

Maintaining Legitimacy: Barriers to Altering Grading and Credentialing in Michigan Competency-Based Pilot Districts

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Competency-based education (CBE) has emerged as a promising reform to address persistent concerns about student achievement and workforce readiness, yet implementation efforts consistently stall when districts attempt to alter traditional grading and credentialing practices. While prior research documents these challenges, it fails to explain why they persist. This study employs institutional theory and the concept of isomorphic pressures to examine how external forces constrain CBE implementation in three Michigan pilot districts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with district administrators and school leaders conducted between 2019 and 2020, this qualitative study addresses two research questions: how normative pressures from parents and coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions influence districts' grading decisions, and how districts navigate these competing pressures. Findings reveal that normative pressures manifested as parental resistance to proficiency-based grading that deviated from their own educational experiences, while coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions led all three districts to maintain traditional transcripts despite their philosophical commitment to CBE. Districts responded through translation, converting proficiency scores to letter grades; supplementation, adding portfolios alongside traditional transcripts; stakeholder education, and investing in sustained parent communication. These strategies represent compromises that preserve institutional legitimacy while only partially advancing CBE goals. The study recommends that states develop formal partnerships with university systems to pilot competency-based transcripts, districts invest substantially in reshaping parental expectations, and policymakers extend implementation timelines to allow for gradual normative shifts.

Keywords: competency-based education; grading; implementation challenges

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Across the United States, policymakers and educators have struggled to identify effective remedies to address low student achievement and post-secondary/workforce readiness. Michigan is among several states, such as Maine and New Hampshire, that have turned to Competency-Based Education (CBE) as a potential mechanism to strengthen student achievement and post-secondary/workforce preparedness. CBE differs from traditional approaches to education foremost in how it challenges traditional expectations for “what, where, when, and how students learn and demonstrate academic content knowledge” (Evans, Landl & Thompson, 2020, p.2). The practices essential to CBE include flexible pacing, increased student choice and voice, and shifts towards mastery in grading and assessment (Evans, Landl & Thompson, 2020; Le et al., 2014; Levine & Patrick, 2019; Lewis et al., 2014; Sturgis et al., 2011). Advocates argue that it disrupts the traditional organization of schooling (e.g., age-based, grade-based, course-based, time-based) that is currently failing to prepare students for post-secondary and workforce opportunities (e.g., Mounoutjis, 2022). This disruption occurs because within a competency-based system, educators prioritize student agency, flexible pacing, and personalization (Basham et al., 2016; Colby, 2019; Patrick et al., 2013; Sturgis & Casey, 2018; Torres et al., 2015), all of which allows educators to better meet the needs of different learners and close achievement gaps. Optimism for CBE as a tool to make up for unfinished learning during the pandemic has only increased policymakers and educators’ interest in these reforms (e.g., Jenkins, 2020).

While this instructional framework has the potential to fill these gaps, the adoption of CBE requires schools to significantly revise and restructure normative educational practices (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Gross & DeArmond, 2018; Stump et al. 2016). Of the different normative practices and expectations that warrant reconsideration, the ways in which grades are assigned and communicated to stakeholders is a pivotal practice that must be addressed for successful implementation (Gross & DeArmond, 2018; Pane et al., 2017; Scheopner Torres et al., 2018). Advocates for CBE argue that traditional grading systems fail to accurately communicate student mastery because these systems focus on the completion of required tasks rather than serving as evidence of progress and learning (Colby, 2019; Gagnon, 2022).

Previous studies have provided evidence to highlight the significant challenge of consistently assigning value to student work and communicating mastery to different stakeholders including parents and post-secondary institutions (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Pane et al., 2017; Scheopner Torres et al., 2015; Scheopner Torres et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2014; Stump et al., 2016; Stump et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018). While the current literature on competency-based implementation explicitly documents the challenges educators have encountered developing and adopting new grading systems, it fails to provide a compelling explanation as to why these challenges persist. Additionally, it is less clear to what extent administrators and teachers, and even students are hindered by internal and external pressures levied between schools, curricula, and organizational contexts in their pursuits of CBE implementation. The literature requires a rigorous unpacking of the forces and beliefs

that limit the effectiveness of these implementation efforts. To provide more robust evidence, I employ institutional theory and isomorphism, the process through which organizations are homogenized (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), as a framework for understanding how and why administrators and teachers in CBE schools maintain traditional grading systems.

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do normative pressures from parents and students and coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions influence CBE districts' decisions to maintain or alter traditional grading and transcript systems?

RQ2: How do CBE districts navigate and respond to these competing pressures while attempting to implement competency-based grading and credentialing practices?

In this paper, I present evidence as to how coercive and normative isomorphic pressures from parents and post-secondary institutions limit the fidelity of districts' CBE implementation and favor traditional grading systems.

Competency-Based Grading vs. Traditional Grading

In traditional grading systems, a student's grade blends together test scores, homework completion, participation, extra credit, and penalties for late work or behavior, producing a single letter or percentage that can obscure actual learning. A review of over 33,000 student grades by the Equitable Grading Project found that over 60% did not match student understanding as measured by external assessments (Feldman, 2024). As Gagnon (2022) notes, without consistent practices and shared philosophy, grades likely send mixed messages to students and families.

Competency-based grading takes a fundamentally different approach, anchoring grades to clearly defined learning outcomes and basing them solely on evidence of what a student knows and can do. NYC's Competency Collaborative envisions grades as accurate, supportive, and bias-resistant feedback rooted in evidence of learning (Gagnon, 2022). Core shifts include using a 0–4 proficiency scale instead of a 100-point scale; separating habits of work from academic achievement; treating formative work as low-stakes practice rather than graded assignments; providing multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery; and sharing learning outcomes transparently from the start (Gagnon, 2022). Grades are not used as rewards or punishments.

Feldman (2024) argues that the path between equitable grading and CBE runs in both directions. Improving grading leads teachers to encounter larger questions about course outcomes and valid assessment — questions central to CBE. Conversely, schools pursuing CBE inevitably confront the practical elements of grading, which is why it is woven throughout the Aurora Institute's Quality Principles for Competency-Based Education (Sturgis & Casey, 2018). Whether educators begin with equitable grading practices or the broader CBE framework, both serve as on ramps to systems that more accurately and fairly communicate student learning.

Implementation Barriers

The current body of literature highlights a series of distinct challenges associated with the implementation of competency-based education (CBE). Previous studies have documented difficulties related to defining mastery (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018), aligning standards with proficiency (Stumpf et al., 2017b; Stump & Silvernail, 2015), disrupting normative beliefs and school practices (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Evans et al., 2019; Scheopner Torres et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2017), and motivating students while developing positive work habits (Steele et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018). Among these various challenges, the tension between mastery-based assessment and traditional grading structures has emerged as a particularly persistent obstacle to successful CBE implementation.

One of the core objectives of CBE is that students advance strictly upon demonstration of mastery. As such, in a competency-based system, grades should not be diluted by factors such as effort, participation, and assignment completion. However, across different states and contexts, stakeholders have consistently reported significant challenges calibrating competency standards to student grades (Pane et al., 2017; Steele et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2016; Stump et al., 2018). In multiple studies, researchers have found persistent challenges related to the implementation, application, and communication of mastery grading (Stump et al., 2018). A RAND report on designing innovative high schools similarly highlighted inconsistency in mastery grading application across schools and classrooms (Steiner et al., 2017). In a study of Maine’s Proficiency-Based High School Diploma system, participating districts—including administrators and teachers—raised concerns about the misalignment between proficiency standards and standardized testing, as well as how these standards would be best communicated through grades (Stump et al., 2018).

A significant barrier to reforming grading practices relates to teachers and their beliefs about assessment. In a pure CBE system, the focus is on learning outcomes with limited regard for effort. Advocates of CBE argue that incorporating these factors makes grade inflation more rampant and dilutes evidence of actual student achievement. However, many teachers believe that grades should account for students’ baseline skills and effort (Steele et al., 2014). Teachers have also expressed concerns that focusing strictly on proficiency would cause mass failure among students who are still developing foundational skills (Steele et al., 2014). This tension is compounded by institutional pressure to move students to the next grade level without demonstrating proficiency, creating conflict between CBE principles and practical school operations (Steiner et al., 2017).

Previous implementation studies have demonstrated that districts imposing limited changes to school structures and practices have been more successful at incorporating components of CBE; however, more ambitious features such as altering grading systems and transcripts are infrequently observed (Evans et al., 2019; Pane et al., 2015). Districts working to implement CBE frequently had to navigate exter-

nal pressures, including aligning curriculum with accountability measures and testing requirements (Stump et al., 2018). These pressures extended to consequential decisions about whether to retain students who did not demonstrate mastery, risking lower graduation rates (Steiner et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2017b), as well as generating grading systems and transcripts that accurately represent student learning while meeting the expectations of parents, secondary institutions, and post-secondary institutions (Pane et al., 2017; Stump et al., 2018).

Parent and community support has emerged as another critical challenge. Previous studies have highlighted districts' struggles to generate support from parents and other community members for competency-based grading reforms (Evans & DeMitchell, 2018; Pane et al., 2015; Shakman et al., 2018; Stump et al., 2016). Without buy-in from parents, altering traditional practices and policies becomes considerably more difficult. In a study of principals in the Northeast, Evans and DeMitchell (2018) found that changes to grading were a persistent challenge requiring careful navigation. External stakeholders, particularly parents, expressed significant discomfort with the shift away from traditional grades. These concerns related specifically to how their children's work would be assessed by colleges and universities and how the new grading system would affect meritorious awards such as scholarships and class rank. The principals in Evans and DeMitchell's study reported explaining to parents that homework completion and participation, while valuable, were not markers of proficiency and had a way of diluting grade meaning and obscuring actual student achievement. Despite these explanations, securing parental understanding and support remained an ongoing challenge.

Collectively, this body of research suggests that while competency-based education offers a theoretically sound approach to measuring student learning, the practical challenges of transitioning away from traditional grading structures are substantial. These challenges have primarily centered around stakeholders' beliefs about schooling and their preparedness to function in a CBE setting, negotiating external pressures from accountability systems and post-secondary institutions, preparing students to participate in CBE classrooms, and translating the competency-based framework into coherent grading practices. Addressing these barriers requires sustained attention to stakeholder communication, careful alignment with external requirements, and recognition that deeply held beliefs about grades and achievement take considerable time and effort to shift.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses institutional theory and the concept of isomorphic pressures to provide an explanation as to why altering grading structures remains such a persistent barrier to successful CBE implementation. As a framework, institutional theory examines why institutions and organizations conform to common characteristics (Burch, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991). Scholars have argued that these moves towards conformity are intentional and that "organizations adopt the practices that they do to look like other organizations" (Burch, 2007, p. 84). Institutions

modeling themselves after existing organizations is a means to achieve legitimacy. Institutional legitimacy is tied to stakeholders' support of individual organizations, and without approval from stakeholders, institutions lack legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Additionally, institutions' drive towards conformity is the result of both external and internal pressure that exert influence over the design and actions of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Institutional theorists argue that these pressures manifest in three forms: coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism. Coercive pressure is regularly exerted by regulatory bodies and other organizations. Examples of these might include the expectations from post-secondary organizations regarding the content and quantitative measures found on traditional transcripts (e.g., GPA, class rank). While coercive pressures are the result of external forces and actors, normative pressures result from organizational members' beliefs, values, and professional norms. In the context of K12 education, organizational members may include administrators, teachers, students, parents and community members. Finally, mimetic pressure results from an organization's desire to mimic existing organizations.

By choosing to adopt a competency-based approach, districts face limited mimetic pressure. However, as grades and class ranks remain one of the most significant tools to communicate student learning and success, they are subject to significant pressure to conform to the expectations of post-secondary institutions. Additionally, as CBE rejects traditional methods and communication of student grading, its adoption threatens how parents can understand their students' performance. CBE asks schools to abandon a grading system that—despite its flaws—is both symbolically legitimate (parents understand it, colleges accept it) and organizationally functional (teachers can manage it, administrators can monitor it). The new system may better reflect actual learning, but the infrastructure to make it doable at scale does not yet exist.

The influence of coercive and normative pressures provides crucial insight as to why districts consistently struggle to alter their grading and transcript procedures. Our study brings new empirical data about the specific challenges in successfully implementing CBE. These findings suggest that perceived coercive pressure from post-secondary institutions and normative pressures from parents and students have led CBE districts to maintain traditional approaches to both credentialing and grading. While previous studies have highlighted the existence of pressure, this paper highlights not only the recurrence of these pressures from external institutions and stakeholders but offers also clear perspectives as to how CBE districts are understanding and trying to respond to these.

Methodology

Michigan CBE Pilot Districts

Michigan enacted three programs to further develop competency-based education. First, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) allocated seed funding and provided technical assistance to seven pilot districts that were grantees of funds

(labeled 21j funds) issued in the state's 2017–2018 School Aid Act. Second, in 2018, Michigan introduced the Marshall Plan for Talent to better align Michigan's education and business infrastructures and prepare students for forecasted career opportunities, with CBE as a vital component. Third, in its 2018 legislative session, the Michigan Legislature introduced House Bills 6314 and 6315, intended to increase access to seat-time waivers by granting broad exemptions to "Public Innovation Districts" that commit to developing innovative, differentiated instruction systems.

In 2017 the state launched its CBE program on a pilot basis. Eighteen school districts applied for the CBE grants. MDE assessed proposals based on criteria including evidence of multiple and innovative methods to determine grade-level competency achievement, student-driven projects, formative assessment systems, innovative partnerships with employers or higher education institutions, transition to competency-based student promotion, high-quality professional development, and continued participation in statewide assessment and accountability systems. Additional considerations included educator evaluation, district implementation capacity, data collection plans, budgets, leadership commitment, and community support. Based on these criteria, MDE selected seven school districts in March 2018 for use in the 2019–2022 school years. Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive characteristics for these school districts and the state. Though Michigan's CBE pilot districts are similar to others across the state in many ways, key differences may influence implementation ease and limit generalizability. Pilot districts tend to have lower proportions of students of color and English learners, with Lehigh being most representative of the state and Williams-Battier, Dawkins-Hurley, and Scheyer-Smith being least representative. Teachers within pilot districts are, on average, more experienced and more likely to possess advanced degrees than teachers statewide, particularly in Dawkins-Hurley and Mercer.

At the time of data collection, these pilot CBE efforts were localized and in early implementation stages; the Aurora Institute classifies Michigan's CBE work as "emerging," meaning districts have shown limited evidence of systematic embedding of CBE practices (Levin, 2022). CBE practices were most adopted in specific grade levels, content areas, or schools. Each pilot district approaches the transition differently, as the shift from standards-based/seat-time to competency-based approaches necessitates local priorities and decisions (Colby, 2019). Districts differ in targeted grades and content areas, timelines, spending plans, and terminology.

Table 1
Descriptive Characteristics for 21j Pilot District (N = 7)

Case study site	State	Williams-Battier		Dawkins-Hurley		Lehigh		Carrawell-James		Davis		Scheyer-Smith		Mercer	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Students</i>															
Special education	14.2%	11.3%	14.7%	10.6%	13.1%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	13.2%
English learners	7.0%	0.4%	8.2%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%	0.6%	2.8%
Economically disadvantaged	52.7%	59.3%	52.1%	30.0%	36.3%	37.6%	37.6%	36.3%	36.3%	37.6%	37.6%	23.9%	23.9%	23.9%	49.1%
Black students	17.9%	0.6%	4.7%	0.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	14.4%
Hispanic students	8.1%	1.7%	17.1%	2.6%	6.6%	4.9%	4.9%	6.6%	6.6%	4.9%	4.9%	1.7%	1.7%	1.7%	3.1%
White students	65.7%	94.0%	69.4%	94.0%	89.8%	88.6%	88.6%	89.8%	89.8%	88.6%	88.6%	95.7%	95.7%	95.7%	73.8%
Other race/ethnicity	8.4%	3.6%	8.8%	3.1%	2.9%	6.5%	6.5%	2.9%	2.9%	6.5%	6.5%	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%	8.8%
<i>Teachers</i>															
Early Career (< 3 years)	15.2%	14.5%	7.8%	10.5%	14.5%	31.0%	31.0%	14.5%	14.5%	31.0%	31.0%	10.6%	10.6%	10.6%	8.0%
Master's or higher	55.7%	59.1%	64.6%	57.1%	62.4%	11.8%	11.8%	62.4%	62.4%	11.8%	11.8%	76.1%	76.1%	76.1%	76.5%
N (students)	1,479,706	3,778	3,085	1,071	2,812	263	263	2,812	2,812	16	16	1,756	1,756	1,756	4,968
N (teachers)	85,103	200	175	61	164	16	16	164	164	88	88	88	88	88	272
Ratio	17:4	18:9	17:6	17:6	17:1	16:4	16:4	17:1	17:1	16:4	16:4	20:0	20:0	20:0	18:3

We invited three of the five 21j districts to participate in case studies from the more extensive set of five pilot districts that participated in our surveys: Mercer Public Schools, Lehigh Public Schools, and Davis Charter High School. We selected these districts for several reasons. First, these districts represented different student populations, with Mercer and Davis serving fewer disadvantaged and English Language Learners than Lehigh. Second, districts also varied by size, with Mercer serving a student population more than ten times Davis' and one third larger than Lehigh. Third, these districts vary by governance model, including both traditional public schools and a recently constituted charter school. As part of this analysis, we narrowed our focus on grading to middle and high school settings for several reasons. These are the levels where grades most directly influence student opportunities, where stakeholder expectations around traditional grading are strongest, and where the tension between seat-time credit accumulation and demonstrated competency is most acute.

Mercer Public Schools

Mercer Public Schools has pursued a district-wide implementation of competency-based education (CBE) across grades K–12 over approximately eight years, beginning with a district-wide 1:1 iPad deployment under a previous superintendent. At the elementary and middle school levels, CBE implementation has centered on reorganizing standards into broader competencies and shifting grading language, while the high school has undertaken more extensive structural reforms. Rather than treating CBE as a standalone initiative, Mercer positions it within a broader deeper learning framework drawn from the New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) model, oriented toward a Portrait of the Graduate anchored by six competencies the district calls the “six C’s.” Teachers have developed four to six competencies per course aligned to disciplinary practices from the Common Core, NGSS, and C3 frameworks. The district has adopted a 70/30 grading structure in which 70 percent of a student’s grade reflects competency mastery and 30 percent reflects practice, with the goal of eventually reaching fully competency-based grading. The district has also shifted its language from “assessments” to “evidence of learning” to encourage varied demonstrations of mastery rather than single high-stakes tests.

To align school structures with CBE principles, Mercer High School operates on a modified block schedule with 90-minute class periods and a daily “smart hour” seminar. During seminar, students set weekly goals, schedule time for reassessment or additional help with teachers, and engage in weekly reflection—building the executive function skills the district views as essential to CBE. A Link Crew mentoring program pairs upperclassmen with freshmen to ease the transition into this self-directed system. Mercer’s instructional approach is grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), through which project-based learning, direct instruction, and blended learning are delivered. Career and technical education courses have eliminated D grades entirely, requiring at least a C to demonstrate sufficient mastery. The district is also developing a data warehouse to produce living report cards that communicate competency levels to students and parents in real time.

Key challenges have included shifting both teacher and student mindsets away from a points-driven, test-centric culture, as students had begun equating competency with taking a test and teachers held tightly to traditional grading practices. Communicating changes to parents, colleges, and the broader community has also proved difficult, particularly regarding how competency-based transcripts translate to college admissions. District leadership emphasizes that CBE alone lacks a sufficient instructional framework and must be paired with strong pedagogy and intentional design practices.

Lehigh Public Schools

Lehigh Public Schools began its district-wide K–12 competency-based education journey—referred to locally as “personal mastery”—in 2012 after achievement data showed that 20 to 40 percent of students were not reaching proficiency, coupled with engagement surveys revealing widespread student disengagement at the secondary level. Following a comprehensive visioning process and field study visits to three CBE-implementing districts, the district held a staff-wide vote in April 2013 establishing critical mass support for the work. Guided by Robert Marzano’s High Reliability Schools framework and supported by the Reinventing Schools Coalition, implementation began at K–8 in all subjects, with the high school initially focusing on culture-building through the Capturing Kids’ Hearts program before expanding CBE practices. At the elementary level, the district adopted “true success traits” to teach skills and dispositions. The district developed a profile of a graduate organized around five themes—empowered learner, responsible collaborator, impactful citizen, skilled communicator, and complex thinker—with alignment work ensuring a through-line from kindergarten true success traits through middle school habits to these culminating graduate dispositions.

To align school structures with CBE principles, the middle school redesigned its advisory period by moving it to the end of the day and giving students daily choice in how to use that time, with teachers directing students who are off pace in core classes. The middle school also shifted from semesters to trimesters to increase pathway options and added a seventh period for extended learning. At the high school, six half-day “voucher days” allow students on pace and meeting proficiency targets to be released early, while students needing additional support receive smaller-group instruction. The district has also invested in instructional coaches at every building, classroom learning labs for peer-to-peer professional development, and a STEM academy housed in a light manufacturing facility where K–10 students engage in project-based learning.

Key challenges include shifting from a teacher-centered, content-coverage model to one emphasizing student agency, particularly at the secondary level. The district acknowledges it remains far from innovative grading practices at the high school, still issuing traditional GPAs and transcripts. Performance assessments are being introduced through voluntary teacher cohorts rather than mandated, and voice, choice, and flexible pacing exist in pockets rather than systematically. Leadership

has emphasized that this work is a continuous improvement process, deliberately using a grassroots, gradual-release approach to shift the locus of control from district mandates to building-level implementation.

Davis Charter Schools

Davis Charter High School is a multi-campus charter school network serving exclusively grades 9–12, with no K–8 component, designed from its 2011 founding as a fully competency-based, project-based learning environment inspired by High Tech High in California. The network participates in the state’s 21j CBE pilot and serves students seeking an alternative to traditional high school, including many who were disengaged or credit deficient. Teachers develop six to ten competencies per course by distilling state and Common Core standards into power standards, then design backwards to create projects on four-to-six-week cycles aligned to three marking periods per semester. Student mastery is measured on a one-through-four proficiency scale correlated to Webb’s Depth of Knowledge. No traditional tests are administered; all assessment is project-based, with students demonstrating mastery through products such as websites, multimedia presentations, physical models, or art installations. Students who have not yet demonstrated mastery continue revising work without time-based penalties, while those who master competencies early advance to dual enrollment, internships, or independent projects.

To align its school structures with CBE principles, Davis operates on a compressed four-day instructional week (Monday through Thursday), reserving Fridays for optional student drop-in hours and collaborative teacher professional development focused on calibrating proficiency expectations. A looping advisory system assigns approximately ten students per advisor, with advisors remaining with the same cohort for all four years to build individualized schedules and monitor competency progress. A first-year academy structures the ninth-grade experience around collaboratively designed, cross-curricular projects so incoming students learn the self-directed habits CBE requires. A companion course called Project Flex rotates freshmen through filmmaking, coding, maker space tools, and digital art to build media production skills for later years. Teachers collaborate weekly in interdisciplinary teams, using the Alma learning management system alongside Google Classroom to track competency mastery in real time. A biannual Project Showcase requires students to present and defend their strongest project before a public audience. Seniors complete a “senior chronicle” portfolio, and the school developed a Profile of a Graduate with dispositional competency standards through partnership with Knowledge Works.

Key challenges include socializing new students particularly transfers from traditional schools—into a project-driven, self-paced culture. Inter-rater reliability on the proficiency scale remains a concern, as does converting competency scores to traditional letter grades and GPAs for college transcripts. Leadership also identified the emotional demands on advisors working with students who arrive with significant anxiety and credit deficiencies as an ongoing strain on staff capacity.

Participants and Data Collection

Participants included district administrators and school leaders from three different CBE pilot districts in Michigan. See Table 2 for the number of participants.

Table 2

Number of Participants for each Pilot District in Michigan (N=8)

District	Administrators
Lehigh Public Schools	4
Mercer Public Schools	2
Davis Charter High School	2

Administrators participated in two interviews between 2019 and 2020. As part of their responsibilities as 21j pilot districts, superintendents and school leaders were asked to participate in interviews. Interviews with administrators were approximately 75 to 90 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured to elicit specific examples, experiences, and perspectives from participants' unique role in the school system. Administrators offered insight into policy, goals, and intent. These interviews, particularly those with administrators, were designed to better understand districts' implementation efforts and the ways in which policy reflected core CBE components. Additionally, these interviews served as a space for participants to evaluate implementation efforts and reflect on specific successes and challenges.

Data Analysis

Prior to beginning our analysis, data were transcribed using the AI software Otter.ai and then read and cleaned by the researcher. After cleaning the data, all transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. The initial stage of data analysis focused on implementation efforts; however, after reviewing and coding the data, implementation challenges emerged as a consistent theme. Administrators consistently spoke about the challenges of wide-scale adoption, in particular the conflict between traditional expectations for grading and assessment and the mastery focus emphasized by competency-based frameworks. As a result of this emerging analysis, the researcher added a research question specifically about how external forces shape policy implementation and added additional codes related to DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of isomorphism. The data were then re-analyzed and the second phase of the data analysis explicitly focused on coding for how traditional values and expectations for schooling and outside institutions and organizations shaped implementation efforts. The analysis revealed efforts to alter grading and transcript reporting were impacted most significantly by external pressures such as parents, students, and post-secondary educational institutions and organizations.

Findings

Normative Pressure from Parental Expectations

Both district and school administrators in Lehigh and Mercer Public Schools identified parent and community expectations as a significant barrier to altering grading practices and reporting methods. The school administrator from Lehigh's Williamson Middle School characterized it as a "constant battle against traditional thinking." While they expressed some frustration with the parents' traditional expectations, district and school administrators also empathized with them. They recognized that this tension was about parents grappling with changing expectations from their own educational experiences. The school administrator from Lehigh high school explained:

Parents and community—the pressure there is that they understand education to be in our very traditional sense of education, right? There should be grades. There should be due dates. These kids should turn things in. If they don't, then they get certain grades for it. That's how it used to work at least.

From their own experiences, parents understand what a traditional grade (i.e., A, B, C, D, F) communicates; however, CBE evaluates students based on mastery and meeting competencies. If students aren't meeting their competencies, are they failing? This ultimately may leave parents uncertain about their students' performance.

In addition to how grades are reported, district and school administrators also identified resistance from parents regarding how learning activities, formative assessment, and summative assessment determined grades. The purpose of grading in a competency-based system is to measure how evidence of student learning. To ensure students were being accurately assessed, factors such as completion assignments or effort that ultimately could be seen as inflating grades should not be considered. District administrators were particularly frustrated by demands from parents and students to return to traditional grading because of how ineffective they believed it had been in the past. As one district administrator from Mercer explained:

Some parents and students even want us to go back to my old grading practices where kids are allowed to turn in ten boxes of tissue for extra credit, and they're gonna get an A even though they really don't know what they need to know. That's the bigger problem people have is that we're making kids accountable to these competencies versus where you were a nice kid, and you did all your homework, but you might have copied it off your neighbor, or you did a lot of work that didn't have much meaning, and that counted towards the grade.

Policies related to homework emerged as a particular sticking point for parents. Parents expected a transactional relationship, where students submitted homework and in return they received a grade. However, while homework was still being assigned in these pilot districts it was regarded as practice and typically did not count towards students' grades. The school administrator at Laettner-Hill High School in Lehigh explained parents' frustration:

They want to know why the homework isn't being graded. Explaining to them that I'm not going to grade all your kids' homework, because it's really just evidence for learning and that it's still valuable because it's their practice. Their final grade needs to be just their summative evaluation, so that you really know what level your child is operating at in math, language arts, science. Parents are really struggling with this.

Ultimately however, the policies often ended up reflecting these parental norms. In Lehigh homework remained graded, and in Mercer a plan was formulated to incorporate practice into the grade.

The school community at Davis Charter High School was also not immune to parental expectations related to grades. Administrators at Davis explained that many of their parents struggled to make sense of their approach to proficiency grading scales and misunderstood the relationship between task completion and proficiency. Parents from the Davis community shared common expectations related to effort and completion and confusion regarding what proficiency meant. A Davis administrator explained this common confusion:

When they have a student who's normally an A student, and maybe they don't get the four, so they feel like the kid did something wrong, or what's missing? It's like no, they turned it in. This is where they're at right now. Parents don't understand like, 'Well, she got all of them right. She defined all of the words,' or 'She turned it in on time,' not understanding, 'Okay, but what we're gonna expect of her at the end is 4.0-level work. Just for right now, it means she did everything she's supposed to do, but the skill itself was very low-level.'

While Davis was experiencing similar parental expectations as those in Lehigh and Mercer, their administrators describing working more intentionally to challenge and disrupt these normative expectations. The administration at Davis explained that some of their success was the result of intentional, ongoing communication with stakeholders. The administrative team at Davis created new parent orientations and training where they explicitly discussed not only what proficiency grading was but its rationale and purpose. One of the administrators noting the importance of proactive communication explained:

I helped launch {community meetings} and train staff and educate parents and students, about the grading system. I am really, or I was when I was the principal, very intentional about doing presentations to parents and educating them about the difference and the merits of it and what does it really mean and how much more information they're gonna have about their student. I try to frontload that in the beginning when they sign up for school so that there's no surprises.

By interrogating beliefs about grading and providing sustained explanation, schools like Davis were better positioned to resist normative pressures that constrained reform in other districts.

Coercive Pressure from Post-Secondary Institutions

Competency-based credentialing also proved to be a significant challenge for districts because they felt they must find alignment with other institutions. As a result, schools in the Lehigh and Mercer districts choose not to alter their transcripts. While administrators expressed frustration with parental and community expectations, they described their decisions related to maintaining traditional transcripts as a pragmatic compromise rather philosophical endorsement. The perception of the inflexibility of college and university admission materials caused the administrators to limit the scope of their policy implementation. An administrator from Lehigh described how transcripts and GPA just felt “so ingrained.” He recounted site visits to competency-based schools in the Northeast that had heavily embedded many components of CBE except for altering their transcripts. The administrator recalled: “I will never forget that principal saying that’s just not a hill they’re willing to die on. There’s too much work that goes into this. They don’t want everything to be stalled because people are still entrenched and believe in the GPA scale.” Other administrators explained that they didn’t feel they had the agency to challenge the existing structure and as such they maintained those traditional practices. An administrator from Mercer explained: “You know there’s transcripts, there’s colleges, there’s you know, a lot of things that are in place and those are those structures that are in place that we don’t have flexibility for, that are affecting what we’re doing.” Some administrators believed that there could be discussion with post-secondary, but this is only something that they had begun to broach and this would take time. One administrator explained: “because our conversations at the college level have just begun too, in terms of how they read transcripts and so forth.”

Administrators were acutely aware not only of the expectations from higher education institutions but were also highly cognizant of the high level of competition for admissions and merit-based financial aid. An administrator from Mercer highlighted this awareness when she noted: “Mercer is not gonna be the district that’s gonna suddenly get rid of GPA and SAT scores. Our kids still want to go to Michigan State and Central, and there’s that game you’ve got to play.” While administrators were committed to CBE, they were also concerned about how their students would be evaluated in a competitive admissions environment. This concern regarding competition also extended to the financial aid opportunities. An administrator from the high school in Mercer was especially concerned about how measures such as grade point averages factor into merit-based scholarship decisions. He worried that without clear, traditional quantitative measures of achievement that students would be at a disadvantage. The administrator explained: “Other students in [the county] were getting scholarships from universities because they have weighted grades. And we didn’t have weighted grades, but our students would have competed for those scholarships too, so we’ve gone to weighted grades.”

While administrators reported translating formats for external targets, they also discussed plans to maintain proficiency scoring internally. In the Lehigh district, while there have been efforts to incorporate proficiency rubrics these scores are ul-

timately translated into traditional grades. As the administrator explained: “They were scoring based on rubrics and I believe it was a one to four scale, proficiency scale. Then they were, on the back end, translating that into GPAs and academic grades, ‘cause that’s what their community understood and supported.” Additionally, in Mercer, administrators explained plans to implement a portfolio system that might help to bridge evidence of mastery and traditional credentialing. An administrator in Mercer explained:

I think what we are gonna work on is having portfolios for kids that are opportunities for them to demonstrate their learning that may not also be—that may not be a grade so when they leave here, they can say, ‘Okay, yeah, I have a 3.7, but here’s my portfolio that shows I’m a great communicator. I can really collaborate.’

Although this compromise seems appealing, it does not alleviate the pressure districts feel. As a solution it remains incomplete because it still asserts that legitimacy is tied to traditional grading and transcripts.

The pressure to conform to the expectations of post-secondary institutions was also felt at Davis Charter High School. Even though Davis was founded as a competency-based school and had fully integrated proficiency grading, the school conformed to traditional transcript expectations. Like the administrators in Lehigh and Mercer, the administrators at Davis also viewed their conformity as a matter of pragmatism. One of Davis’ administrators explained:

This is another area where we kinda—I don’t wanna say we’re selling out, but at the end of the experience, we wind up converting to a letter grade because of kids that want to go on to college or whatever. It’s just easier because it raises so many concerns, questions, and we don’t want that to be an impediment to them getting accepted or whatever.

Among the administrators’ reasons for compromising on transcript reporting is concern for student opportunity. Much like their counterparts in Lehigh and Mercer, these administrators recognized the competitiveness of post-secondary education admissions and were concerned about creating artificial barriers. The administrator continued to explain:

We wind up doing a traditional transcript, which is unfortunate. It’s something we really wanna change, but we just feel like there really aren’t that many high schools that are doing it, so it’s—we stick out. It just raises a lot of problems. It’ll make it easier if we have the backing of the state to make some of those changes to the transcripts, the college transcripts. I think we could get more momentum having their support with universities recognizing the competency-based transcript.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how coercive and normative isomorphic pressures shape CBE districts’ decisions regarding grading and transcript systems. Our findings reveal that despite philosophical commitment to competency-based ap-

proaches, districts consistently maintained traditional grading structures in response to external pressures. These results align with and extend prior implementation research while demonstrating the explanatory power of institutional theory for understanding persistent barriers to CBE reform.

Regarding our first research question—how normative pressures from parents and students and coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions influence CBE districts' decisions to maintain or alter traditional grading and transcript systems—our findings demonstrate that these pressures operate as powerful constraints on implementation fidelity. Normative pressures from parents manifested as resistance to proficiency-based grading that deviated from their own educational experiences. Parents expected a transactional relationship between homework completion and grades, struggled to interpret proficiency scales, and in some cases demanded a return to traditional practices. These expectations created what administrators described as a “constant battle against traditional thinking.” Coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions proved equally determinative: all three districts, including Davis despite its founding mission as a competency-based school, maintained traditional transcripts with GPAs and letter grades because administrators perceived college admissions criteria as immutable requirements. The combined effect of these pressures was that districts implemented competency-based practices internally while preserving traditional credentialing systems for external audiences.

Our second research question asked how CBE districts navigate and respond to these competing pressures while attempting to implement competency-based grading and credentialing practices. The findings reveal three primary navigation strategies. First, districts engaged in translation—using proficiency rubrics and competency-based assessment internally while converting these scores to traditional letter grades and GPAs for transcripts and report cards. As one Lehigh administrator explained, teachers scored “based on rubrics and I believe it was a one to four scale, proficiency scale” then translated these into “GPAs and academic grades, ‘cause that’s what their community understood.” Second, districts pursued supplementation, planning to add portfolio systems that document competency mastery alongside traditional transcripts rather than replacing them. Third, districts like Davis invested in stakeholder education, frontloading parent orientations and sustained communication to reshape normative expectations over time. Notably, all three strategies represent compromises that preserve institutional legitimacy while partially advancing CBE goals, rather than full implementation of competency-based credentialing.

These findings extend prior implementation research by revealing the mechanisms through which external pressures constrain reform. Earlier studies documented that districts imposing limited changes to school structures have been more successful at incorporating CBE components, while ambitious features like altered transcripts remain “infrequently observed” (Evans et al., 2019; Pane et al., 2015). Our institutional analysis explains this pattern: normative pressures from parents represent deeply embedded beliefs about educational legitimacy that equate effort and compliance with achievement. When Mercer parents demanded grading practices where “ten boxes of tissue for extra credit” could yield an A, they were asserting

traditional definitions of what legitimate schooling looks like. Similarly, coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions operate through perceived risk—the Mercer administrator’s statement that “our kids still want to go to Michigan State and Central, and there’s that game you’ve got to play” encapsulates how districts conform not because they agree with traditional credentialing but because non-conformity carries unacceptable consequences for student opportunities.

Institutional theory illuminates why these barriers prove so intractable. CBE asks schools to abandon grading systems that possess symbolic legitimacy—parents understand them, colleges accept them—and organizational functionality—teachers can manage them, administrators can monitor them (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991). The infrastructure to make competency-based credentialing legitimate at scale simply does not yet exist. Districts thus find themselves navigating impossible tensions: implement CBE with fidelity and risk student opportunity, or compromise on core principles to maintain institutional legitimacy. Davis’s relative success with parent education suggests that normative pressures, while powerful, can be reshaped through deliberate socialization. However, addressing coercive pressures from post-secondary institutions requires systemic change beyond what individual districts can accomplish.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the analysis focused exclusively on middle and high school settings, where grading carries the most direct consequences for student opportunities. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the dynamics of competency-based grading reform at the elementary level, where parental expectations and institutional pressures may operate differently. Second, the study drew on interviews with district administrators and school leaders only; the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents—whose beliefs and behaviors are central to the pressures described—were not directly examined. Third, the three case study districts, while varying in size and governance, tended to serve lower proportions of students of color and English learners than the state average, limiting the transferability of findings to more diverse contexts. Finally, data were collected between 2019 and 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the institutional pressures documented in this study—parental expectations rooted in deeply held beliefs about traditional grading and perceived inflexibility of post-secondary admissions requirements—are structural in nature and unlikely to have diminished in the intervening years. If anything, the pandemic’s disruption of traditional schooling practices and the subsequent push to return to familiar structures may have reinforced the normative pressures described here. Moreover, CBE implementation nationally remains in early stages, with the Aurora Institute continuing to classify most state efforts as emerging, suggesting that the barriers identified in this study persist as relevant challenges for districts pursuing competency-based reform.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

These findings carry significant implications for policymakers and practitioners committed to CBE implementation. First, addressing coercive pressures requires action beyond individual districts. States invested in CBE should develop formal partnerships between departments of education, K-12 districts, and public university systems to pilot competency-based transcripts with guaranteed acceptance pathways. Such partnerships would reduce districts' perceived risk by providing institutional backing for alternative credentials. Additionally, states could negotiate with scholarship organizations to ensure that competency-based transcripts receive equitable consideration in merit-based award processes.

Second, districts must invest substantially in reshaping normative expectations. Davis's success with proactive parent education suggests that family engagement cannot be an afterthought. CBE districts should establish ongoing learning communities where families examine their assumptions about grading and participate in developing new assessment communication systems. These spaces should move beyond explaining CBE to actively helping parents reconstruct their understanding of what grades should represent. Districts might also consider parent advisory committees specifically focused on assessment reform, giving community members ownership over implementation decisions.

Third, policymakers must reconsider implementation timelines. The deeply embedded nature of normative beliefs about grades suggests that CBE cannot be implemented within typical three-to-five-year policy windows. States should consider ten-year implementation horizons that allow districts to socialize students beginning in early elementary grades, building cohorts of learners and families who develop within competency-based systems rather than being asked to abandon established expectations. This longitudinal approach would also provide post-secondary institutions time to develop admission processes accommodating competency-based credentials.

Fourth, districts should formalize the hybrid documentation systems that emerged organically in our study. Mercer's proposed portfolio approach—maintaining traditional transcripts for external legitimacy while using portfolios to document competency mastery—represents a pragmatic bridge strategy. Such systems acknowledge current institutional constraints while preserving evidence of CBE's distinctive approach to documenting student learning. Over time, as portfolios demonstrate value to employers and post-secondary institutions, they may gradually supplant traditional credentials.

Finally, state education agencies should assume a coordinating role in building the legitimacy infrastructure that CBE requires. Individual districts cannot shift post-secondary expectations alone. States can convene stakeholders, develop model policies, and create recognition systems for competency-based credentials. Michigan's pilot program represents a promising start, but as administrators noted, districts need "the backing of the state" to make substantive changes to transcripts and cre-

denialing. Without coordinated state action, districts will continue facing impossible choices between implementation fidelity and student opportunity, and CBE will remain perpetually “emerging” rather than transformative.

Directions for Future Research

While this study offers important insight into the institutional pressures that constrain competency-based grading reform, several areas warrant further investigation. First, future research should examine the actual flexibility of post-secondary admissions processes toward competency-based transcripts. A central finding of this study is that all three districts maintained traditional transcripts based on administrators’ perceptions of post-secondary rigidity, yet none had engaged in sustained dialogue with university admissions offices. Research that directly surveys admissions officers and financial aid administrators about their willingness to evaluate competency-based credentials would clarify whether the coercive pressure described by participants reflects formal institutional policy or an assumption that itself functions as a self-reinforcing barrier. Such findings would carry significant implications for how states design partnership strategies between K–12 districts and higher education systems.

Second, future studies should explore how normative and coercive pressures operate differently across districts serving more racially and socioeconomically diverse student populations. The pilot districts in this study tended to serve lower proportions of students of color and English learners than the state average, limiting the generalizability of findings regarding parental expectations and community resistance. Parental beliefs about grading may vary considerably across communities with different historical relationships to traditional schooling, and the perceived stakes of maintaining or abandoning conventional transcripts may differ for students from historically marginalized groups who already navigate inequities in college admissions and financial aid systems. Research in this area would connect institutional theory with equity-focused scholarship and help policymakers anticipate how isomorphic pressures may differentially affect implementation in high-need districts.

Third, longitudinal research is needed to track whether and how parental norms around grading shift over sustained periods of stakeholder engagement. This study found that Davis Charter High School’s proactive parent communication positioned it to better resist normative pressures than the other two districts, suggesting that deliberate socialization efforts can reshape community expectations. However, the cross-sectional nature of this study cannot establish how durable these shifts are or how long they take to consolidate. Longitudinal designs that follow CBE districts over extended implementation timelines, particularly those beginning competency-based practices in early elementary grades—would provide empirical evidence regarding the pace and trajectory of normative change. Such research could identify tipping points at which community expectations begin to align with competency-based principles, informing the ten-year implementation horizons recommended in this study and offering practical guidance for districts seeking to move beyond compromise strategies toward fuller CBE implementation.

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