

Friday Focus Webinar: Letter Grades, Appeals, and Accountability Updates

November 21, 2025

Smith, Sean 0:39

Thank you everybody for joining. We just wanted to give just a little bit of time to have everybody log in and admitted. Thank you so much for joining today. Anjali from the assessment team is with us. She'll be monitoring the chat as we go along.

Please feel free to drop questions in there and I will trust in Anjali's expertise. She'll kind of surface anything if it's important to grab as we're going along. If not, we'll just proceed and we'll have plenty of time for questions at the end.

Today's webinar will be a little bit informal. I don't have a formal presentation. I'll just want to give a few updates and then be available for questions. So we'll jump right into it. First and foremost, we are at November, it's November 21st. The 17th, this Monday, was the close of the appeals window. So if any of you have appeals out there, the spreadsheet that is available on the State Board of Education website will now show any schools who have appealed as under review. So those will be listed that way.

And again, I just want to give a shout out to the Board staff. They have...really the last couple years...they've worked real closely with schools to communicate with anybody who might have an appeal. They've even reached out to some schools who...they saw some things that may need an appeal...and list those schools as under review initially before the initial release. So, Sean Ross at the State Board, you know, he likes to say...I'll quote him on two things. He likes to say we want accountability to feel like something that's done with schools and not something that's done to schools.

Then the other point that we're we're trying to accomplish with these letter grade releases, he likes to say, you know, it's hard to put the toothpaste back in the tube. Once those letter grades are out there, they're out there and visible and if there is a change that won't necessarily get picked up or hit the news in the same way that initial release does. So it was real encouraging. They work very hard to try and get that initial release correct before it goes live and it was gratifying to see in some of the news stories they listed on day one, you know, here's the breakdown of the schools and there's this many schools currently under review. So it was nice to see that that work had happened to make sure schools had the space to understand their

data, prepare their story and work with the Board and the Department to get that appeal through.

Let's see, next timeline on that. So, we will work with Board staff and then the three members of the board who are on the appeals committee will review each appeal. And then, our goal in those settings is to get as much information as we can and understand what each school is presenting. So if any of you are involved in that, what to expect is likely Board staff or somebody from the department may reach out to you with additional questions. I had done it years ago from the school side and it always felt a little bit like going on trial and trying to plead your case and say, you know, here's the evidence and hope it worked out well.

The format that we've tried to create now is much more of a dialogue back and forth. So, Board staff and my team at the Department will work a lot with schools to talk data back and forth, discuss findings, and our goal is to present the Board members who serve on the Appeals committee with the best information possible so that they fully understand the situation and can make a decision. Even in some of those discussions, when we're meeting with members at Appeals committee, oftentimes they'll have additional questions, and we'll go back to the school. So that dialogue continues the whole time, and you can expect...I guess just to set the stage, you don't need to anticipate just kind of a one and done, hoping that you wrote it up really well and persuasively when there are follow up questions. Those will come back and forth and we try and understand everything as well as possible so the Board members can make that decision. You also, if you're going through that process, may get contacted if hey, we already know that the appeal is going to be approved. You know, maybe you'd ask for time to have that meeting and be face-to-face with the Board members. You may get a contact and say like, hey, they already know they're going to approve it. You're welcome to still come, but it's not necessary if you'd rather just let them vote on it. So that's what that'll look like and then afterwards those members of the Appeals Committee, the State Board of Education members, those three committee members will make a recommendation to the full Board, which will then receive a vote in January. And that January timeline is when we'll see those new grades reflected on the public spreadsheet, and that's roughly the same timeline that we roll over report cards. So, those grades will roll out at about the same time, but we'll process those updates if anything has gone out on report cards first.

So, a few updates. One is we're speaking report cards. So one of the big updates that we'd had around school report cards was the requirement for incident reporting. So we had a webinar about this and some touch points.

We started communications almost a year ago, so about February of last year. The impetus for it is there's a point in the statute that requires schools to report the number of incidents that occur at their school that require reporting to a peace officer or law enforcement officer. So we had a webinar that we recorded and it's available on our website along with some guidance that we were able to process with both our legal team here at the Department, as well as Mike Kurtenbach, who is the Deputy Associate Superintendent for School Safety and a former police officer.

That should be some solid guidance as far as what is legally required to report there. And the timely reminder right now is that the report cards that we're going to release early January will not feature that. So again, middle of the school year last year was when we started talking about this new process and requirement.

So schools would not have been able to collect that data necessarily for the 24/25 school year. When we roll over 25/26 report cards a year from now, that will be the first year that features that new incident reporting category. So we do...again, we're trying to provide a sufficiently long onramp for schools to understand and create those data reporting processes and then be able to bring that over to report cards.

What should be happening right now is that data collection, working back and forth with law enforcement as necessary, to determine which specific events need to be reported. You may want to start having discussions with school and district leadership about the narrative portion that accompanies it. So there's going to be a number box that just says, OK, number of incidents that meet this criteria, but there's that open response box that allows schools to explain what's happening, what they constitute, you know...this may have been just a person who was traveling through the community and trespassed on the school on a weekend...would potentially be required. You know if that was reported to law enforcement, that could be a required incident, but that open response field allows schools to be able to tell the story of, you know, this was nothing that affected student safety or occurred during school hours. So again, we hope that that opportunity to provide the context is helpful and can clarify to your communities the things that you're doing to keep students safe and and the nature of incidents that are happening.

Next point I want to hit really quick on is indicator scoring. So, as many of you are probably familiar, we've been making progress towards adopting indicator scoring within the A through F models. As a review of what that is, so currently every school receives 1 summative letter grade A through F.

In the statute, it actually says that each piece of the letter grade...proficiency, growth, graduation rate, EL...each need to receive their own letter grade. The intent of that was driven by a Superintendent, the goal being to be able to highlight the things that schools are doing well, as you all know, that one big summative letter grade that is kind of supposed to encapsulate everything a school is doing...it's hard to capture a lot of the good things that are happening at school in one letter of the alphabet.

By breaking down the pieces, we can provide a little more feedback. As many of you know, making progress on a letter grade is often going to come in an area at a time. It's possible to do almost anything, but you can't do everything necessarily in a year. So this is a way...the intent of it is to showcase where schools are showing progress, highlight some of the things that they're doing good, rather than just have it be all part of one overall grade. That has been an effort that we've been working on for a couple years now. The timeline has been fluid with the intent of providing schools enough time to adjust, gathering feedback, working with schools and leaders to understand how we can do this in the best way possible so that it accomplishes that goal of better communication and a better use of the data, and we want to limit any potential problems that could result as we pull that into the system.

So where we're at with that right now...the Board has begun a series of study sessions where they've begun investigating each of the individual indicators. Those are recorded, they're on the State Board of Education's YouTube channel, so you can dig in there. They can get pretty dense...they're very data heavy. But the goal is we'd like as many people to be a part of this conversation as possible and, we want to foster as much understanding around it as we can.

So far we've looked at growth and proficiency. There were two study sessions to look at growth and proficiency and how they interact. An important piece of this is understanding that, as we take apart these indicators and give them individual grades, we have to understand that they've worked together as a system, and they have a balance that's designed to report an overall meaning when they work together. But that can break down when we're starting to take them apart and say, here's this one, here's what you got in proficiency, here's what you've got in growth. And the signals that we're sending need some work to make sure that they are reporting in the way that's going to give an accurate understanding of what's happening. So, one of the things that...and I'll highlight a few of the directions that the Board has voted on for the Technical Advisory Committees to investigate and then what's kind of on the horizon as far as remaining study sessions.

So, at the last Board meeting in November...getting that date right now...I think it would have been the end of October. The Board directed the Technical Advisory Committees to start investigating a few key principles related to growth and proficiency. So one of the things that they asked the TAC to investigate was setting data informed goals for each of these indicators.

So, currently there's a balance where the points come into the overall pot and then we set cut scores for the overall system. The Board wants us to investigate what looks like an appropriate goal within each of those indicators. What should we expect of schools? Where can they expect to earn results on there? I think that will be a tremendously positive change going forward as we investigate and find a way to do that. It will, for the first time, kind of sit in front of schools. What does an A mean in terms of proficiency? Here's the threshold you'd need to arrive at, and that's a similar question that we've explored in the second, or the most recent, session on English learners as well.

If you're familiar with the the accountability system, the English learner goal each year is a norm reference measure, so schools earn points for achieving a reclassification rate that's higher than the state average. That's good from the standpoint that it sets a realistic goal. It's difficult for schools to aim for because that statewide number can change and fluctuate every year. So what the Board has asked the TAC to investigate is what would a method look like where we put some goals in place for each of those indicators that schools would then be able to focus on, reach for, and importantly...it makes it possible to have student level conversations about these metrics instead of saying like we do with English learner outcomes currently and like well, I just, you know, here's what we're going to do and we're just going to hope that that beats the state average.

If we're able to put a goal in place, you know, so the statewide average for high school, for example, this year, is roughly 18% reclassification rate. If schools know that beforehand and are able to say, all right, our goal is an 18% reclassification rate, you can start to have student discussions about where students are at, who needs what support in order to, you know, what does a teacher need in order to accomplish that. And so our hope is that by setting more criterion reference goals ahead of time, it gives schools and leaders and educators a better opportunity to understand and respond to those rather than kind of waiting for, you know, in the case of English learners, eight or nine months after the test happens to see what those results ended up being.

So again, we've had that direction to investigate those specific more criterion reference goals that are informed by the data of each indicator.

Oh yes, question about incident reporting. I'll jump on that real quick here and I'll share that website.

But the direction to look at data informed goals and then one of the second points they've asked us to look at is related to an accelerator that exists for the growth indicator, right? There's points that are awarded higher or lower depending on where students' proficiency was the year before. The Board has asked us to look at something and find if there's a way to remove that prior year performance.

So, what we've found is that a student's prior year proficiency can often hide some of the growth story that's happening. There are schools that can have tremendous growth and it might not show up in the points just depending on how the proficiency of students change from year to year, so the goal is to find a way that would be more representative of the growth that any students show, while also still searching for options that would recognize schools who are able to take students who are performing and struggling on state assessments and be able to advance their proficiency levels.

So again, a broad overview of some of the work that's been happening in those study sessions. The most recent one, as I mentioned, was on November 14th, so just a week ago today...and we'll have another one upcoming. We've been doing them roughly every month, month and a half. The plan is to have a study session where we take a deep dive into each indicator of the system so that we can discuss and get feedback and hopefully around the state, we can have good ideas coming in and there have everybody kind of on the same page as far as the direction that we're moving.

Noting the question, do y'all mind? Would you like me to keep going and or take a pause? Anjali, I don't know if you would prefer I take a pause real quick and grab that website link or if you want me to hang on till the end and I'll drop that in the chat.

Wilson, Anjali 19:39

We typically wait on questions until after you're done presenting, but if you want to take a pause now, that's also fine. It's your preference.

Smith, Sean 19:48

All right, let me just...so I don't hold everybody up searching around for that link, I'll find that. And at the end, Anjali, if you'll help me remember to kind of come back to that incident reporting, I'll drop these links into the chat. The second question that was coming up there was where can we find the investigation and study sessions? Those are on YouTube on the Arizona State Board of Education's channel. I will drop the link to their channel in as well. And yes, each one has been recorded. So you can hear them. Additionally, I'll put a link in the chat with the schedule for committee meetings. So, as I mentioned, we have the Technical Advisory Committee meetings the first Monday of each month. Those are open to the public as well. I believe both of the meetings are now available online virtually as well, so you don't have to drive in. I'll have to double check and make sure. I know at least the morning meeting is, but those are open as well and that's where the Technical Advisory Committee is going to get down to implementing the policy directions that the Board has kind of voted on.

OK. So we'll jump in. I'll give you a few more updates. That's kind of where we're at on the study sessions and the indicator scoring landscape. I'll hit one more topic briefly and then we should have a good amount of time at the end for questions. So we'll jump over there.

So, last point I want to mention with people today is the updates to the alternative application process that we're looking at. So if any of you are operating an alternative school, so...I don't want to assume familiarity, but of the three models that we have for state accountability, there's the K-8 traditional model, the traditional 9-12 schools model, and then the alternative model that's designed for schools who are primarily serving students...you know, the statutory language is...students who are not otherwise able to profit from a traditional high school setting.

Typically, what that means is students who are overage and under-credited, they're kind of behind on their path towards high school graduation and these schools' mission is to get them across the finish line. So each year, schools have to apply for alternative status. That typically takes place at the beginning of the year. We open the application in roughly February and it's due by March.

We're looking to make some changes with the goal of streamlining that process, reducing the burden on schools and getting the alternative designation to schools much earlier. So the timeline currently is roughly, you know, a February opening of the application, a month to submit data, it closes in March, we then review it. All of that starts to then take place as we're running accountability. And so those

designations oftentimes, as we review, as we meet and follow up with schools...that puts the identification timeline into the summer, which for schools that are pending that, especially any new schools...that timeline can be anxiety-inducing, but at the very least problematic...waiting to know, all right, I'm ready to start this school year, we wanted to have some time over the summer to plan, understand the model better, brief our staff and know the direction that we're going forward.

So, we're looking at some refinements that we hope will help with that process. The biggest question I've been getting recently on when we've announced some of these changes and we've been looking at these with the Technical Advisory Committees since I think April, about six months or so. The question that we get most often is like, why? Why are we doing this? What prompted this?

The true story is we had some staffing changes in February, the guy who'd been doing our alternative process got a new job and he'd been doing that for several years. That was one of the first things that prompted us to kind of sit down and look at it as we were processing it for that year. We realized there was some spaces where even internally amongst the team, we were interpreting a mission statement differently or we might be looking at a piece of data that a school had submitted differently than another member of the team.

And so it prompted first the reflection of, OK, can we make this process more transparent so that schools know exactly what we'd be looking for before they submit their application and then the secondary question was, you know, from a computer science standpoint, a designing principle is you want to avoid asking users for information that you already have. And what we tried to ask ourselves was, do we have enough information that we could look at the data that we have and be able to tell the difference between alternative schools and traditional schools without schools...without having to wait for schools to submit that large data ask that's part of the application process.

So we dove deep into some analysis to see, did we have enough data on what we see? Because what we see is only a small portion of what we ask for in the application process. There's a whole bunch of categories that we look for, you know, are there students who are primary caregivers? Are there students who've been adjudicated or are struggling? Are they wards of the state? There's all kinds of things that are, you know...are they behind on credits? We don't necessarily see their credits, so there's a wealth of data that we ask for in the application to be able to say, OK, yes, this school is predominantly serving, you know the threshold is at 70% of students who meet the alternative criteria.

So our guiding question was with the smaller sample of data that's available to us, can we see enough within that that we can, on our own, tell the difference between yes, this school's an alternative or no, they're not. And essentially, can we get the same result without having schools have to go through that data process? And ideally long-term, could we turn it around then to where we're helping provide some of that data rather than having schools to do that data entry. So in the analysis we did, we found as we expanded some of the criteria that we looked at internally, that gave us enough information to very clearly distinguish an alternative school from a traditional school.

Long story short, what that gives us the opportunity to do is, under the new application system that we want to roll out, we'd be able to give schools as we release the application, say, all right, we send out a notification to the District Accountability Coordinator. You've already been approved for the quantitative review, we've reviewed your data and seen that you already meet that. We have a mission statement on file...if there's no changes to that, it would be approved. And so, all the schools will be doing in the application at that point is confirming yes, I still want to be an alternative school for the coming accountability year. Here's my contact information and essentially done.

That would allow us to cut back some of those timelines and for the vast majority of schools, they could have a notification in January instead of waiting until...I should say as early as January instead of having to wait until the summer months and after schools already started to know their status. So our hope there...and we're going to have the December 8th Board meeting...we'll have a more in-depth conversation and presentation to the Board about that. Also, as I mentioned, Technical Advisory Committee meetings, they'll meet the first Monday of December and our last one, the minutes should be available online to kind of review what we talked about.

What we're going to propose to the State Board on December 8th is essentially a year 0 implementation of this process beginning in January. So, this January when schools apply, what we'd like to have is the option to...schools can either choose to follow the current application system that they're familiar with. They don't have to change any processes. Or, as I mentioned, we'll send out that data notification to District Accountability Coordinators, letting them know...here's the results of our quantitative review and our mission statement review, letting them know that they pass with the new system already and if so, would they like to go ahead and just opt into the new system and they can be done at that point. So that's what we're proposing to the State Board in December.

Toby looks like he's dropping into the chat a few of the links that we mentioned.

But yeah, so in December, that's what we're hoping to propose to the Board, giving the field the opportunity to choose which of those options best suits their needs for this year. And ideally, like I said, for the vast majority of schools, we're hoping that we can offer them a drastically expedited process this year and then, with the option to continue the process they're familiar with, if that's necessary or beneficial to them.

All right, I think that is the main highlights I wanted to hit. So we'll jump into questions now as they're coming in.

Let's see. So Toby was able to provide the link to The State Board of Education YouTube channel. That's where you'll find those recorded Board sessions, and I believe that's also where we stream the Technical Advisory Committee. I could be wrong with that one. I'm going to grab, real quick, the link to the meeting schedule.

The site I'm dropping into the chat right now...this is the Board committee meetings and the committees of interest will be the Technical Advisory Committees.

Wilson, Anjali 31:28

And then there was a question from the chat. Can you please share the website that has the info about reporting the safety incidents?

Smith, Sean 31:35

Oh, thank you for the reminder. Yes, let me grab that.

Wilson, Anjali 31:38

Yeah, no problem.

Smith, Sean 31:54

So it'll be on this page and that is going to be under the heading of Guides and FAQ.

What we have there is a recorded webinar. We have some documents with legal guidance, and I believe we should have instructions on how to log into school report cards. What you'll see if you have that permission enabled in ADEConnect, you can see on the admin side exactly what's going to be there, how it's going to, what you're going to need to report, and you can plan before it goes live as well. So you should be able to access the entire process now before it goes live. Again, the go live date for that data will be January, end of December, early January 2027.

Any other questions that are useful for today?

Trying to be a good teacher and leave appropriate wait time, so we'll leave some awkward wait time just to see for any questions.

Wilson, Anjali 33:31

Yeah, we can stay on for another 5 or so minutes waiting to see if anyone has questions, but if you don't have any questions, feel free to hop off and thanks so much for joining.

Smith, Sean 33:44

Awesome. Thank you, Anjali. Thank you everyone for being here. Yeah, we'll hang out for a few minutes.

Yep, please forgive me on the visuals. Yeah, it's been an intense week, and I wasn't able to get the visuals together. We're available for questions. Other than that, thank you everybody for attending.

All right. I think we're OK, Anjali, should we log off?

Wilson, Anjali 35:30

Yes, it looks like no one has any questions, so I'll go ahead and end the meeting. But thanks for joining everyone. Thank you, Sean.

Smith, Sean 35:38

Thank you all.