacity with the standards they were teaching. She noted that teachers might have benefited from training on how to “train families” on how to adjust to the new grading system. Emily shared that the grading shift did increase family engagement, but also stated that it was often initiated due to a parent having difficulty understanding their student’s progress. Many focus group participants agreed that having administration facilitate training sessions on how to educate parents would have supported teachers during the first few years of implementation. Participants agreed that teachers would have benefitted from a structured professional development calendar to scaffold the rollout of SBG throughout their initial year of rollout to support varying needs of teachers as they surfaced throughout the school year.

Throughout their conversations, teacher participants commented on the variety of expertise and experiences that administrators and teachers brought with them to Pilot during the first year of implementation. They noted that ongoing professional learning focused on SBG

would have helped to bring all teachers together during their first year facilitating SBG. Daniel noted:

The biggest challenge for many of us that first year was consistency. We were all entering the school years with different levels of understanding specific to SBG...It would have really helped to have staff wide PD that was teacher led, so we were all learning the same best practices.

During focus group conversations, teachers also noted the SBG also shifted the school's need to align content vertically. Teachers remarked on how beneficial professional learning opportunities on vertical alignment would have been during the 2018-19 school year. Allison noted,

During the 2018-19 school year, my department began to appreciate the importance of certain standards, because it was so essential for students to master them before going to the next grade. In hindsight, it would have been helpful for administration to give teachers opportunities for departmental PL so we could unpack standards vertically.

As teachers reflected on the 2018-19 school year they also remarked on the lack of formal professional learning opportunities they received to support their use of the school's learning management system. Lauren remarked on their desire for a structured professional development to support their use of the management system. She reflected,

We had zero structured PD on how to make [the learning management system] work. If the district could have supported our school through training from our IT team, that would have helped us immensely those first few years.

Through providing teachers with opportunities to sharpen their skill and knowledge base, teachers are able to build their capacity and increase staff buy-in and sense of purpose, leading to improved teacher morale (Borg, 2018). As staff begin to have an increased sense of purpose and

ownership, teachers are more committed to remaining at a specific school, increasing teacher retention levels (Wang'ombe, 2022). Teacher participants expressed their frustration, and the frustration of their colleagues from the lack of formal professional learning opportunities on SBG from their leadership. This frustration had a negative impact on staff morale and retention at PMMS as teachers were left to navigate their new grading system independent of any schoolwide professional learning structures.

***Theme 7: Teachers needed a single learning management system to meet their needs and their students' needs.***

Effective learning management systems provide educators with a set of tools and a framework to effectively communicate content with stakeholders (Watson & Watson, 2007). Within the teacher focus groups, each participant contributed to the discussion of how Pilot's utilization of SBG was negatively impacted by their learning management systems. Allison shared that since the 2018-19 school year, PMMS has utilized two different systems, none of which adequately met teacher needs. While teachers shared a common frustration with their experiences navigating each respective system, Lauren reflected on their experiences and felt that this largely negative experience was due to being the first and only middle school in the district implementing a standards-based system. She noted,

[The LMS] was super frustrating...Since we were all learning the program together, it felt like we really didn't have anyone to turn to. [PMMS Staff Member] was the only person who really understood the system, but if you didn't teach on the same grade level as [them], it was impossible to get access to [them] for help... It wasn't like we could put a HelpDesk ticket in, because they weren't familiar with [the LMS] either. We were the blind leading the blind.

The teachers' primary complaint was connected to the amount of time they spent dealing with each system. Nathan explained the time dedicated to mastering how to effectively navigate each platform, then to setting up classes within each system, and the amount of time teachers dedicated to explaining the functionality of each system to students and their families. They noted that with SBG already requiring more time from teachers as they gave personalized feedback to each student, the lack of a user-friendly learning management system caused an "additional drain on teachers' already drained resources." Samantha noted their frustration to the group sharing,

Our time with [the learning management system] was by far the most difficult aspect of the grading system. I spent countless hours outside of school setting up my classes and then even more time providing feedback ...I don't know what system is best for our school, but the ones we have used were not meeting my needs.

As teacher participants expressed frustration with their experiences specific to learning management systems at Pilot, Vanessa noted that while the functionality of their second LMS was time consuming, it did meet the majority of their needs in regard to providing feedback that aligned with course standards. They shared,

[The LMS] did exactly what it was designed to do. I felt like the problem was that Pilot was the only school utilizing the platform, so when we had issues we didn't have anyone in [the district] to turn to.

As teachers shared and reflected on their experiences with the two different platforms utilized, they agreed that in many cases, being the pilot school might have contributed to their negative experiences with navigating SBG, rather than the grading system itself. The school district did not have any experience with the LMS that Pilot was utilizing, so teachers did not have access to

any support structures when they, or their students, were having issues with navigating the LMS. Teachers had to dedicate additional time and energy into mastering their LMS, which became a source of frustration for teachers, negatively impacting their morale. Allison noted that even with the difficult experiences associated with the learning management systems, that “SBG made [them] a better teacher.” Participants agreed with their comment, sharing that no matter how time consuming it was to utilize the various learning platforms, they supported working with a SBG system. Daniel noted,

[SBG] is best for kids. Students know what they can do with what they know. They ask questions based on feedback we give them, that shows that they are also starting to know what they *don't* know. I'll take the extra time dealing with a system that I don't love, when I see students taking my feedback and actually doing something with it.

Through focus group conversations, teachers shared that they felt a better functioning learning management system would have positively impacted teacher morale. However, teachers shared that the “good outweighed the bad” in their reflection of navigating varied platforms to implement SBG in their respective classrooms. Teachers shared that the LMS negatively impacted their ability to focus on student achievement and instructional planning due to the large amount of time they had to spend educating themselves, their students, and parents on how to navigate the platform. The amount of time teachers lost to navigating their LMS ultimately negatively impacted the morale of the teachers at Pilot. While teachers noted that the learning platform was a source of frustration, two participants shared that the LMS was not a contributing factor in their decision to leave PMMS.

**Teachers on Culture:**

Just as school administrators play an integral role in the success of school reform, classroom teachers share a role in the impact of a reform like standard-based grading, within the school community (Margolis & Nagel, 2006). In speaking with current and former teachers from PMMS, participants noted a shift that occurred for teachers and students during the 2018-19 school year as the school community made its transition into a SBG system. Participants noted a renewed sense of ownership over student success and achievement within themselves and their colleagues. The school culture of Pilot became one of teachers becoming more invested in student progress, as they had an improved understanding of how course standards connected from one course to the next. This renewed ownership of student learning was reflected in Pilot's TWC results, with an increase of 7% of teachers agreeing that they "provide parents/guardians with useful information about student learning" (NC TWC, 2024).

In reviewing teacher focus group data, two primary themes emerged. Teachers discussed a school-wide transition to a culture of collaboration within teacher PLCs, driven primarily by an increase in their understanding of how the specific standards being covered in their classrooms were impacting their colleagues' successes in their respective classrooms. Teachers also noted a shift in the types of relationships that were formed with their students, as they were able to have meaningful conversations with students and their families about their academic progress. Teachers shared that through the implementation of SBG, PMMS staff shifted into an appreciation for students being much more than a numeric average. Teachers began to see students as individual learners, working to build a student's academic abilities based on what content they have mastered, and what students are able to produce with their mastery of course content. During focus group discussion, five participants noted that these positive shifts to Pilot's

overall school culture enhanced levels of morale amongst teachers within the school and contributed to their decision to remain at Pilot for an additional year.

***Theme 8: Teachers believed that implementation of SBG increased teacher collaboration.***

Teachers are vital to the success of educational reform and as teachers work together to support student learning, they are able to make substantial impacts on the individuals they teach (Datnow, 2020). Within their focus groups, all teacher participants emphasized the importance of collaboration among their colleagues. Participants agreed that collaboration was “integral to their success” with implementing SBG at PMMS. Nathan shared their experiences with professional learning communities at Pilot, noting the shift in culture that took place during the 2018-19 school year.

Before that year, my team was always meeting because it was required. That year, our meetings became about unpacking standards and using backward design. It was the first time that I felt that we were a productive team.

In their conversations regarding professional learning communities, teacher participants noted that in large part, PMMS teachers experienced a shift in the PLC culture from maintaining compliance to administrative expectations to a commitment to “deep diving” into their respective course of study to improve their classroom practices with conversations about student progress utilizing relevant student data. Teachers remarked on the more intentional use of time within their professional learning communities to review student data to create targeted interventions for their students. Daniel noted,

SBG allowed my team to target intervention for kids in a much more meaningful way...because we were giving personalized feedback to every student on every standard, we were able to bring intervention needs to the table...I could engage my PLC in

conversations about what standards might need to be retaught. We were able to use our PLC time to create a plan for reteaching and remediation for all of the standards we were covering.

Six other focus group participants highlighted how their professional learning communities were able to align vertically within their departments to support student learning after the first year of implementation. Lauren discussed the shift in the collaboration across PLCs within the school stating,

Another big shift for my team took place at the end of that first year. We had collected student data from across every module we covered and were able to share that information with other grade levels to help target key areas that kids were missing throughout the year...we always knew at some level that this information was out there, but the new grading system equipped us with even more student achievement data to make data driven planning decisions.

During focus group conversations, teachers engaged in discussions around how teachers were “truly working together to support student needs.” Teachers remarked that teacher teams were utilizing a data driven “kid talk” during their weekly meetings for the first time. Vanessa noted,

A shift that I wasn’t thinking about came from the conversations my team and I began to have during kid talk...We still spoke about student behavior, but our conversations also began to be about how kids were performing in our classrooms academically, and how we would be able to support them as teachers...For the first time, we had student achievement data being used to drive those conversations.

The transition to SBG facilitated teachers reaching a shared vision for students through an increased priority of working collaboratively to support student learning. Higher levels of teacher

collaboration led to increased levels of teacher morale through shared inspiration and improved pedagogical strategies and ultimately an increased commitment of teachers to the school they serve (Goldstein, 2015).

***Theme 9: Teachers believed that implementation of SBG increased meaningful teacher-student relationships.***

Positive teacher-student relationships increase a student's sense of self-efficacy and ultimately, increase student achievement (Xu & Qi, 2019). As teachers engaged in focus group conversations, all participants noted that, ultimately, the benefit of SBG was the positive impact the grading system had for their relationships with students. Samantha noted the positive shift that it had for their relationships with students during the first year of implementation. They noted that the grading system encouraged teachers to have a deeper understanding of student needs, allowing them to engage students earlier in the school year. Emily agreed with this thought noting,

Something I was not considering was how SBG allowed me to learn my students much sooner than ever before. I had such a specific understanding of where they were at academically because I was forced to provide specific, personalized feedback to every student on every assignment. I knew what they needed and had a better understanding of how to help get them those things.

Focus group participants echoed this sentiment throughout their conversation. They discussed how they were able to learn more about their students' strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest at a faster pace. Rachel shared,

SBG pushed us to assess our kids across contexts, rather than with a basic multiple-choice assessment. I worked with my PLC to create project-based assessments which

really let my students' interests shine. I loved getting to know students this way because I was able to see their personalities come through in a new way.

The positive shift in teacher-student relationships was highlighted in the focus group through comments that teachers shared about how student intervention was affected by SBG. Allison shared how their teams were able to engage in student led conferences with their families, using SBG rubrics to shape their discussions. They noted,

One of the biggest successes I saw during those first two years came from the team meetings we had with families. We were able to give students a seat at the table during those conversations because students were able to articulate what they knew and what they didn't know...it was so powerful for kids to see their teachers and families partnering together to support their success. Our kids knew we cared about them as people, not just as a name on our roster.

Seven of the focus group participants noted that the positive shift in their relationships with teachers contributed to their support of SBG, and ultimately contributed to their reason to stay at Pilot. Nathan reflected,

Pilot is a tough school to work at. There are so many factors that contribute to a teacher's decision to leave the school. In my opinion, SBG was the reason I stayed. The work that we were doing was helping kids...I saw it in my classroom every day.

Samantha shared a similar sentiment in response to Nathan, they stated:

I have left [Pilot], and I struggled with my decision as to whether to stay or go. My decision had nothing to do with our grading system. Like [Nathan] said, the reason I stayed was because I was committed to supporting SBG at our school. I know it helped me help my students. I was committed to staying to see it through its first phases at Pilot.

According to Pilot's Teacher Working Conditions surveys, 60.32% of teachers committed to working the following year at Pilot, as compared to 55.38% from the previous TWC survey (NC TWC, 2024). Four of the focus group participants shared that Pilot's transition to their new grading system shifted school culture in a positive way. They noted that the school began to shift to having teachers with a renewed sense of purpose and passion, and an increased sense of ownership over student learning. Participants shared that they felt this cultural shift increased teacher connection to the school community, and positively impacted morale and retention for their colleagues.

### **Teachers on Agency:**

Priestly, Biesta, and Robinson (2013) define teacher agency as their levels of personal capacity as well as their ability to make sound professional decisions within their classrooms. In school communities with high levels of teacher agency, research finds that teachers' high levels of engagement-both in their classrooms and beyond have become an invaluable element of educational reform (Imnants & Van Der Wal, 2020). In Bosso's (2017) research, teacher participants shared that when given the opportunity to make decisions regarding their classrooms, they felt a strong sense of professional purpose and reported that they were happy to be in the classroom, with no intention of leaving the profession. The inclusion of SBG has impacted teachers' knowledge on their curriculum and content and reshaped the way many teachers facilitate instruction, giving teachers increased autonomy in their classrooms (Alvunger, 2018).

The PMMS staff have shared that they, too, have felt their teaching practices have shifted since the school's transition to SBG in 2018. Focus groups participants reflected that with their

utilization of Pilot's new grading system, they had a renewed sense of ownership over the learning that has been occurring in their classrooms.

During focus groups, teachers noted two themes in regard to teacher agency. Most consistently, teachers shared that they felt that their teaching practices improved after the transition to SBG occurred. Focus group participants shared that they felt in comparison to their colleagues at other schools, they had a deeper knowledge base and a more varied set of resources to support their own teaching and student learning. Focus group conversations also highlighted the importance of an onboarding process for teachers that were new to Pilot. They shared that they felt that administration did not do an effective job in transitioning new staff into the school's grading system. The lack of new staff support increased a teacher's learning curve in adjusting to the new school community and required their professional learning communities to devote time to supporting a teacher in their transition to best practices. Taking time away from a PLC's ability to plan instruction or review student assessment data during their weekly meetings

***Theme 10: To effectively implement SBG, teachers believed that new teachers needed access to onboarding experiences at their school.***

Effective teacher onboarding provides new staff an opportunity to build agency and increase the amount of support felt by educators within the school community (Webb, 2022). In speaking with teachers, it was clear from all participants that intentional professional development was a source of frustration for teachers. When teachers spoke more specifically about what they wished the framework would look like, all participants noted that Pilot had minimal to no SBG onboarding for teachers that joined the staff after the 2018-19 school year. Vanessa noted,

I joined the school during the second year of implementation. The principal spoke to me about the school's unique grading system, but once I accepted the position, I didn't receive any support from school administration to help me understand what that actually looked like in my classroom.

During the focus group session, participants agreed with Vanessa's experiences. They noted that the onboarding was ultimately left to the returning teachers, which added additional stress for teachers as they were still working to get their bearings on how to effectively implement SBG into their own classrooms. Nathan noted that professional learning communities had to take on the role of supporting new staff, they shared,

We lost valuable time during the first few weeks of the school year because we had to train new teammates on how to incorporate our rubrics into their classrooms, on how to use our various learning platforms and on how to make sense of student data.

Teacher participants agreed that administration should have found a way to bring in new teachers for onboarding sessions to ensure that they are comfortable with how to execute SBG in their classrooms. Rachel shared,

[Pilot] is already a unique school. Admin should be more intentional about how they support teachers that are new to our school. Simply noting that we use SBG during an interview isn't enough. I wish that new staff would be given a [Pilot] bootcamp before our work days began in August. That would have taken some of the stress off of returning teachers, there is just so much to learn.

As teacher participants discussed the need for onboarding, they noted that many of their newer teammates were often overwhelmed by SBG. Lauren shared,

I don't think that SBG would be the reason that a teacher left [Pilot]. I do wholeheartedly believe it is what's best for kids. Still, there are so many things required of teachers today... I do wonder how many of the teachers that left would have stayed if they had received better onboarding from administration and the school district.

Teacher participants agreed that creating increased teacher agency through intentional onboarding opportunities would likely support an increase in teacher retention for staff that started working at Pilot after the 2018-19 school year.

***Theme 11: Through the facilitation of SBG, teachers believe they have a deeper understanding of the content they teach.***

Teacher agency plays a key role in the success of an educational reform, as agency increases, so does a teacher's commitment to the success of their school (Egbo, 2011).

Throughout focus group discussion, all participants agreed that the most significant impact on teachers was an increase in their understanding of the standards associated with their courses. With their increased content knowledge, teachers were able to make learning more personalized to suit the needs of their students. Two participants remarked on how a veteran teacher shared in a staff meeting that this was the first time in over twenty years of teaching that they truly knew their content standards and saw how each standard was connected to one another. As teachers begin to have a deeper understanding of how their course standards are connected, they have more opportunities to use their professional agency within their instructional planning time.

Allison shared,

SBG required teachers to shift from teaching activities that they incorporated into their classes simply because they enjoyed the activity, to teachers aligning all of their instruction and learning opportunities directly to a course standard.

Participants noted that it has always been best practice to align teaching and learning to a standard course of study; however, there are many teachers who assign projects or engage with content, simply because they have personal interest in the topic, rather than because it aligns with their curriculum. Participants stated that this deeper understanding of standards has increased a teacher's capacity in strategic planning ahead of the school year. Six of the participants discussed that the utilization of SBG increased their levels of agency within their classrooms. Vanessa shared,

SBG allowed me to have such a deep understanding of what I needed to see my students accomplish during our time together. Honestly, [SBG] was really the first time I had a full picture of my course standards...my increased knowledge made me a better teammate in my weekly PLTs because I knew where my student learning needed to go...It made me a better classroom teacher because I could help steer my students to a goal.

SBG allows teachers to have more purpose in their planning as they are able to lean on their deeper understanding of their course standards to strategically pace their course to support student learning. Three participants noted that they were able to spend less time planning each week because they had a better sense of where they needed to direct student learning. Daniel noted,

Another huge advantage to SBG for my team was our ability to anticipate what students may need. We are able to track student data from previous school years and use that as a tool in our planning...We can allocate more time to certain standards because we can anticipate how course pacing will unfold for the school year...Now more than ever, we know how to instruct students so they know *what* they're learning, *why* they are learning

it and how it relates to standards that they'll see in the future...I know more about my teammates standards than ever before.

Participants that have left Pilot have noted that in their new schools, they have the most in-depth working knowledge of their content. Emily noted,

Even though I am one of the younger teachers in my new PLC, I definitely am taking the lead in aligning our instruction to our course standards. Other teachers don't have the same working knowledge of standards that [Pilot] teachers do, and definitely do not emphasize standards-aligned instruction the same way that [Pilot] does.

Though teachers did acknowledge that the transition to SBG resulted in the positive impact of a greater understanding of content, participants stressed the significant amount of time they had to devote to instructional planning in order to gain this content knowledge. Samantha shared,

I spent more time working with my PLC, planning and grading that year than I ever had. As teachers, we were diving more deeply into our standards than any of my colleagues at other schools, that created a huge lift on our part as we were completely revamping our planning for the year...Yes, I became more of a content expert than ever before, but that came after a huge investment of time on my part. Not every teacher at [Pilot] signed up for that aspect of SBG.

Participants agreed with Samantha's sentiment, sharing that they were not prepared for the time they would have to dedicate to reframing the way they taught within the new system.

### Summary of Findings for Teachers

Summary Of Findings		
Theme	Impact on Teacher Morale	Impact on Teacher Retention
Teachers needed ongoing professional development and onboarding.	Access to PD improved teacher confidence and capacity, increasing morale.	Well-supported teachers were more likely to stay in their roles at Pilot.
Teachers needed a single learning management system.	Pilot's LMS was overwhelming, reducing job satisfaction.	Frustration with inefficient LMS contributed to decreased retention.
Teachers believed SBG increased collaboration.	Greater teamwork led to a sense of professional growth and improved morale.	A strong collaborative environment encouraged teachers to remain at PMMS.
Teachers believed SBG increased meaningful teacher-student relationships.	Strengthened relationships with students improved job satisfaction.	Stronger student connections contributed to job fulfillment, increasing retention
Teachers believed SBG deepened their understanding of content.	Increased content mastery boosted professional confidence and instructional effectiveness.	Feeling more competent in their role encouraged long-term commitment.
Teachers believed new teachers needed onboarding.	Insufficient onboarding made new teachers feel unsupported, lowering morale.	New teachers without onboarding were more likely to leave due to feeling overwhelmed.

In speaking with the teachers from Pilot, it is clear that they have an appreciation for the impact that SBG has had on their school community. While the transition required additional time dedicated to professional learning, family communication and instructional planning, teachers ultimately felt that the new grading system was what was best for students. And, as shared by Nathan, it was a large factor in their decision to remain a part of PMMS.

During teacher focus groups, teachers spoke to the need for a structural shift in schools, in order for the grading system to be successful, they stressed the need for a more teacher-friendly learning management system and ongoing professional learning opportunities to support

their growth as instructional leaders. Teachers spoke to the positive cultural shifts that occurred as a result of SBG, both in the context of teacher collaboration, and relationships with students. Within their focus groups, teacher participants also noted the positive impact that the school's grading system had on teacher agency within the school community, highlighting an increased instructional capacity for teachers within the curriculum they were teaching, while also stressing the need for more intentional onboarding structures for new staff members. Teacher participants agreed that there were too many factors associated with Pilot to attribute SBG as a reason that teachers might have left the school community.

### **Summary of Chapter Four**

Chapter Four discusses the findings of the research conducted to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to a standards-based reporting model and two key factors, teacher morale and teacher retention. The research collected seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to a standards-based reporting model and teacher morale?
2. What are teachers' and school administrators' perceptions regarding the relationship between the transition to a standards-based reporting model and teacher retention?

Findings from participant interviews and survey responses were categorized into three overarching themes: culture, structure, and agency, aligning with the framework of school reform outlined in Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan's (1998) research. This framework was used to better understand the impact of SBG implementation from the perspectives of school administrators and teachers. Responses were further organized into subcategories to reflect themes that emerged from interview and focus group data.

Several themes emerged from the data regarding administrator perspectives on the transition to a SBG system. First, administrators believed that the successful implementation of the new grading system required greater support from the school district. Administrators reported that the district provided limited guidance and resources. Additionally, administrators emphasized the importance of having an effective LMS to facilitate SBG. They noted that without a centralized and functional LMS, teachers faced challenges in supporting parents with tracking student progress. Another key finding was that administrators perceived an increase in family engagement as a result of SBG. By shifting the focus from traditional letter grades to course mastery, parents became more involved in discussions about student learning and progress. Administrators also observed a positive shift in the efficiency of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at PMMS. With a shared focus on student mastery, teachers collaborate more effectively to analyze student data and adjust instruction accordingly. Administrators also acknowledged that for SBG to be implemented effectively, teachers required access to structured onboarding experiences. Without formal training and support, teachers struggled to navigate the transition, which negatively impacted teacher morale and decreased teacher retention.

Based on teacher focus group data, several themes emerged that highlighted both the benefits and challenges of SBG. Teachers consistently emphasized the need for ongoing professional development and structured onboarding, particularly for new teachers. Without these supports, educators found the transition overwhelming and confusing. Teachers expressed the necessity of having a single, integrated learning management system. The use of multiple platforms created inefficiencies and confusion, whereas a unified system would streamline the grading process and enhance instructional planning.

One of the most significant findings was that teachers believed that SBG increased collaboration among educators. With a clearer understanding of learning objectives, teachers worked together more frequently to develop strategies for student success. Teachers reported that the implementation of SBG strengthened meaningful teacher-student relationships. By focusing on mastery rather than traditional grading practices, teachers felt more engaged in building positive relationships with students to increase student success. Teachers indicated that SBG deepened their understanding of the content they teach. Focusing their attention on learning objectives allowed teachers to engage with curriculum materials in more meaningful ways, ultimately enhancing their instructional practices. Teacher participants shared the administrator's desire for structured onboarding experiences for new teachers. They stressed that without sufficient training, new educators struggled to implement the grading system effectively, which resulted in negative impacts for teacher morale retention.

The data collected from this study indicate that SBG offers potential benefits, such as increased collaboration amongst teachers, deeper content understanding, and improved family engagement. Both administrators and teachers identified the need for district support with professional learning opportunities, effective learning management systems, and comprehensive professional development. The data also highlights the critical role of onboarding experiences in ensuring that teachers feel prepared and supported in adopting this grading model.

In Chapter Five, I interpret these findings within the broader context of existing literature, discuss their implications for school and district leadership, and offer recommendations for supporting teachers during future grading reform efforts. This final chapter also reflects on the limitations of the study and proposes potential areas for further research.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

School administrators need to ensure that they foster a strong school culture in order to support high teacher morale, retention, and student achievement (Becker & Grob, 2021). As new policies and procedures are implemented within a school community, those changes impact teacher morale and can also have an impact on teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2011). Teachers need support at both the district and the school level to successfully execute instructional shifts in their classroom (Cohen et al., 2011). Research on teacher morale and retention shows that while school reform can impact morale and retention among teachers (Datnow, 2020), there are many issues that affect teacher morale and retention, including teacher working conditions, teacher salaries, and a lack of resources for teachers (Kavenuke, 2013). Recent trends suggest that teacher retention has consistently decreased over the past ten years, averaging 8% of teachers choosing to leave their current school, and another 8% leaving education completely (Taie & Lewis, 2023). District and school leaders alike must work to find successful strategies to increase teacher morale and retain teachers.

While factors such as working conditions, salaries, and limited resources impact teacher morale and retention, transitioning to a standards-based grading model does impact a teacher's experiences in the classroom. For example, teachers implementing an SBG model have to commit more time to grading, as they are providing individualized feedback to every student, based on their performances on a given standard (Townesley, 2019). Teachers also have to dedicate time to communicating with families about how to interpret standards based grading data and helping families interpret feedback (Hill, 2018). Educators that are implementing an SBG model invest more time in collaborating with their colleagues as they assess data and create instructional opportunities and assessments that are aligned with course standards (Ulrich, 2012).

Teachers that implement SBG also build a stronger depth of knowledge in the content they teach as they unpack all of their course standards to provide instruction to their students (Noschese, 2011; Thomas, 1997, Mackenzie, 2007). Through the SBG model, teachers also see an increase in student ownership of learning, as students begin to have a more profound understanding of what they know and what they can do with that knowledge (Guskey, 2018).

### **Summary of the Study & Research Questions**

This study examines teachers' and administrators' experiences with Pilot's transition to SBG, and how this transition impacted teacher morale and retention. To do so, I used Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan's (1998) framework to analyze participant responses to determine what they believed the impact of implementing SBG was on teacher morale and retention at PMMS. Hatch's framework includes three components:

1. Structure, or how the school and school district organized supports for Pilot's transition to SBG.
2. Culture, or the school's shared beliefs and instructional norms that influence teacher morale and retention.
3. Agency, or the teachers' instructional capacity and their ability to make decisions for their respective classrooms.

By reviewing administrator and teacher responses with the lens of Hatch's framework, this study attempted to understand how a school's transition to SBG impacted Pilot's overall teacher retention and morale. In this study, I ask:

1. How do school structure, teacher agency, and school culture affect teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of teacher morale during the transition to a SBG model in middle school?

2. How do school structure, teacher agency, and school culture affect teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of teacher retention during the transition to a SBG model?

The data gathered for this study was collected through interviews with three PMMS Administrators, focus group sessions with eight PMMS teachers, and a review of Pilot's teacher working conditions surveys. All participants volunteered their time to support this study and were employed at Pilot during the rollout of SBG. The administrator and teacher participants' tenure at PMMS ranged in length from as little as two years to as long as fifteen years, capturing a variety of perspectives on the shifts that the school made during their transition to a new grading system. To capture different perspectives, I selected teachers with a variety of different roles, from teachers who had no additional responsibilities outside of their classrooms, to those who served as members of leadership and school improvement teams.

I found that the transition to SBG had both benefits and challenges for teacher morale and retention. Administrators shared that the benefits of SBG were the increase in family engagement and improved collaboration within PLCs. They stated that the challenges associated with SBG were associated with a lack of district support, particularly with structured onboarding and professional development, and they stressed the need for an effective LMS. Teacher participants stated that the benefits of SBG were in the increased PLC collaboration, deeper content understanding, and more meaningful teacher-student relationships. Teachers shared that the challenges associated with SBG came from a need for improved onboarding and professional learning and from a difficult to use LMS.

### **Discussion of Themes**

I analyzed participant responses through the lenses of structure, culture, and agency (Hatch, 2002). I will now review each of the themes.

## **Themes found in Structure**

Houchard (2005) examines how school structure influences teacher morale, emphasizing the connection between a school's practices and procedures and a teacher's job satisfaction and commitment to staying. The study explores how decision-making processes and the way final decisions are communicated to teachers can impact both morale and retention. While PMMS worked to create clear structures for teachers and students to utilize during their transition to the SBG model, there were additional structures that were needed to support the school community during their transition. Teachers expressed frustration over the insufficient professional learning opportunities available to support them in implementing the new grading system. As a key structure of support within the school, the lack of these opportunities negatively impacted teacher morale during the transition. In his research, Guskey (2002) assesses the relationship between professional learning and shifts in teacher morale. Guskey's study found that when teachers have access to professional learning that they can apply directly into their classroom practices, teacher morale and retention is positively impacted (Guskey, 2002).

During review of data collected from interviews and focus groups, the following themes emerged for structure:

### ***School Administrators***

- The success of a new grading system requires support from the school district.
- Effective learning management systems were essential for SBG to be effective. During their transition, Pilot teachers did not have access to a LMS that met teacher needs.

### ***Teachers***

- Teachers needed opportunities for ongoing professional development related to....

- Teachers needed a single learning management system that met their needs and their students' needs.

### *Teachers and Administrators*

Both teachers and administrators shared that the transition to a new learning management system created an additional hurdle for teachers as they were working to navigate the school's new grading system. Participants from both groups mentioned the amount of time dedicated to mastering the new system and expressed a sense of frustration from teachers, students, and parents as they attempted to make meaning of student progress based on course standards while also navigating the new LMS.

Administrators and teachers also stressed the importance of teachers having access to professional learning opportunities to increase teacher capacity with facilitating SBG. In school settings where teachers feel supported as professional learners and feel that they have access to relevant professional learning, there are higher levels of morale and retention (Eskew, 2016). School administrators shared that they were hoping to receive additional support from the school district to assist with professional learning for teachers, especially those that were new to Pilot. Teacher participants shared that they were looking to school-based leaders to provide them with these ongoing opportunities. While participants had different opinions on who might have been ultimately responsible for additional professional learning opportunities, both agreed teachers would have benefitted from professional learning opportunities to support their facilitation of SBG in their respective classrooms.

Both participant groups also highlighted the positive impact that ongoing professional learning experiences could have had on a teacher's ability to facilitate SBG. Teachers and administrators believed that this increased confidence would have positively impacted teacher

morale and could have contributed to an increase in teacher retention. Research has found that in schools where teachers received targeted, personalized professional learning opportunities, there was a boost in morale, as teachers felt confident in meeting their professional expectations. Additionally, these opportunities led to an increase in retention, as teachers had access to the resources they needed to be successful in their classrooms (McLaurin et al., 2009).

As administrators work to maintain or increase levels of teacher morale and retention in their respective buildings, they benefit from a strong partnership with district leaders (American University School of Education, 2022). A collaborative relationship between schools and districts plays a crucial role in how effectively school wide changes, such as the implementation SBG, are introduced and sustained. School policies that intentionally support teachers, whether through professional development, clear communication protocols, or the allocation of fiscal resources, directly impact teachers' ability to adapt to new systems and sustain morale during times of transition (Sulit, 2020). Sulit (2020) emphasizes that when districts provide consistent and targeted support, such as resources for implementation or dedicated time for training, schools are better equipped to manage the demands of instructional change, which can affect teacher satisfaction and their willingness to remain in the profession. In their interviews, school administrators expressed a strong desire to function as partners with district leaders, particularly during the transition to SBG. They acknowledged early support in writing academic rubrics, but also identified a need for continued district assistance, especially in areas that directly influence teacher workload, such as parent communication and learning management system navigation. Without sustained and responsive district-level support, the demands of implementing SBG risk increasing teacher frustration and burnout, which can negatively affect both morale and retention.

There was a consensus among school administrators and teachers that the structures that were missing at PMMS during the rollout of SBG impacted teacher morale during the first years of the school's transition.

### **Themes found in Culture**

School culture can be defined as "the values, attitudes, and behavioral norms that are created and shared by school members, including students, teachers, and other staff" (Wang & Degol, 2022). A school's overall culture plays a large role in levels of staff morale and retention (Willis & Varner, 2010). Willis and Varner (2010) found that in schools where leadership has cultivated a culture of shared decision making, open communication and support from leadership resulted in increased morale and high levels of teacher retention, whereas schools with imbalanced power structures for staff resulted in teacher dissatisfaction and high turnover. As teachers are working to support student learning and achievement, their ability to engage collaboratively with one another, and with other stakeholders like school administrators, students, and families, impact their sense of success and their willingness to remain in the classroom for an extended period of time (Maria Cristina et al., 2016). In this study, I found that teachers felt that SBG improved collaboration not only within their PLCs, but also across different grade levels. Teachers reflected that Pilot's vertical alignment became more intentional, allowing educators to build on students' prior knowledge more effectively and ensure a cohesive learning experience through increased collaboration with their colleagues. This increased collaboration and strengthened professional relationships enhanced teacher morale and increased retention at Pilot.

Based on the review of data collected from interviews and focus groups, the following themes emerged for school culture:

### *School Administration*

- SBG fostered increased family engagement. Families were communicating more consistently with teachers and were more aware of what their student was learning.
- Implementations of a SBG system created a positive shift in Professional Learning Communities. PLC meetings became more focused on student achievement data and aligning instruction to standard course of study.

### *Teachers*

- Implementation of SBG increased teacher collaboration.
- Implementation of SBG increased meaningful teacher-student relationships.

My analysis of administrator interviews and teacher focus groups revealed a positive shift in relationships within the PMMS school community. For example, administrators highlighted the strengthened relationships that occurred with the school and families. Families were reaching out to teachers about their student's academic progress and were gaining a better understanding of how their student was performing and what supports they may need. Through SBG, parents were beginning to use parent-teacher conferences as an opportunity to support the work teachers were doing in their classrooms. Administrators shared that the increased opportunities to engage with families opened lines of communication between the school and parents leading to increased levels of consistent parental support. Participants reflected that SBG gave teachers more specific ways to communicate with families, because they had a deeper understanding of how students were performing in their classrooms. This improved understanding equipped teachers with more targeted areas for families to assist their students. Teachers found that when they were able to give parents specific skills, based on course standards, parents were able to provide more focused support to their students at home. Research

has found that parent and family support can have positive impacts on a teacher's morale through fostering a collaborative environment where teachers feel valued, respected, and supported in their efforts to promote student success (Werang et al., 2024).

Teachers reflected on the shift in relationships that were created between teachers and students. Teacher focus group participants shared that during their transition to SBG, they were able to have deeper conversations with their students about their academic performance because SBG had equipped teachers with a specific understanding of how students were performing on specific course standards. Teachers began to identify more specifically what students knew, and what they could do with that knowledge. They stated that they were able to advocate for students' academic needs in a different way because SBG allowed them to have a more complete picture of what the student knew and whether the student was able to apply that knowledge across contexts. Research has found that as teachers see the direct, positive results from their work with students, both through the relationships they build with their students and through the increase in student achievement, their levels of morale and retention increase (Sabin, 2012).

Both teachers and leaders noted a change in the professional relationships between teachers during the school's transition to SBG. Administrators shared that they observed a positive change in the productivity of PLCs, as teachers were focused on sharing instructional best practices and ideas about facilitating instruction that is closely aligned with course standards. Teacher participants stated that there was an increase in collaboration with their colleagues as they navigated the school's transition to SBG. Research has found that school communities fostering a culture of teacher collaboration experience increased levels of teacher morale, as educators feel supported by their peers (Eskew, 2016). Eskew (2016) supports this by highlighting the relationship between trust, teacher morale, and capacity building within schools.

Eskew's (2016) study highlights that when teachers are given opportunities to collaborate they are more likely to feel valued and supported in their roles. This collaborative culture, built on mutual trust, contributes to a more positive work environment and increases teacher job satisfaction and retention.

### **Themes found on Agency**

Through the integration of SBG, researchers have found that teachers have a deeper understanding of the content they teach and how to effectively incorporate meaningful, engaging lessons into their classrooms (Noschese, 2011). With deeper content knowledge, teachers at Pilot reported feeling a greater sense of professional agency in their classrooms, in their professional learning communities, and in their departments. Researchers have found that as teachers begin to increase their professional agency and become a part of their school's collective decision making processes, they have an increased sense of professional worth, they begin to feel more fulfilled, and they are more likely to remain working at their schools (Timms et al., 2007).

From the review of data collected from interviews and focus groups, the following themes emerged for teacher agency:

#### ***School Administration***

- Teachers needed access to onboarding to successfully implement SBG.
- SBG created an increased need for professional development for teachers, especially those new to SBG implementation.

#### ***Teachers***

- With teachers facilitating SBG, they have a deeper understanding of the content they teach.

- To effectively implement SBG, teachers needed access to onboarding experiences at their school.

Both teachers and administrators expressed concern with the onboarding process to SBG. They also described how a comprehensive onboarding experience would have helped provide them with a better understanding of how to navigate new learning management systems, as well as how to effectively plan and facilitate standards-based instruction. Effective onboarding practices, including clear role expectations, mentorship, and ongoing professional learning, are critical in helping new teachers understand the specific demands and expectations of their roles within the school environment (Webb, 2022). Webb (2022) found that when schools implement structured onboarding programs, new teachers are better equipped to navigate their responsibilities, build relationships with colleagues, and assimilate into the school culture. These practices contribute to teachers feeling more confident in their roles. As a result, teachers experience a stronger sense of accomplishment and connection to their schools, leading to a positive impact on morale and retention.

In their interviews, administrators described the increased importance of professional development for all teachers to master SBG for their students. They believed that as teachers became more comfortable with facilitating SBG effectively, their levels of agency over how they engaged students in their classrooms would increase. These findings align with the research conducted by Jung and Guskey (2007), who emphasized the need for systematic training and support when implementing SBG, particularly in ensuring that educators understand how to apply standards meaningfully for all students. Similarly, Urich (2012) found that teacher buy-in and professional development were necessary for successful implementation of SBG, highlighting that clear communication around expectations contributes to teacher ownership of

instruction. As teachers reflected on their experiences with Pilot's transition to SBG, they remarked on how the shift increased their levels of comfort with facilitating instruction for their course standards.

Within focus group discussions, teachers noted that as a result of SBG implementation, they developed a clearer understanding of how course standards aligned across units and grade levels, resulting in shifts in instructional pacing and sequencing throughout the year. These observations are supported by Bostic's (2012) findings that SBG improves teacher understanding of the sequencing of course standards, allowing for more intentional instructional planning. Participants also shared that this clarity increased their ownership over the selection of course materials and assignments, as they had a better sense of students' prior knowledge and what content needed to be mastered during the school year. This connection between understanding learning targets and making informed curricular decisions is connected to effective implementation of SBG (Heflebower & Hoegh, 2014). As teacher capacity increases within the content they are teaching, they begin to take greater ownership over student achievement and show increased interest in the curricular decisions associated with their content areas (Guskey, Swan, & Jung, 2011). These shifts reflect Wang and Degol's (2022) findings that increased instructional agency boosts teacher morale and contributes to retention within the profession. Together, the literature and interview and focus group data suggest that as teachers develop a deeper understanding of their standards and instructional goals through effective SBG implementation, teacher morale increases, positively influencing their decision to remain in the classroom.

## **Recommendations**

Through this study, I found that the teachers and administration believe in the benefits of SBG both for their students and for themselves. However, there are still areas of concern that must be met in order to support teachers through the process of implementing SBG in their classrooms. Looking through the lens of structure, culture, and agency, I recommend the following.

### ***Structure***

Through a review of both administrator and teacher input, there is a clear need for ongoing learning opportunities not only for staff, but also for families. For teachers, these opportunities would focus on how to effectively facilitate instruction utilizing SBG, navigate the LMS, and support families in interpreting SBG feedback. Equally important are learning opportunities for families, including workshops that introduce SBG, demonstrate how to access and interpret information in the LMS, and outline strategies for collaborating with teachers to support student growth. This shared learning supports the development of a school culture that prioritizes collaboration with families. As Werang et al (2024) emphasized, strong family support plays a significant role in shaping a positive school environment and contributes to teacher morale by helping educators feel valued and supported in their instructional roles. When families are able to engage meaningfully in their child's learning, teachers experience support from families, which is critical in maintaining positive teacher morale and retention.

As the administrators at PMMS continue to work with their district leadership to create these learning opportunities it would benefit the school district and school administrators to create a professional learning series for teachers that will focus on their comfort levels with SBG and can support teachers with applying these practices to their content areas (Townesley &

Wilcox, 2023). These sessions can be facilitated by current, experienced classroom teachers and other instructional leaders from Pilot, in addition to other individuals from the school district's professional learning office. Townsley and Wilcox (2023) emphasize the importance of training and support for teachers, led by teacher leaders to successfully implement SBG within a school. By providing ongoing learning opportunities to teachers throughout the school year, administrators will create systems for teachers to regularly reflect upon their practices, identify their specific needs as facilitators of SBG, and select professional learning opportunities that meet their individual needs (Townsley & Wilcox, 2023). These professional learning sessions will focus on continuing teacher education of SBG and will give teachers an opportunity to meet with their PLCs to calibrate grading rubrics and share successful implementation strategies with colleagues. In their research, Morris et al. (2024) suggest that when administrators address the professional learning needs of their teachers, educators feel more supported in their transition to SBG, which in turn positively impacts teacher morale. As teachers begin to build their capacity in how to effectively facilitate SBG, they will be more likely to remain a part of Pilot, as they have invested time in mastering skills associated with SBG, ultimately increasing teacher retention for the school (Willis & Varner, 2010).

In addition to working with PMMS teachers to create ongoing professional learning opportunities to support their work with SBG, administrators should consider designing parent and family education sessions would also be a benefit to teacher morale at Pilot. During focus group sessions, teacher participants noted the amount of time that they had to dedicate to educating parents on what SBG is, and how to interpret the feedback given to their students. Educating students and their families about the value of SBG can lead to a more supportive school environment for teachers, increasing overall morale and teacher retention (Peters et al.,

2017). By working with the office of family engagement within their district, PMMS administration should design a parent education series to help support parents with navigating standards-based grading throughout the school year. These informational sessions could help educate parents and families on what SBG is and how students are assessed. Better educating families can help to decrease the amount of resistance a teacher may experience from families as they begin facilitating SBG (Knight & Cooper, 2019). Administrators could also provide additional sessions at the close of each grading period to help interpret and understand their child's report card. By taking the responsibility of educating parents away from classroom teachers, teacher morale can increase as teachers are able to dedicate more time to instructional planning and supporting their students. By removing the stress of having to educate families, teacher morale increases as teachers find themselves working in a more supportive environment, increasing teacher retention as well (Peters et al., 2017).

### ***Culture***

The data analyzed in Chapter Four highlighted an emphasis on engaging more intentionally with parents and families, from both administration and teacher participants alike. As schools work to engage families in their student's learning, they would benefit from identifying opportunities for conferences with families and their students. By allowing teachers protected time to engage with students and their families, they can work to help families understand specifically how their student is performing, and how parents might be able to support their student in continuing to succeed (Peters et al., 2017). Teacher participants acknowledged that a positive aspect of Pilot's transition to SBG was the more robust conversations they were able to have with their students; they recognized that this positively impacted their morale and desire to remain at Pilot. Peters et al.'s (2017) research suggests that

schools will positively impact morale and retention by organizing multiple schoolwide conference events, the pressure to schedule meetings is lifted away from teachers, allowing them to focus more of their energy on building positive relationships with families and students.

Professional learning communities play a large role in a teacher's perception of their workplace, teachers who participate in a PLC have higher levels of morale and increased retention (Carr, 2024). Based on teacher participant responses, Pilot's transition to a SBG model has positively impacted the culture of professional learning communities. Teachers observed that their time spent in their PLC meetings are more productive and are focused more intentionally on content standards and student growth data (Carr, 2024). With the positive shifts in PLC culture from focus group participants, administration could work collaboratively with those teachers to revise any existing PLC norms and expectations, based on feedback provided from current teachers. As teachers have an increased knowledge and understanding of the standards associated with their content, they can contribute in more meaningful ways to their professional learning communities to increase their sense of ownership over the successes happening not only in their respective classrooms, but across the school community, to increase levels of teacher retention at PMMS.

### *Agency*

Throughout focus group sessions, teacher participants noted an increase in their understanding of their specific course standards. With this increased capacity, teachers began to have a better understanding of what their specific professional learning needs were. When teachers feel empowered to make decisions about their experiences, their levels of morale and retention increase (Keddie, 2020). As the administration of PMMS begins to shape future professional learning opportunities for their staff, it would be beneficial to levels of morale to

gain staff input on what those specific learning opportunities should look like, and who should be a part of facilitating them to the staff. PMMS Administration could engage interested teachers in a committee focused on professional learning, with representation across grade levels and departments to utilize teacher feedback to create and facilitate professional learning opportunities. As teachers begin to have agency over their learning opportunities, they will become more invested in the future of Pilot, increasing levels of teacher retention for the school (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020).

Just as teachers have a deeper understanding of what their professional learning needs are, teacher participants shared that they have a much better understanding of the instruction they are delivering to their students. Participants shared that SBG has given them a renewed understanding of how their content is connected with other courses, and how to best support student learning. As teachers work to support student learning, the administration can increase morale by giving teachers additional input into what curricular resources they might want to integrate into their respective classrooms (Priestly et al., 2013). By allowing teachers to have increased autonomy in how they facilitate instruction, they will have opportunities to provide more engaging and relevant learning experiences for their students (Alvunger, 2018). As teachers feel respected as instructional leaders, their levels of ownership over student success will increase, which will lead to increases in both morale and retention.

At PMMS, many teachers invested considerable time and effort into mastering the SBG model, embracing the professional learning and instructional adjustments required for its implementation. However, with the program now discontinued, these educators may feel a sense of lost investment, potentially lowering morale and reducing their likelihood to fully engage in future reforms. If teachers perceive that their efforts to adapt to significant instructional changes

can be undone without sustained commitment from school and district leadership, they may be less inclined to invest deeply in future initiatives. This instability can undermine efforts to retain high-quality educators, as teachers may prioritize more stable environments where their professional growth and instructional innovations are consistently valued. Recognizing this risk, it is critical for school leaders to communicate a long-term vision for grading reforms and provide ongoing support to help teachers navigate these transitions. This approach can reinforce teacher morale and improve retention, ensuring that educators remain committed to the school's instructional mission.

### **Limitations**

During the research component of this study, I served as one of the assistant principals of Pilot. While my role at this school gave me an intimate view and understanding of how SBG was being implemented, it also may have impacted the research that I collected. Teacher participants may have been less willing to participate or have felt more cautious with sharing any negative aspects of their experiences with SBG. To address this limitation, I utilized a staff member that was not in a supervisory role to invite teacher participants to join the study and to facilitate all teacher focus groups for data collection.

While conducting research at PMMS, the principal that initiated SBG resigned from her role. While the new principal supported the use of SBG for PMMS, their experiences with middle school structures and culture were very different from the previous leadership. This shift may have impacted the perception of teacher participants during their focus group sessions as well as the perceptions of district leaders, families and students.

Another limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which consisted of eight teachers and three administrators. While these participants provided valuable insights into

the transition to SBG, their perspectives may not fully represent the experiences of all educators at Pilot. A larger sample size may have allowed for a more diverse range of experiences and viewpoints, providing a broader understanding of the impact of SBG on teacher morale and retention.

Additionally, because I utilized a third-party individual to conduct the teacher focus groups, I missed the opportunity to incorporate my own experiences with SBG into the discourse. Given my firsthand knowledge of the challenges and benefits of this grading approach, my presence might have sparked additional insights from participants or allowed for a more nuanced exploration of their perspectives. While this approach reduced potential power dynamics, it also meant forgoing the opportunity to leverage my unique context-specific understanding, potentially limiting the richness of the data collected.

A final limitation to consider is the possibility of participant bias. Teachers and administrators who chose to participate in the study may have had particularly strong opinions, both positive and negative, about SBG, which could influence the overall findings. Additionally, social bias may have played a role with teacher participants, as they may have crafted their responses based on what they perceived to be the "correct" answers, particularly given my position as an assistant principal at the school. Although steps were taken to minimize this limitation, such as having a non-supervisory staff member facilitate teacher focus groups, the possibility of bias in participants' responses cannot be entirely ruled out.

### **Future Research**

If schools continue to transition toward SBG, it is essential that future research should support educators in understanding the tools and systems that support this shift. Both administrators and teachers shared frustration with their respective experiences with Pilot's

various learning management systems. As schools consider making a shift into SBG, it would benefit school districts to receive additional research on what educators need from their management systems to support their instructional practices and their communication with students and families. Additionally, since SBG is already widely implemented in elementary schools, future research should focus on middle school contexts, where the transition presents unique challenges. Middle schools operate within a structure that bridges elementary and high school practices, requiring grading systems that accommodate departmentalized instruction, multiple content areas, and varying levels of student readiness. Research that explores how middle schools can effectively implement SBG while addressing these complexities would be particularly valuable in supporting educators during this transition.

An additional area of need for teachers utilizing SBG is meaningful professional learning opportunities. Research on best practices for professional learning, tailored to SBG, would largely benefit educators that are beginning to integrate SBG. The research should consider the variety of audiences that might benefit from the professional learning being created. Based on teacher participant data, there is a need for learning opportunities that are not only tailored to the content they deliver, but also to the participant's current level of comfort with facilitating SBG. Data can then be collected to see if there is any relationship between the more targeted professional learning and the levels of teacher morale and retention of the participants.

A final area of research needed is centered on students and families. Participant data shows an increase in the amount of time they had to dedicate to educating families on what SBG is and how to interpret teacher feedback to understand student progress. By focusing research on how to support families in their understanding of what SBG is and how to interpret relevant data for their students, school districts can use this information to create a series of family education

events to support schools in their transition to a SBG model. These events would support parents in understanding the shifts in teaching and learning that are occurring in their student's school. These opportunities will create an increase in parental support of schools and will decrease the amount of time that school personnel have to spend in educating parents on what SBG is, allowing them to focus conversations on specific student needs rather than on general school-wide structures.

### **Summary of Chapter Five**

The fifth chapter of this dissertation summarizes the study by restating the study's purpose and the key research questions posed. These questions guided the exploration of teachers' perceptions of the relationship between transitioning to a SBG model and its impact on teacher morale and retention. The findings were discussed in relation to the themes that emerged from the data, focusing on the perspectives of the two participant groups: administrators and teachers. By examining these viewpoints, the study sought to provide an understanding of how SBG influences teacher morale and retention.

Throughout the chapter, the research limitations were acknowledged. These limitations, including my role as both the researcher and a former staff member at Pilot as well as the change in school leadership, should be considered when interpreting the results. Chapter Five also presents several recommendations based on the study's outcomes. These recommendations aim to guide school leaders in creating supportive environments that consider a school's structure and culture and teacher agency during transitions to new grading systems. Addressing teacher morale and providing professional development opportunities related to SBG could prove crucial in improving teacher morale and retention. The chapter outlines potential areas for future research. Improving learning management systems, professional learning opportunities and school to

family communication could provide a deeper understanding of how to support teachers during transitions between grading systems.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on SBG and its impact on teacher morale and retention. By understanding the relationship between structure, culture, agency and teacher morale, school leaders can make informed decisions that promote both teacher satisfaction and student success. Continued research of this topic will be crucial for fostering a sustainable and positive teaching environment, where educators feel valued, supported, and are more likely to remain in the classroom.

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### Appendix A: Email Invitation for Participants (Interview)

Dear Invitee,

I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University and am currently working on my dissertation. I am conducting research on Pilot Magnet Middle School's transition to a standards-based grading program and how it has had an impact on teachers, specifically teacher morale and retention. I am hoping to interview to gain an understanding of your perspective of how Pilot's standards-based grading impacted teachers within the school community.

My research includes a review of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey data, teacher retention data as well as interviews and focus group sessions.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you would like to participate in this study, please read the Informed Consent Form attached to this letter.

If you agree to participate, I will follow up with you to determine a time that works best for your schedule to conduct an interview. I am happy to conduct interviews in person or virtually to best accommodate your needs.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Best,

Laura Pierrie

Doctoral Student, North Carolina State University

## Appendix B: Email Invitation for Participants (Focus Group)

Dear Invitee,

I am a doctoral student at North Carolina State University and am currently working on my dissertation. I am conducting research on Pilot Magnet Middle School's transition to a standards-based grading program and how it has had an impact on teachers, specifically teacher morale and retention. I am hoping that you will participate in a focus group with other teachers from the 2018-19 school year to gain an understanding of your perspective of how Pilot's standards-based grading impacted teachers within the school community.

My research includes a review of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions survey data, teacher retention data as well as interviews and focus group sessions.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you would like to participate in this study, please read the Informed Consent Form attached to this letter.

If you agree to participate, I will follow up with you to determine a time that works best for your schedule to conduct the focus group session. I am happy to conduct these sessions in person or virtually to best accommodate participant needs.

Thank you for your time and participation.

Best,

Laura Pierrie

Doctoral Student, North Carolina State University

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

**Consent Form**

**Title of Study: A Program Evaluation of Competency Based Grading and Its Impact on Teacher Retention**

**Principal Investigator(s):** Laura Pierrie, [lpierri@ncsu.edu](mailto:lpierri@ncsu.edu), 919-696-2287

**Funding Source:** None

**NC State Faculty Point of Contact:** Dr. Timothy Drake, [tadrake@ncsu.edu](mailto:tadrake@ncsu.edu), 919-513-7975

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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, and to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of the impact that Standards-Based Grading has had on teacher retention and morale at a middle school. We will do this through the utilization of focus groups and interviews as well as a review of Teacher Working Conditions survey responses and teacher retention data.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. You may want to participate in this research because your experiences as a staff member might assist school leaders in making decisions to positively impact teacher morale. You may not want to participate in this research because of your current role at the research site.

Specific details about the research in which you are invited to participate are contained below. If you do not understand something in this form, please ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation in this research, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the *What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?* section of this form.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to understand how a school's transition to Standards-Based Grading has impacted teacher morale and retention.

**How many people will be in the study?**

There will be approximately 10-15 participants in this study.

**Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?**

In order to be a participant in this study, you must agree to be in the study and have been a staff member at Pilot Magnet Middle School during the 2018-19 school year.

You cannot participate in this study if you do not meet the inclusion criteria or were not a staff member at Pilot Magnet Middle School during the 2018-19 school year.

### **What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do all of the following:

1. Participant will respond to participant invitation via email or phone call.
2. Participant will collaborate with researcher on the phone to identify a date for their interview, at the convenience of the participant.
3. The participant will select their preferred participation format (in-person or virtual).
4. Participants will receive a copy of the informed consent in advance.
5. Participants will receive a copy of the questions that will be asked in advance.
6. Sessions will be recorded by the researcher.
7. Sessions will last a maximum of two hours.
8. Follow up sessions will be scheduled as necessary, follow up sessions will last a maximum of one hour.

The total amount of time that you will be participating in this study is no more than three hours.

### **Recording and images**

As a part of this research, I would like your consent to screen record or video record you. Please initial next to the sentence(s) that you agree to.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to be photographed.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to my screen being recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to my screen being recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to be video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to be video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not consent to be photographed.

### **Risks and benefits**

There are no risks associated with participation in this research.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are the knowledge gained that will assist other school leaders that may choose to make a decision to transition their school to a Standards-Based Grading model.

**Right to withdraw your participation**

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. To do so, just stop any research activity that you are doing or contact the student researcher, Laura Pierrie at [lpierri@ncsu.edu](mailto:lpierri@ncsu.edu) and (919) 696-2287. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Timothy Drake at [tadrake@ncsu.edu](mailto:tadrake@ncsu.edu) and (919) 513-7975. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher(s) will redact your data from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

**Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management**

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that I have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must report instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How I manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data that will be shared with others about you will be de-identified.

**De-identified.** De-identified data is information that at one time can directly identify you, but I will record this data so that your identity will be separated from the data. I will have a master list with your code and real name that I can use to link to your data. When the research concludes, there will be no way your real identity will be linked to the data I publish.

**Future use of your research data**

Your information even with identifiers removed, will not be stored or distributed for future research studies.

**Compensation**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**What if you are an employee?**

Your participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study itself or the procedures implemented in this study, you may contact the researcher, Laura Pierrie at [lpierri@ncsu.edu](mailto:lpierri@ncsu.edu) and (919) 696-2287. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Timothy Drake at [tadrake@ncsu.edu](mailto:tadrake@ncsu.edu) and (919) 513-7975.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB (Institutional Review Board) office. An IRB office helps participants if they have any issues regarding research activities. You can contact the NC State University IRB office at [IRB-](#)

[Director@ncsu.edu](mailto:Director@ncsu.edu), 919-515-8754, or [fill out a confidential form online](https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/) at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

### **Consent to participate**

By signing this consent form, I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

**Yes, I want to be in this research study.**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

**No, I do not want to be in this research study.**

**Thank you for your consideration.**

## Appendix D: Interview Guide for Data Collection

1. Please share with me your background and how you became involved with the planning for Pilot Magnet Middle School's transition to a standard based grading system.
2. Why did you feel that Pilot's school community would benefit from the transition to a new grading system?
3. Do you remember the first steps taken to transition Pilot to standards-based grading?
4. During the initial phases, please describe your impression of how stakeholders, especially teachers, received the news of making the change from a traditional grading system to the standards-based grading system.
5. What concerns did you have, if any, for teachers making the transition to a standards-based grading system? For students? For families?
6. What support was provided to staff as the new grading system rollout began at the start of the 2018-19 school year?
7. What additional support might have been helpful for teachers making their transition to standards-based grading?
8. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what positive impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first 9 weeks of implementation?
9. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what negative impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first 9 weeks of implementation?
10. During this transition to standards-based grading, what systems of support were put into place for teachers? For students and families?
11. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what positive impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first full academic year of implementation?
12. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what negative impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first full academic year of implementation?
13. During the first year of Pilot's transition to standards-based grading, what impact do you feel the transition had on overall staff morale?
14. What impact do you feel Pilot's transition to standards-based grading had on teacher retention during the 2018-19 school year?
15. As you reflect back on the first year of implementation, what support systems for teachers may have been helpful during their transition to standards-based grading?
16. As you prepared for the 2019-20 school year, what strategies did you utilize to support staff as they transitioned into a new school year with standards-based grading?
17. As new teachers begin to work at Pilot, what support might they need to transition to standards-based grading?
18. How do you feel Pilot's grading system impacts teacher morale? Teacher retention?

## Appendix E: Focus Group Guide for Data Collection

1. Please share with me your background and what your involvement was, if any, for Pilot Magnet Middle School's transition to a standard based grading system.
2. During the initial phases, please describe your impression of how stakeholders, especially teachers, received the news of making the change from a traditional grading system to the standards-based grading system.
3. What concerns did you have, if any, for teachers making the transition to a standards-based grading system? For students? For families?
4. What support was provided to staff as the new grading system rollout began at the start of the 2018-19 school year?
5. What additional support might have been helpful for teachers making their transition to standards-based grading?
6. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what positive impacts for teachers did you notice within the first 9 weeks of implementation?
7. During this transition to standards-based grading, what systems of support were put into place for teachers?
8. As a classroom teacher, what support systems might have been additionally helpful?
9. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what positive impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first full academic year of implementation?
10. As Pilot transitioned to the new grading system, what negative impacts for stakeholders did you notice within the first full academic year of implementation?
11. During the first year of Pilot's transition to standards-based grading, what impact do you feel the transition had on overall staff morale?
12. What impact do you feel Pilot's transition to standards-based grading had on teacher retention during the 2018-19 school year?
13. What support might teachers have benefitted from during the start of the 2019-20 school year, as it pertains to standards-based grading?
14. As new teachers begin to work at Pilot, what support might they need to transition to standards-based grading?
15. How do you feel Pilot's grading system impacts teacher morale? Teacher retention?