

# Best of Breed vs. Student Information System Gradebooks



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for education

gradebook software by

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## Best of Breed vs. Student Information System Gradebooks

When evaluating gradebook solutions, districts must choose between best of breed software like eSembler or gradebook software contained as a component of their Student Information System (SIS). For the purposes of this discussion, best of breed gradebook software integrates with data stored in the district SIS but is otherwise not affiliated with the SIS software. Although opinions of best of breed and SIS vendor opinions are colored by their individual offerings, an objective analysis is still possible when evaluating a best of breed versus SIS gradebook solutions.

Generally, Student Information System vendors proclaim that their gradebook offers ease of integration. And this claim is certainly true. However, best of breed gradebook vendors promote flexibility, features, and scalability—aspects often lacking in SIS gradebooks. It is important to not though that that although integration is more seamless with a SIS-supported gradebook, integration with a best of breed gradebook like eSembler is by no means onerous. Best of breed gradebook vendors have made enormous investments in developing flexible and easy-to implement data transfer models; the old arguments about integration difficulties simply no longer apply. There are many reasons to consider a best of breed gradebook solution over one offered by SIS vendors. In the October 2003 issue of *Scholastic Administrator* Chip Kimball Ed.D. writes, "Integrated solutions can be desirable, but just like you might hesitate to purchase a combination stereo system because its individual components are lacking, a single SIS vendor is rarely an expert in every area of information management." Best of breed gradebook vendors are experts in managing daily classroom grades and attendance. These gradebook vendors focus on one thing—providing flexible and feature-rich software for managing teacher grade and attendance information.

SIS vendors excel at providing products that meet generalized district business and reporting requirements that have been administratively standardized. However, teacher requirements are much more complex. Teachers require flexibility and are not prone to change the way they "do business" in their classroom based on the software selected by district administrators. This is where best of breed gradebooks come into play. For many years best of breed vendors have worked to develop flexible classroom gradebook solutions, adjusting their product offerings to meet the needs of a demanding and diverse user base—namely teachers. These best of breed vendors constantly evaluate competitor offerings and refine their software from a functional, pedagogical, and legislative perspective—driven by their need to remain competitive and offer a solution desirable to teachers as well as administrators. SIS vendors are not driven by these same requirements as their gradebooks are not considered core to their business model. The SIS vendor is most concerned with offering a robust system by which to manage student information, handle state reporting requirements, and meet the administrative needs of a district. In many cases, their gradebook offering is intended to serve simply as another line item on their ever-expanding list of available features.

It is shortsighted to suggest that any one solution will be appropriate for every district. Districts should develop a comprehensive plan and list of feature requirements where all relevant requirements and features are analyzed. Ideally, districts should take a structured approach, analyzing classrooms on a grade-by-grade and class-by-class basis to determine if their requirements match the functionality offered the gradebook solution. Additionally, districts should also consider wider issues including the vendor's stability, references, and reputation; ability to integrate with the district's existing and future SIS environment; maintenance and support requirements; performance and scalability; total cost of ownership, and of course the depth of features available. There is no one perfect answer for all districts; and there is not one perfect gradebook for any individual district. The advice we offer to districts is to undertake a rigorous selection process incorporating a wide range of considerations that extend beyond basic functionality, fit, or cost.