

# THE SPRING SBG CONFERENCE

**PRESENTED BY THE STAGR CENTER**



Real classrooms. Real leaders. Real conversations.



**Featuring Keynote Dr. Thomas Guskey**

**AGENDA**

**INSIDE**



**MAY 5, 2026**



**VIRTUAL CONFERENCE**  
*with recorded access to all sessions*

- ✓ Breakout Sessions
- ✓ Administrator Panels
- ✓ Teacher Panels

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# Welcome!

## THE SPRING SBG CONFERENCE



Welcome to THE Spring SBG Conference, presented by the STAGR Center. We're glad you're here for a day focused on honest conversations, real classroom practice, and thoughtful leadership around standards based grading.

This conference is designed to support educators and leaders at all stages of the work. Whether you are beginning your SBG journey, actively implementing, or refining practices already in place, today is about building clarity, strengthening decision making, and learning from both research and real world experience.

The day begins with a keynote from Dr. Thomas Guskey, who will challenge long standing grading practices and ground the work in what research tells us about accuracy, integrity, and purpose in grading. From there, participants will engage in extended breakout sessions, practitioner panels, and a live closing conversation designed to connect ideas to the realities educators are navigating in schools right now.

Throughout the conference, you'll hear from classroom teachers, school leaders, and practitioners who are actively doing the work. Sessions are intentionally structured to provide practical examples, shared language, and opportunities to ask questions that matter to your own context.

Thank you for joining us in this important work. We're excited to learn together and continue the conversation about grades that truly reflect learning.

Sincerely,  
The FIRST Educational Resources STAGR Team



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# CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

*at a glance*

## May 5<sup>th</sup> 2026

- 9:00 am – 10:15 am
  - Conference Kick Off, Opening Keynote by Dr. Thomas Guskey, and Transition to Breakout Sessions
- 10:30 am – 11:30 am
  - Breakout Sessions – Round 1: Choose one of five concurrent sessions
- 11:45 am – 12:45 pm
  - Teacher & Administrator Panels
    - Classroom and leadership perspectives on standards based grading in practice
- 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm
  - Breakout Sessions – Round 2: Choose one of five concurrent sessions
- 2:15 pm – 3:00 pm
  - Closing Session: You Ask. We Answer.
    - Live conversation with Garth Larson, Don Smith, and Becky Pepler

KEYNOTE AND BREAKOUT SESSION DESCRIPTIONS CAN BE FOUND ON THE NEXT FEW PAGES OF THE CONFERENCE PROGRAM

**\*\*\*TIMES LISTED ARE CENTRAL TIME ZONE\*\*\***

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Conference Kickoff & Keynote | 9:00 am - 10:15 am

**9:00 am - 9:15 am**

**Setting the Direction for the Day:** Framing the purpose and focus for the conference

**9:15 am - 10:00 am**

**Ensuring that Every Grade Tells the Truth by Putting First Things First**  
with Dr. Thomas Guskey

Habit 3 in Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is "Put First Things First." Effective people organize and carry out their work around important priorities of what matters most, guided by clear principles rather than by agendas or external pressures. Evidence shows that educators implementing standards-based grading can prevent numerous problems and avoid most resistance simply by knowing what to do first. In this presentation, Tom outlines four essential "First Things" that must be prioritized in order to minimize resistance and ensure the successful implementation of standards-based grading.



**10:00 am - 10:15 am**

**Turning Ideas Into Direction:** Connecting keynote ideas to the learning ahead

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Breakout Session 1 Options | 10:30 am - 11:30 am

## Co-Creating Student Learning Targets with A.I. with Larry Ainsworth

Just as “unwrapping” Essential Standards provides educators with the “gift of clarity” needed to fully understand those standards, the way to communicate that same clarity to students is to “translate” them into Student Learning Targets and explain their purpose when first introducing them. In this session, you will see how A.I. can be used as a “thought partner” to expedite the creation of Student Learning Targets once educators understand the what, why, and how of this all-important component of instruction.

By first knowing the attributes of—and seeing examples of—correctly written Student Learning Targets, educators can easily evaluate the validity of each response that A.I. generates. This approach counteracts the use of A.I. as an isolated shortcut for creating Student Learning Targets without understanding the impact they can have on instruction and student learning when co-created thoughtfully.

## Assessment as Evidence Gathering with Garth Larson

Too often, assessment is treated as an endpoint, something we do to students in order to generate grades. This session challenges that mindset and reframes assessment for what it is truly meant to be: a process of gathering evidence of learning.

During this breakout, participants will explore the fundamental purpose of assessment and how shifting from point-collecting to evidence-collecting transforms instructional decisions, feedback, grading, and student ownership of learning. We will examine what counts as quality evidence, how evidence should be aligned to learning targets, and what to do as a result of gathering clearer evidence.

Educators will leave with a clearer lens for designing assessments that inform instruction, support learner growth, and communicate learning more accurately, moving assessment from a compliance activity to a meaningful part of the learning process.

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Breakout Session 1 Options | 10:30 am - 11:30 am

## Lean Into Coaching: 5 Strategies to Improve Standards-Aligned Instruction and Assessment Practices with Danica Lewis

More and more schools are learning that real, sustainable improvement requires support for teachers that goes beyond what the typical teacher inservice day can offer. When teachers access to intentional, job-embedded coaching, they are more likely to take on new practices and to stick with those that work for the long haul. In this session, we will work through 5 coaching strategies that can be leveraged as schools and teachers implement standards-aligned instruction and assessment practices. Participants will walk away with ready to use tools that will make a difference in the success of teachers and students

**NOTE: This session was pre-recorded and will be available the day of the conference & in the video showcase after the conference.**

## Using Student Evidence to Determine Proficiency with Becky Peppler

Standards-based grading asks teachers to determine what students know and can do based on evidence of learning rather than points or averages. This can be especially challenging when students show multiple pieces of evidence, varying levels of performance, or growth over time.

In this session, participants will explore how teachers use evidence to determine proficiency. Through classroom examples, we will examine how rubrics, success criteria, and patterns in student work support accurate and consistent decisions about learning. The session also clarifies what professional judgment looks like in practice and how it is guided by evidence and shared expectations.

Participants will leave with greater confidence in how evidence is collected, interpreted, and used to determine proficiency in ways that are fair, meaningful, and defensible.

## Leading SBG with Don Smith

Implementing standards-based grading is not about leaders becoming grading experts, it's about understanding the process of change their school is experiencing and leading it intentionally. Too often, grading reform stalls not because educators lack knowledge, but because leadership misjudges where the school is in the journey and what kind of support is needed next. In this session, we will walk through the stages of standards-based grading implementation and examine the critical leadership moves along the way.

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**Practitioner Panels | 11:45 am - 12:45 pm**

These facilitated panel conversations bring the work of standards based grading out of theory and into real classrooms and schools. Panelists are educators actively engaged in implementation and are asked to speak candidly about what is working, what has been challenging, and what they have learned along the way. Participants will hear honest reflections, practical examples, and have opportunities to pose questions that matter to their own contexts.

## **Teacher Panel:** In the Classroom: What SBG Really Looks Like

This panel features classroom teachers from a variety of grade levels and content areas who are living the day to day realities of standards based grading. Teachers share how they use learning targets and assessments, navigate reassessment, manage gradebooks, and help students understand their learning. The conversation highlights practical classroom decisions, common obstacles, and the strategies teachers use to keep the focus on learning while maintaining clarity and consistency.

## **Administrator Panel:** Leading Change that Lasts

School and district leaders who have guided grading change share their perspectives on what it takes to move this work forward over time. This panel focuses on leadership decisions related to culture, communication, and capacity building, including how leaders support teachers, respond to concerns, and sustain momentum beyond the first year of implementation. The conversation offers insight into what leaders wish they had known earlier and how they continue to refine the work.

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**Breakout Session 2 Options | 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm**

## **Aligning Success Criteria to Student Learning Targets** with Larry Ainsworth

Together with Student Learning Targets that communicate to students what they are to learn and why it is important, Success Criteria show students how they will demonstrate that they have learned it. Educators closely study their “unwrapped” Essential Standards, and the related Student Learning Targets from which they are derived, to determine the matching Success Criteria. The benefit of doing so? Success Criteria make clear for learners exactly what they need to write, say, and/or do to provide valid evidence that they have successfully “hit the bullseye” of the Student Learning Targets.

In this session, you will see numerous educator-created and A.I.-generated examples of Success Criteria across various content areas that are directly aligned to Student Learning Targets, and learn tools, tips, and step-by-step instructions for creating them effectively.

## **Standards-Based Grading for Students with IEPs: What’s Legal, What’s Ethical, and What Works** with Kelly Barkovich

As schools continue to refine standards-based grading practices, questions often arise about how to thoughtfully and appropriately grade students with IEPs. This session provides clarity around what IDEA allows and requires when it comes to grade reporting, while keeping the focus on student learning and instructional decision-making.

Participants will explore the difference between accommodations and modifications, consider when report card notations are appropriate, and examine how IEP teams can make collaborative, student-centered decisions about grade-level versus modified learning targets. Through practical classroom examples, this session connects IEP goal writing, standards-based grading, and assessment practices into a clear and manageable transparent framework.

- Participants will learn how to:
  - Understand the difference between accommodations and modifications in a standards-based grading system
  - Make thoughtful, team-based decisions about grade-level and modified reporting
  - Align IEP goals with report cards in meaningful ways
  - Navigate common challenges in grading students with IEPs with greater confidence

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**Breakout Session 2 Options | 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm**

## **Clarity for ALL Classrooms: Turning Shared Expectations into Consistent Practice** with Gabe Hackett

We know clarity has a powerful impact on student learning, but how do we ensure clarity exists in every classroom, not just a few? In this interactive session, Gabe Hackett will share practical tools and protocols from the FIRST PLC Center that help teams build shared clarity around instructional priorities, learning expectations, and classroom practice. Participants will explore actionable strategies to align instruction across teams, buildings, and districts, bringing research to reality and creating consistent, high-quality learning experiences for all students.

## **Reassessment in Practice: Overcoming the Roadblocks That Get in the Way** with Becky Pepler

Reassessment is often identified as a key component of standards-based grading, yet it is also one of the most challenging practices for schools to implement well. Questions around timing, evidence, workload, and accountability can quickly create hesitation, frustration, or inconsistency. In this session, participants will explore how schools work through these roadblocks by clarifying expectations, using evidence to guide decisions, and connecting reassessment to learning rather than compliance.

This session focuses on the practical decision points that help reassessment function as a learning support rather than an add-on. Participants will consider how clear expectations, preparation, and feedback shape reassessment practices and help maintain high expectations without creating overload for teachers or students.

Participants will leave with greater clarity around how to address common reassessment challenges and move forward with practices that are manageable, meaningful, and focused on learning.

## **Repurposing Homework as Ungraded Practice** with Matt Townsley

Students are often pressured to perform on daily homework assignments—or risk falling behind in the point-accumulation game of school. Grading reform frameworks informed by the latest educational research challenge this approach, arguing that homework is most effective when repurposed as ungraded practice rather than a source of points. In this interactive session, participants will examine why grading homework undermines learning and will discover four actionable criteria for designing and implementing homework as meaningful, ungraded practice in their classrooms.

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Closing Session | 2:15 pm - 3:00 pm

## You Ask. We Answer.

This closing session brings the day together through live conversation shaped by participant questions. Rather than a formal presentation, this time is intentionally responsive to the real scenarios, tensions, and decisions educators are navigating in their assessment and grading work. Drawing from questions raised in the moment, Garth Larson, Don Smith, and Becky Pepler explore how ideas from the conference show up in practice, helping participants think through next steps, trade offs, and priorities. The conversation connects research, practitioner insight, and leadership perspective to the realities of classrooms, teams, and schools.

Participants will leave with greater clarity around where to focus next, what questions are worth continuing to ask, and how to move forward with purpose as they return to their own contexts.

## Keep the Conversation Going!

The conversations don't end when the conference does. The Fires in Grading Show is a podcast that explores the real questions educators are asking about assessment, grading, and reporting.

Each episode features honest dialogue, practical insight, and perspectives from classroom teachers, school leaders, and researchers doing the work.

Subscribe & listen in to continue learning, reflecting, and challenging the way grades communicate learning.

<https://www.bit.ly/FIRESinGRADING>

**THE FIRES**  
— IN GRADING —  
PODCAST

*"Conversations that spark change"*

**New Episodes Every Other Friday**

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## Meet our Presenters

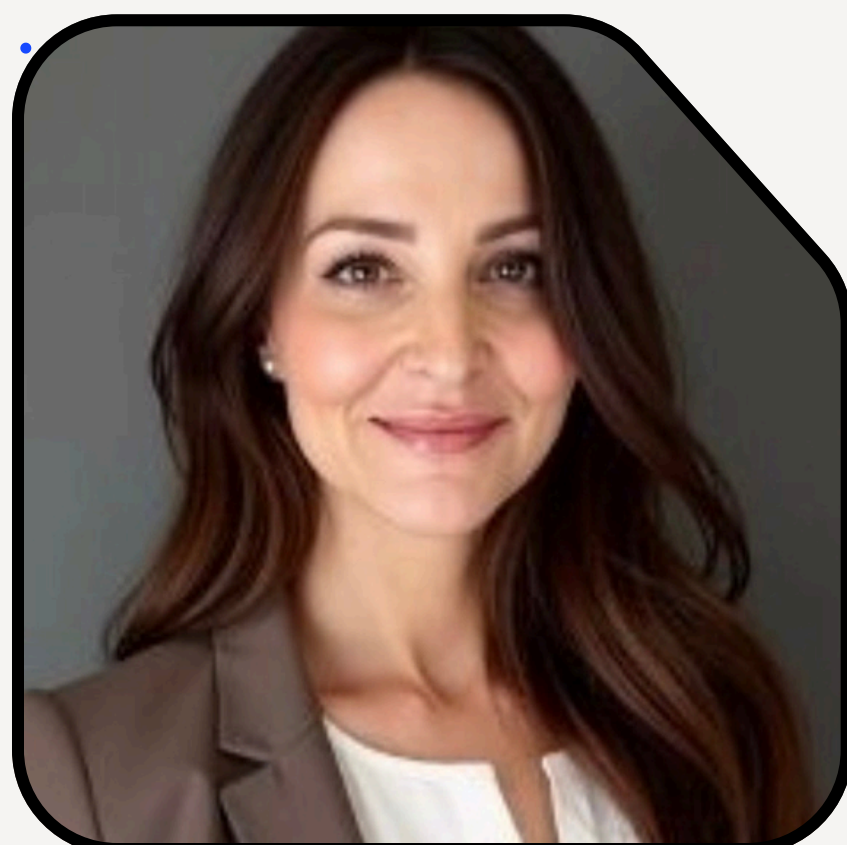


**Larry Ainsworth**

Larry Ainsworth is the author or co author of more than 20 books, including his most popular titles: Rigorous Curriculum Design; Common Formative Assessments 2.0; Prioritizing Common Core State Standards; Power Standards; “Unwrapping” Common Core State Standards, and “Unwrapping” the Standards. Larry’s comprehensive new book series, Integrating Teaching and Learning: “Timeless Essentials” for Creating Integrated Units of Study (2024), explains and illustrates in detail how PK-12 educators can develop quality units of study that intentionally align standards, assessments, instruction, and data analysis to positively impact student learning.

Currently an independent author consultant, Larry served as the Executive Director of Professional Development at The Leadership and Learning Center in Englewood, Colorado, from 1999 to 2013. He traveled nationally and internationally to assist school systems in implementing best practices related to standards, assessment, curriculum, and instruction across all grades and content areas. Throughout his career as an education consultant, Larry has delivered keynote addresses and breakout sessions across North America and in Argentina and Switzerland.

Drawing upon 24 years of experience as an upper elementary and middle school classroom teacher in demographically diverse schools in several U.S. states, Larry brings a varied background and wide range of professional experiences to each of his presentations. Since 2020 Larry has been presenting to educators and leaders across the U.S. a series of virtual workshops based on his Integrated Teaching and Learning System©, a dynamic unit design framework that includes prioritizing and aligning PreK-12 standards, “unwrapping” Essential Standards, writing Student Learning Targets and Success Criteria, and designing quality formative and summative assessments with easy to use Scoring Guides.



**Kelly Barkovich**

Kelly Barkovich is an experienced educator with over 17 years in public education, currently splitting her time between special education consulting and serving as a virtual special education teacher. She is also the Co-Director of the Co-Teaching Center, where she collaborates with educators to improve co-teaching practices and enhance student outcomes. Her background includes leadership as an elementary school principal, Special Education Instructional Coach, and special educator across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Kelly’s expertise includes co-teaching, instructional coaching, assessment practices, and supporting the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students. Kelly was recognized with the Inclusion Partnership Award for her dedication to creating inclusive, student-centered learning environments.



**Thomas Guskey**

Thomas Guskey is Professor Emeritus in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky where he served as Department Chair, Head of the Educational Psychology Area Committee, and President of the Faculty Council. He began his career in education as a middle school teacher and earned his doctorate in educational measurement and evaluation at the University of Chicago. He served as an administrator in Chicago Public Schools before becoming the first director of the Center for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, a national research center.

Dr. Guskey is the author/editor of 30 award-winning books and more than 300 book chapters, articles, and professional papers. He was named a Fellow in the American Educational Research Association, the Association’s highest honor, and received the Association’s prestigious Relating Research to Practice Award. He has also received the Distinguished Contributions to the Field Award from Learning Forward, the Jason Millman Award from the Consortium for Research on Educational Assessment and Teaching Effectiveness, and the Distinguished Achievement Award from the Association of Educational Publishers. Perhaps most unique, in the 158-year history of his undergraduate institution, Thiel College, he is one of only three graduates to receive the Outstanding Alumnus Award and be inducted into the Thiel College Athletic Hall of Fame.

His most recent books include Grading with Integrity (2024), Engaging Parents and Families in Grading Reforms (2024), and Implementing Mastery Learning (2023).

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## Meet our Presenters



**Gabe Hackett**

Gabe Hackett is the director of the PLC Center with FIRST Educational Resources. He is the former principal of Annandale Middle School in Annandale, Minnesota. He also spent 10 years as the principal of Little Mountain Elementary in Monticello, MN. Gabe and his teams have helped to develop Observable Impact tools and structures currently used by many schools across the United States and around the globe. Gabe is passionate about using the Observable Impact tools and protocols to strengthen collaborative teams by connecting action to impact. He enjoys working with schools across the United States to develop strong collaborative teams and finally answer the question, "What instructional strategies really work in our classrooms?" He is the co-author of Building PLCs from the Ground Up Laminated Guide. Gabe lives in South Haven, MN with his wife (Heidi) and two kids (Griffin and MarLee).



**Garth Larson**

Garth Larson, Ed.D, is the Co-Founder and CEO of FIRST Educational Resources. He began his career as a high school English teacher and Associate Principal, later serving as an elementary principal and the Director of Learning for the Winneconne Community School District in Northeast Wisconsin. In 2015, he co-founded FIRST Educational Resources, aiming to enhance student achievement across the United States. Since then, over 2500 school districts worldwide have partnered with his company. Garth consults globally, providing customized professional development on topics such as Professional Learning Communities, Learning-Centered Grading Practices, Leadership, and School Improvement. He is the co-author of six books, including Collaborative Systems of Support, PLC 2.0, Grading for Impact, The STAGR Process Roadmap, Extinguishing the Fires Within Assessment and Grading Reform, and Simplifying School Improvement: A Framework for Impact in Today's Schools.



**Danica Lewis**

Danica Lewis has 20 years of experience in schools, serving as an elementary teacher and later as a school and district administrator, including school building leadership, early childhood leadership, special education leadership, and curriculum & assessment leadership in urban and suburban schools. Danica led the implementation of standards-aligned instruction, assessment, and grading as both a district-level and building-level administrator and implemented a coaching program for a medium sized district. Danica facilitates powerful professional learning around instructional coaching, literacy, standards-aligned instruction and assessment, rigorous teaching, data analysis, and professional learning community leadership. In 2017, the Wisconsin Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development recognized Danica as the "Instructional Leader of the Year" for the State of Wisconsin.

Danica has a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership from Marian University in Fond du Lac, WI and has a Bachelor's of Science in Human Development and Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (WI).

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## Meet our Presenters



**Becky Pepler**

Becky Pepler is the Director of FIRST Education STAGR (Standards, Targets, Assessment, Grading & Reporting) Center (a division of FIRST Educational Resources). Becky Pepler's rich educational background began as a dedicated Chemistry and Forensic Science teacher. She later elevated to an instructional coach and the distinguished role of the 6-12 Science Curriculum Chair. Honored with the Excellence in Science Education Award from Wisconsin, Becky's innovation didn't stop there. She was instrumental in spearheading the shift of the Winneconne Community School District towards Target Based Grading. This initiative, along with her expertise in meaningful assessment, has positively impacted over 100 school districts nationwide. An advocate for inclusive education, Becky believes every student deserves a chance at academic and personal success. Beyond her primary roles, she also co-authored the "STAGR Process Roadmap Laminated Guide" with Dr. Garth Larson and Ken O'Connor, and "Extinguishing the Fires Within Assessment and Grading Reform" with Dr. Garth Larson, Matt Townsley and Don Smith, a testament to her unwavering dedication to providing educators with the tools they need to thrive.



**Don Smith**

Don Smith has 20 years of professional experience in public schools. Don previously served as the Director of Teaching and Learning for the Winneconne Community School District, in Wisconsin. Prior to that, Don was the Director of Teaching and Learning in the School District of Waupaca. Don also served as the Principal at Fond du Lac STEM Academy and Fond du Lac STEM Institute, as well as the District Assessment Coordinator for the Fond du Lac Area School District (WI). Don is a co-author on Extinguishing the Fires of Assessment and Grading Reform, as well as a co-author of the laminated guide, Leveraging the Block Schedule for Student Learning Growth. Don continually leads professional development sessions centered on research based practices in instruction, assessment and grading. In 2022, Don began working full time with FIRST Educational Resources.



**Matt Townsley**

Matt Townsley serves as an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Northern Iowa. He previously taught and worked as a district administrator in Solon, IA. Matt authored multiple books, including Making Grades Matter: Standards-Based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work, Using Grading to Support Student Learning, A Parents' Guide to Grading and Reporting: Being Clear about What Matters, and Extinguishing the Fires within Assessment and Grading Reform. Through conferences, professional development, and workshops, Dr. Townsley has consulted with thousands of teachers and administrators across the country on assessment and standards-based grading. Matt's writing appears in journals such as Educational Leadership (ASCD), School Administrator (AASA), and ASCD Express. He has been featured or quoted on CNN.com, The Washington Post, California public radio, the Center for Digital Education, Education Week, USA Today, and other media outlets. Matt's primary area of expertise and support with FIRST includes assessment and grading.