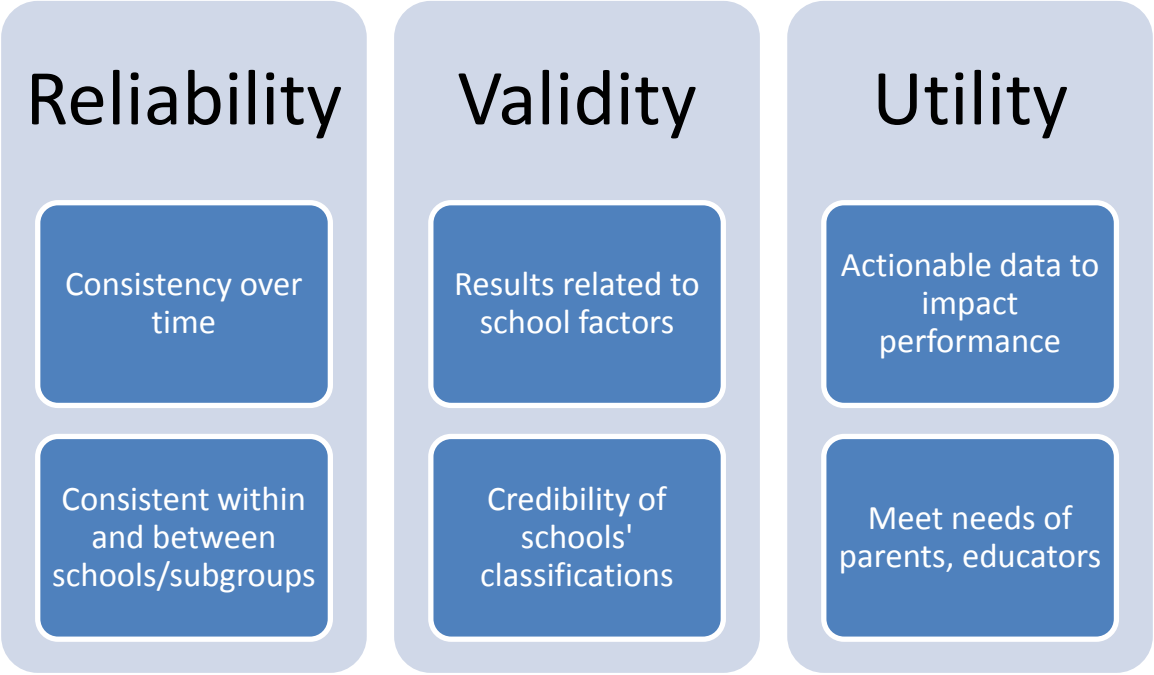
Rebuilding Arizona's School & District Accountability System

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE), the State Board of Education (SBE), and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) share the ultimate responsibility of ensuring all students — regardless of race, ethnicity, income, language or special needs — receive an education that prepares them for the opportunities and demands of college, the workplace, and life beyond high school. Senate Bill (SB) 1289 establishes a transition process and prohibits ADE and the SBE from assigning schools and LEAs letter grade classifications during the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years (transition period) as prescribed in A.R.S §15-241. The high stakes of letter grades has only increased as these labels incentivize high performing schools and sanction schools in need of improvement. In order to address these dual purposes, A.R.S. §15-241 requires a list of all "F" rated schools to be published in a newspaper of "general circulation" at least twice annually. During the summer of 2014, the SBE's A-F subcommittee passed guiding principles to guide the development and implementation of any accountability system used for high stakes. Similarly, Superintendent Diane Douglas recently published "AZ Kids Can't Afford to Wait" also calling for multiple measures and more transparency in the grading system. This specific report outlines how Arizona can hold schools accountable in a manner as robust as Arizona's school choice system.

Framework for Building a New A-F System

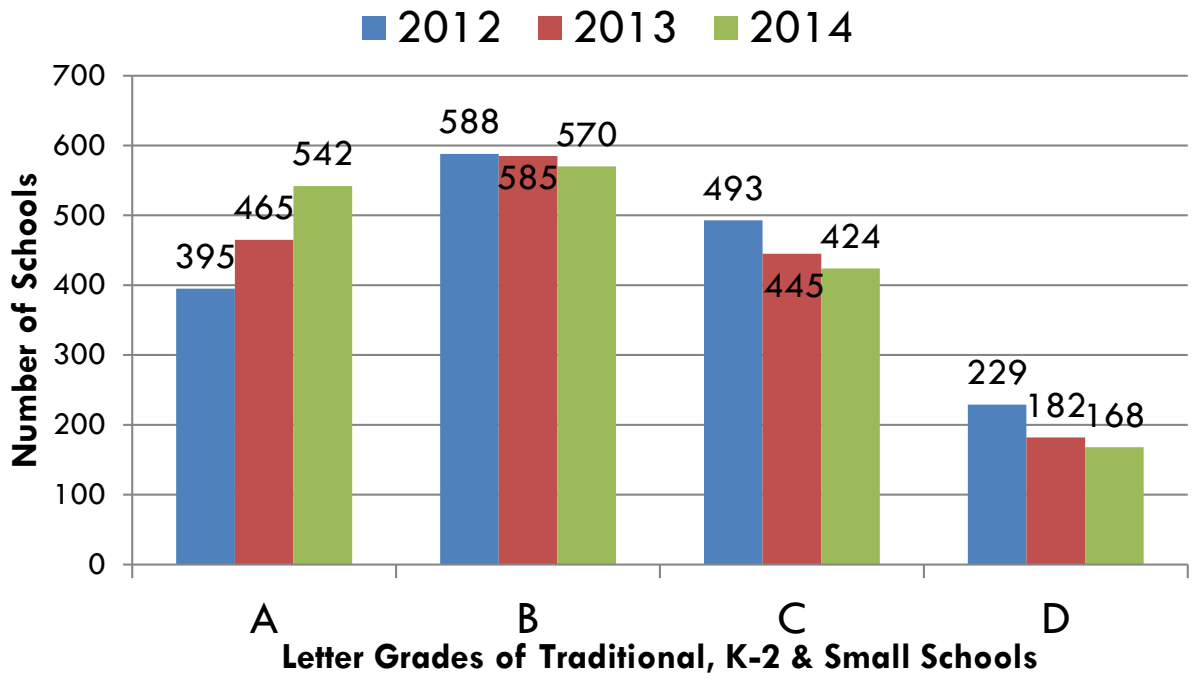
Regardless of labeling conventions, any accountability system used for high stakes purposes will utilize best practices in order to apply the most balanced measurement principles. Based on stakeholder feedback from school administrators, experienced educators as well as policy and technical experts, the newly built accountability system should incorporate the following design principles:



Using parameters prescribed in A.R.S. §15-241, Arizona piloted its first A-F Letter Grade Accountability System in the 2010-2011 school year and began applying high stakes consequences to A-F letter grades given to schools and districts during the 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years. With the exception of the 2014-2015 school year, ADE

has produced more than 2000 A-F letter grades each school year using distinct methodology adopted by the SBE.

Figure 1. Letter Grade Distribution Over Three Years



Unfortunately, student achievement in Arizona has not increased at the same rate as "above average" and "excellent" school labels have increased over the past three years. Two-thirds of Arizona schools received an "A" or "B" letter grade in the 2013-2014 school year although statute assigns "average" schools in Arizona the "C" letter grade. Based on parameters required by statute, letter grades were previously assigned based almost entirely on results of Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) Mathematics and Reading assessments; based on the new proficiency rates on Arizona's Measurement of Educational Readiness to Inform Teaching (AzMERIT) English/Language Arts and Mathematics assessments, schools would decrease an average of 35 A-F points. The introduction of new standards and an assessment offers a unique opportunity to rebase the state's accountability system in order to reflect more defined goals and expectations for Arizona schools.

Multiple Measures

Statute identifies specific measures which can be included in school letter grades, but omits other measures which may also impact the quality of an academic program. Although the ADE and SBE have taken steps to include other measures in schools' A-F letter grades, statute requires the majority of a school's letter grade to come from results of student proficiency and student growth as measured by the statewide standardized assessment. Each year, ADE has recommended refinements to accountability measures in order to address feedback from stakeholders, mitigate unintended consequences, and align with the state's shifting priorities.

During Superintendent Diane Douglas' "We Are Listening" tour, parents and educators throughout Arizona expressed the need to include more than just standardized tests in the A-F accountability system. Based on the current statutory requirements to grade schools, a lower rated school can have multiple programs in place to prevent bullying, provide

transportation, and engage parents while schools which invest solely in test preparation may receive higher letter grades. Diversifying the measures within the state's accountability system will also reduce the emphasis on standardized testing, but maintain high academic standards for all students.

Factors unrelated to a school or educator's inputs could impact each of the measures within the existing A-F Letter Grade Accountability System. Factors such as whether a student drops out of school or achieves a scale score higher than their peer compounds these non-school factors when aggregated to the school level. The existing system operationalized multiple measures of student performance by using a test score to denote both proficiency and growth; however, each of these depends on a single test event in order to produce the student-level data used to hold schools accountable.

Although high school graduation rates are included in the accountability model for all high schools, a single test event can directly impact students' ability to graduate from high school in addition to proficiency and growth scores for a school. These statewide standardized assessments serve as an integral barometer of instructional effectiveness as well as academic progress from year to year; however, an accountability model restricted to aggregation of student-level assessments does not provide the comprehensiveness of a truly multi-level, multiple measure model which could also include school-level measures such as increased teacher retention or participation rates in Arts, Music, and Physical Education programs.

Statewide standardized assessments alone fail to capture the innovative practices used to prepare diverse groups of students for postsecondary readiness. Arizona's accountability system must capture more comprehensive indicators in order to minimize stakes associated with a statewide standardized assessment and impact of school demographics on overall accountability determinations. For example, student proficiency on AzMERIT does not directly capture or measure the extent to which schools prioritize highly qualified and/or effective educators. Furthermore, the overall percentage of students which meet high school graduation requirements within four years does not capture the percentage of students which leave high school with industry certification or prepared for postsecondary education.

Inform Improvement, Maintain Standards

A-F letter grades ensure continued parsimony and utility of the state accountability system, but transparency of the underlying components can inform performance improvement. Public reporting of A-F letter grades serve as a tool for many stakeholders – especially those concerned with school choice. For many schools, especially those with non-traditional academic programs, the letter grade label holds less value than a more direct assessment of school improvement and performance. A comprehensive system will provide feedback for purposes of improvement and accountability rather than forcing assignment of value-laden labels easily taken out of the context. Many states, including Arizona, recognize the unintended consequences of assigning A-F labels to schools where a letter grade may be less appropriate than more nuanced identification. In these instances, the state may utilize other mechanisms to differentiate and support schools which serve divergent populations such as Arizona's more than 100 alternative schools. Even with different methodology and designations such as alternative (–ALT) and Arizona Online Instruction (–DL) models, the easily recognized A-F labels imply some level of comparability among very different schools.

Arizona's 2012, 2013, and 2014 A-F Letter Grade Accountability System lacked any mechanism to identify failing levels of performance among schools. In fact, the scale used to

assign letter grades only accounted for "excellent" through "below average" levels of performance or "A" through "D" letter grades. Without an operational definition of a failing school, schools performed "below average" for several years before the "F" letter grade was assigned per A.R.S. §15-241.

This approach to high stakes accountability biases one side of the performance spectrum and withholds information necessary to drive improvement in schools which need feedback most. In its third year of full implementation, the number of Arizona schools which received the "F" label tripled. Although more than a dozen states utilize the A-F grading system for its schools, Arizona relies exclusively on state statute to diagnose failing performance after designating schools "below average" for three years regardless of any improvement made.

Figure 2. Three Scenarios - "A" Letter Grade Schools

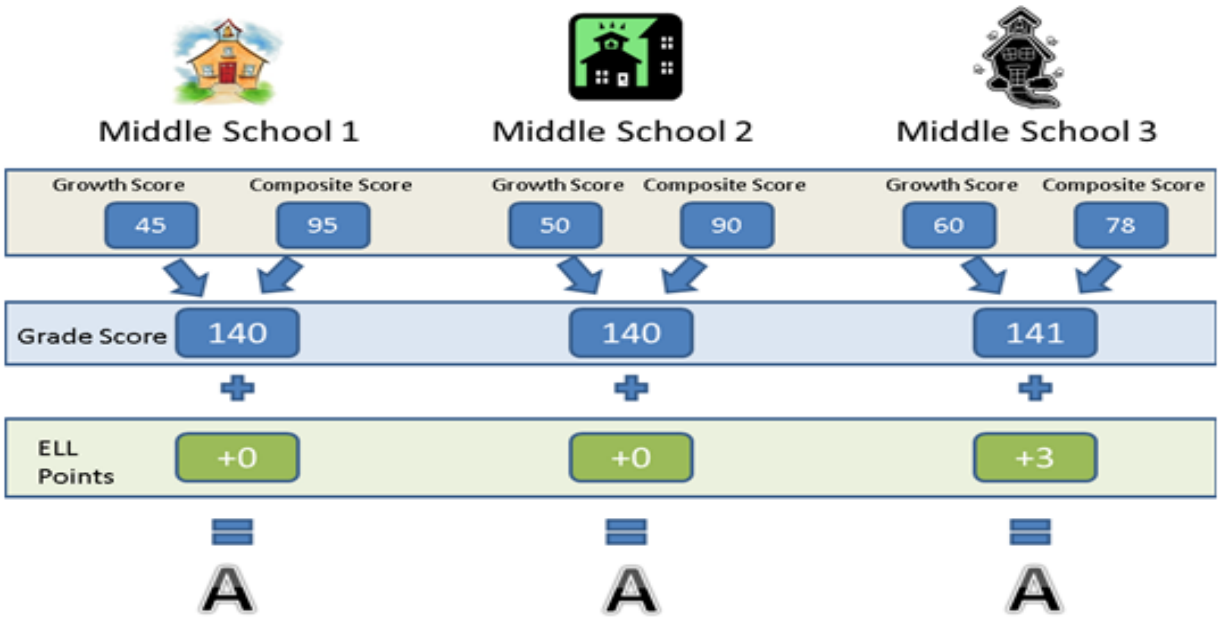


Figure 2 illustrates how three different schools could earn an "A" in the former A-F system; however, this single letter grade may not adequately identify shortcomings in specific areas – nor does a significantly lower letter grade convey strengths within a school. While letter grade inflation is a significant concern, the lower end of the A-F spectrum may discount a school's academic growth and exacerbate factors like poverty which impact student achievement. An unacceptable letter grade can also deter selective families and effective educators; furthermore, a low letter grade also triggers consequences intended to improve the school in areas of deficiency which can be predicated to some extent on the socioeconomic conditions surrounding the school.

Unlike other states which utilize an A-F grading system for schools, there is no provision which exists to ensure the robustness of the letter grading scale on a regular basis. Implications include the inflation of school letter grades when measures allow easier access to A-F points or when measures such as statewide standardized assessment drives down proficiency rates. For example, despite an increase in the number of high schools rated "A" or "B" from 2013 to 2014, neither proficiency nor graduation rates in high schools increased.

Summary

In order to observe the principles of agreement adopted by the SBE and realize Superintendent Diane Douglas' vision for a new A-F accountability system, ADE will collaborate with internal and external stakeholders. ADE has long used technical and policy stakeholders to evaluate proposed models for fairness, validity, and reliability. Any recommendation to the SBE will continue to undergo thorough review by lay, technical as well as policy stakeholders. In order to better serve schools and the public, the ADE will streamline reporting of school performance data whenever possible. ADE actively collaborates with national measurement and policy experts and other state education agencies to utilize best practices within Arizona. More flexible state and/or federal laws outlining accountability for K-12 education warrant increased checks and balances especially as more diverse measures are incorporated into a high stakes system.

Regardless of the stakeholder collaboration, technical assistance, or measurement innovation, Arizona's next accountability model will first observe the parameters outlined by A.R.S. §15-241. Potential legislation which only references statewide standardized assessments may discourage inclusion of non-statewide standardized assessments such as industry credentials, assessments for college credit, etc.

Maximum flexibility of a revised state system will ensure alignment with schools' other accountability requirements. With potential Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization, it is important to develop a system with the most agility and sensitivity to policy change. Prescriptive rules for school accountability diminish the state's ability to bring data-driven decisions and policy recommendations to the SBE. Also, a state accountability system built in a silo fails to take into account duplicative mandates on schools by other regulatory bodies. Arizona parents and educators are primed for a more comprehensive, collaborative, and innovative system of holding its schools accountable. Lessons learned as well as on-going demand for a more holistic profile of school performance will drive the development of a new accountability system presented to the SBE for adoption during the summer of 2016.