

School Grades: Fundamental Principles

School grades provide transparent, objective, and easily understood data to parents, educators and the public to spur improvement and student learning to prepare for the challenges of higher education, the workforce, and civic life. A-F school grading, pioneered in Florida, has been adopted by sixteen additional states¹ in law or rule, and several more states have A-F school grading legislation pending that has a significant chance of becoming law during the 2016 legislative session.

A-F has been a popular and effective accountability tool for two main reasons. First, the rigorous model uses sophisticated, valid, and reliable indicators that are based on student learning outcomes and focused on the performance of the lowest achieving students in each school. Second, and just as importantly, these indicators are aggregated into a rigorous A-F grading scale. The easy-to-understand A-F labels are crucial for promoting transparency and establishing effective incentives for schools. Not surprisingly, these labels have been incredibly popular with parents. In a national poll, 84 percent of parents supported assigning schools a letter grade based on how well they educate their students (McLaughlin & Associates, 2014).

In order to fully realize the benefits of a transparent school accountability system, states should adopt the following fundamental principles:

1. Use clear and transparent descriptors of A, B, C, D, and F
2. Include objective, concise student learning outcome measures
3. Balance measures of student performance and progress
4. Calculate student progress toward grade level and advanced achievement
5. Focus attention on the progress of the lowest performing students in each school
6. Report results in a timely manner as close to the end of the school year as possible
7. Communicate clearly to parents
8. Establish rigorous criteria, with automatic increases, in order to earn A, B, C, D, or F grades
9. Use grades to identify schools for recognition, intervention, and support

1. Use clear and transparent descriptors of A, B, C, D, and F

Using clear and transparent A, B, C, D, and F grades, rather than vague categorical descriptors, ensures that everyone understands how schools are doing. Even if parents don't understand specifics of the school accountability calculation, they will know that A and B is good, that D and F is not good, and a C means there is room for improvement.

School grading brings a command focus on learning because no one, including administrators, educators and parents is satisfied with a C grade or lower. Everyone strives for excellence in a way that does not occur with fuzzy descriptors like "satisfactory" or "performing."

In an A to F system, low performing schools are easily identified and communities rally around them. Florida witnessed countless stories of communities coming together to improve schools to raise

¹ 2016 in order of adoption: FL, AZ, IN, LA, NM, OK, UT, AL, MS, NC, OH, AR, ME, WV, GA, TX and TN – 17 states

student achievement. That didn't happen when Florida used fuzzy descriptors such as performing, low performing, and critically low performing.

A-F descriptors are easily consumable by the general public and draw a heightened amount of interest.

2. Include objective, concise student learning outcome measures

The purpose of federal and state school accountability is to ensure that students are learning. School accountability measures need to be based on what is most important and what measures student success. Strong school accountability models include objective student outcome measures such as performance and progress on statewide assessments, graduation rates, performance on advanced coursework, and/or college readiness measures. These objective measures focus on student learning and achievement.

These measures should be concise in their calculation and not require complex mathematical adjustments or explanations. Simpler is better because it allows individual classroom teachers to focus on goal instead of figuring out how to game the system.

For example, simply using the percent of students who score grade level or higher on the math assessment is a much stronger calculation than a complex indexing system that awards some points for partial proficiency, full points for grade level performance and extra points for advanced proficiency. Seeing 59 percent of students proficient in math is more meaningful than earning 59 points on a "proficiency index." Simple, concise calculations provide transparency and meaningful data to parents and educators.

The process and methods schools use to ensure students learn, such as school culture, student engagement, and access to courses, are extremely important and should be reported publicly, primarily through parent-friendly school report cards. But that information, should be used by local decision makers to improve the educational environment, not included in the portion of statewide accountability systems that identifies schools needing support and interventions.

3. Balance measures of student performance and progress

School accountability systems need to balance student and student progress. All students have the ability to learn, and a strong accountability system must capture measures of that growth. While the ultimate goal is that all students will be performing on grade level, the reality is that many are not. Focusing on both proficiency and growth provides a truer, fairer picture of how a school is doing.

While measuring student proficiency provides useful information on where a school stands in relation to mastery of grade-level standard, it doesn't provide a complete picture. Every school has students who perform at different levels of proficiency. Therefore, states cannot simply compare proficiency across schools because proficiency may be a reflection of the performance of students who entered the school, not the impact of the school demonstrated through student growth.

Using a growth component in the school accountability formula levels the playing field so that schools do not have advantages or disadvantages simply as a result of the students who attend a school. The growth component requires schools to demonstrate that all students, high achieving and low achieving, have made a year's worth of progress in a year's time. Growth ensures schools earn credit for making progress with students who may have entered their school below grade level and have not yet achieved grade level performance, and it also puts pressure on schools who have high performing students to keep them high performing.

Perhaps most importantly, both proficiency and growth should be equally balanced in an accountability system. To weight growth more than proficiency provides less incentive to ensure students are on grade level. States that too heavily weight progress may find themselves issuing A grades to schools with far too few students achieving on grade level, which makes the accountability system lack credibility. To weight proficiency more than growth will create an uneven playing field.

4. Calculate student progress towards grade level and advanced achievement

There are two widely used methods for calculating student growth – “criterion-based” and “norm-referenced” – and adopting a criterion-based method is essential to ensure that each individual student is making progress.

In a criterion-based system, students are measured on their individual progress towards meeting pre-determined expectations. The strongest expectations set the amount of growth a student must make each year at a level that moves her towards achieving proficiency, or if already proficient, to advanced achievement. This growth expectation determines whether or not the student has demonstrated progress towards the mastery of a certain set of skills.

Norm-referenced growth models, by contrast, compare students to the performance of other students across the state – not how well an individual student progressed towards meeting a predetermined standard. In this method, there will always be winners and losers -- students that make growth relative to others and students that do not make growth relative to others, regardless of how well or poorly the students are performing.

In other words, even if student performance improves substantially across the state, there will be “losers” a set of students that are determined to not be making growth, because another set of students did just a little better.

Criterion-based growth to proficiency models are the fairest, because they measure what matters – whether each student is learning enough each year to become proficient – not how well a student did compared to their peers, using an ever-changing scale.

5. Focus attention on the learning progress of the lowest performing students in each school

Effective school accountability systems place more focus on students most in need, without ignoring those that are performing on grade level or higher. Instead of focusing on individual demographic

or curricular subgroups of students, which was required under the federal accountability system, and which many states gamed in order to “hide” populations of students within schools, states should focus on the lowest performing students in each school – because each school has a group of lowest performing students.

Low performing students come from all races and ethnicities, all income levels and all curricular backgrounds, and they are found in all schools. Focusing on these lowest performing students ensures the ‘right’ kids in every school are getting the extra attention and resources needed to catch up with their peers.

6. Report results timely manner as close to the end of the school year as possible

It is important that results of school grades are released with enough time for parents to make decisions about where to send their child to school. Issuing grades before the end of the school year, or shortly thereafter, has many benefits.

- For schools earning a high grade, getting a grade close to the end of the year allows teachers and students to celebrate success when they earned it. Teachers and students who move to different schools do not get to share in the success of earning a good grade.
- For schools earning a low grade, getting a grade close to the end of the year ensures that leaders and educators have ample time over the summer to analyze where their weaknesses were to develop and implement a plan to improve before the start of the next school year.
- For states that have school choice options or remediation plan requirements attached to the school’s grade, issuing grades close to the end of the school year allows for these policies to more be effectively implemented.

7. Communicate clearly to parents

Parents need to have access to school grades and the underlying data for the underlying measures. The state should make report cards easily accessible on the agency website. The report cards should have a school grade reported with an explanation of the statewide grading scale to give parents context for the grade. Information should be easy to navigate and explained in simple language and graphics. Schools and districts should be required to notify parents of the school’s grade and provide information to parents that cannot access the website.

And ideally, parents should know what their options are if they are not pleased with the school’s performance.

8. Establish rigorous criteria, with automatic increases, in order to earn A, B, C, D, or F grades

Once it is determined which components are included in the school grading system it is important to establish rigorous criteria and the scale to earn a grade. Setting the grading scale for earning an A, B, C, D, and F is critical to the success of school accountability.

Setting the grading scale too low will result in all schools earning an A or B, which defeats the purpose and meaning of a transparent system. Parents will not know how their school is performing, and the school will not have any incentive to improve. Setting the grading scale too high so all schools are earning a D or F will not build confidence in the system. The school grading scale should reflect that state's national standings and make sense in the context of current student achievement. For example, if the state is ranked at the bottom of the states on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading and math measures, then an accurate grading scale would result in more D and F schools than A and B schools that first year. However, if the state was in the top 10 on NAEP measures, a system that produced more D and F schools than A and B schools would suggest that the grading scale was too high.

Even if a state initially sets a high bar for grades that results in a large number of D and F schools, history proves that it will not remain this way for long. Schools will rise to the challenge and work to improve student performance and their school grade. It is important that the school accountability system has a mechanism to raise the bar as more and more schools are making higher marks. Success is never final and reform is never finished. Raising the bar is critical to continuous improvement.

States should set in law the long-term school grading scale desired while providing for thoughtful, established, automatic increases in the scale as schools are ready (e.g., automatic school grading scale increase).

For example, states could ensure the grading scale will increase by 5 percentage points when 65% or more schools (elementary, middle or high schools) earn an A or B in a given year. These increases will occur until the statewide school grading scale reaches: 90-100% = A, 80-89% = B, 70-79% = C, 60-69% = D, and <60% = F.

An automatic increase allows for the state to set a grading scale that will ensure an appropriate distribution of school grades in the implementation year, but provides for an automatic increase to raise the bar when schools are improving. This approach has two primary benefits: 1) alleviates need for potentially annual changes in law to adjust the scale which can become politically challenging once grades have been issued over time, and 2) allows the scales to be different for elementary, middle and high schools over time – even though they will all ultimately reach 90-100% = A.

Codifying an automatic grading scale increase will allow for raising the bar while avoiding having to open up the school grading law making it susceptible to other changes.

9. Use grades to identify schools for recognition, intervention, and support

Regardless of the nuances of methodology states use to meaningfully differentiate schools, a key factor is identification of schools that should be rewarded, or provide extra support and resources for intervention at schools that are consistently failing to serve students.

Schools that improve a letter grade from the prior year or earn an A, should be recognized as **Reward Schools**. Recognition should include financial awards for educators as well as publicity and certificates of recognition.

- *Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools*: This category includes the lowest performing 5 percent of Title I schools and all high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent.
- *Targeted Support and Improvement Schools*: These are schools where one or more groups of students are “consistently underperforming,” as determined by the state.
- *Additional Targeted Support and Improvement Schools*: These are schools that have one or more groups of students who are performing as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools.

Because of the many benefits of having a unitary system of federal and state accountability, the school grading system will be the primary mechanism for identifying schools for support and improvement. However, high schools may also qualify based on graduation rates.

Schools meeting the following criteria will be identified as **Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools**:

- Schools with an F letter grade. F schools are the lowest performing schools in that they have the lowest percent of students proficient in each subgroup and the lowest percent of students in each subgroup making growth. States currently using A-F school grading have identified more than 5 percent of Title I schools as F school.
- High schools that have graduation rates below 67 percent.

Schools meeting the following criteria will be identified as **Targeted Support and Improvement Schools**:

- Schools with a D letter grade. D schools exhibit larger achievement and growth gaps than higher performing schools (i.e., subgroups that are “consistently underperforming.”)
- A, B and C schools with subgroups performing as poorly as the bottom 5 percent of schools.
- A, B and C schools with subgroups performing as poorly as the subgroups in D schools.
- A, B and C schools who did not meet the needs of their students learning English.