



# A-F SCHOOL GRADING

*Excuse vs. Reality*  
*ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit*

## SUMMARY

Two decades of experience in Florida and A-F school grading adoption in 15 other states have positively impacted students with more educational opportunities—resulting in students who are better prepared for success in school, careers and life. This experience and these successes yield four primary advantages of A-F school grading.

### 1: Ensures Schools are Striving for Excellence, Not Settling for Complacency

A-F school grading creates a system-wide focus on school effectiveness because administrators, educators and parents understand A-F grades. No one is satisfied with a C grade or even a B grade. In the 16 A-F states across the country, stakeholders strive for excellence in a way you don't see with fuzzy descriptors like "satisfactory" or "performing." Grading schools on a scale of A-F produces a sense of urgency to ensure our schools are meeting the needs of every student.

### 2: Increased Media and Public Attention

Transparency in evaluating schools attracts more attention - from extensive media coverage of individual school effectiveness to realtors who highlight good school grades as a selling point on the housing market. This attention brings more investments in time and energy from families, teachers, administrators, policy makers and all community leaders to support and improve schools.

Schools now have a real, tangible sign of their excellence and hard work. Despite any initial objections to school grades, it is not long before everyone begins displaying their grade on the school marquee, hanging banners, or doing local press about the fact that they earned the coveted A grade or jumped from a D to a B.

### 3: Community Support Emerges from Transparent, Simple Grading

In an A-F system, low performing schools are easily identified and communities rally around them. A-F states can share numerous stories of communities coming together to improve schools to raise student achievement.

For example, in one Florida district, an entire school board meeting was dedicated to how the district could become the first in the state with no C schools. That would not have happened if the old labels of "satisfactory," "making progress," and other vague language had still been in place.

### 4: Parents are Empowered to Make Better Choices for Their Children

Easy-to-understand school grades are crucial for promoting transparency and helping parents choose the best school for their child. That's why A-F school grades 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).

The four reasons listed - (1) a sense of urgency to be excellent, (2) increased attention on school effectiveness, (3) an upsurge of community support, and (4) empowering parents with better information - have created a system of sustained improvement in Florida.



## ADDRESSING COMMON EXCUSES FOR AVOIDING IMPLEMENTATION OF A-F SCHOOL GRADING

### *“There is no evidence that A-F school grading works.”*

National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) data has provided ample evidence that A-F school grades have increased student achievement in Florida. <sup>1</sup>After nearly two decades of A-F school grading, Florida students continue to benefit from rigorous accountability.

Florida made more progress on NAEP than any other state in the nation in 2017. With Florida’s fourth and eighth grade students performed above the NAEP national public average in reading. Florida students significantly outperformed the nation in grades 4 Reading and Mathematics in 2017. All of Florida’s student subgroups - White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, students eligible for free/reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and English language learners - significantly outperformed their national peers in grade 4 NAEP Mathematics in 2017. All of Florida’s student subgroups outperformed their national peers in grade 4 and 8 Reading, and many of them significantly outperformed their national peers in 2017.

Student improvement continues as Florida consistently raises the bar on criteria for a school to earn an A, expectations for students to be proficient and make growth, and requirements for earning a high school diploma.

### *“There’s a lot more to a school’s performance than a letter grade.”*

The purpose of an A to F system isn’t to encapsulate everything that makes a school great. In fact, there is much more to a school than a letter grade. What letter grades do accomplish, however, is hold schools accountable for clear, academic goals that everyone can rally around. In addition to all the qualities that make a school great, student learning is at the center of every school’s core mission. In K-8, this means ensuring that students are reading and performing math at grade level, and if they are not, ensuring that they are making progress towards grade level. In high school, graduation rates are included, since a high school’s core mission is graduating students prepared for college or careers.

Just think: there’s a lot more to a student’s performance than what’s on the report card they bring home. There’s athletics, extracurricular activities, volunteering, music, and more than can be mentioned. Yet we’ve never worried about students earning letter grades for specific academic goals we want them to accomplish.

That is why school grades should be reported to parents on a report card that includes a robust dashboard of additional information such as attendance data, school culture, extracurricular activities and other important information.

[Georgia’s school grades website is a great example.](#)

### *“A-F is biased against low-income schools, which face more difficult situations than affluent schools.”*

One of the greatest strengths of A-F is that it sets the same rigorous expectations for every school in the state. When the adults in the system set high expectations for all their students - and are held accountable for ensuring all their students succeed - you will be amazed at what students can achieve.

Florida’s experience demonstrates that low-income does not necessarily equal low student performance. In 2015-16, of the schools where more than half of the students came from low-income families, nearly 80 percent earned a grade of C or higher while 30 percent earned an A or B.

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<sup>1</sup> (Source: National Center for Education Statistics, [NAEP](#), 2017)



*“School grading is a reform that originated in Florida when the state had one of the worst education systems in the country. Why should our state, which already has a better reputation, do something different?”*

All states can do better, and experiences in states like Florida demonstrate that tremendous improvements in student performance can be achieved regardless of the demographic makeup of a state.

Consider Florida’s size and diversity. Nearly 60 percent of Florida’s 2.8 million students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The Sunshine State has a majority-minority student population, with minority students making up 60 percent of their total enrollment. Just over 10 percent of Florida students are English Learners (EL). On top of that, Florida’s per-pupil funding<sup>2</sup> consistently ranks among the lowest in the country. In fact, Florida has ranked among the lowest quarter of states in per-pupil funding in all but two years since 2004.

But the Florida experience has shown that demography is not destiny. The achievement gap is a reality for all states, but Florida’s reforms have helped close it. All of Florida’s student subgroups - White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, students eligible for free/reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and English language learners - significantly outperformed their national peers in grade 4 NAEP Mathematics in 2017.

All of Florida’s student subgroups outperformed their national peers in grade 4 and 8 Reading, and many of them significantly outperformed their national peers in 2017.

*“It is unfair to grade schools because it hurts the self-esteem of the students who attend a D or F school.”*

It is the very grade that forces adults to change their actions to ensure that the D or F grade improves, and students can receive the high-quality education they deserve. A clear, transparent accountability system leaves no doubt which schools are meeting the needs of their kids. It is far more unfair to ask kids to be okay with a low-performing school.

*“We should not rush this. School grading sounds good, but it is a complicated issue.”*

Every year we wait to hold schools accountable is another year of students falling behind during the most critical time of their development. Such hesitancy has moved the U.S. from the world’s leader in education quality to the middle-of-the-pack at best. Students cannot afford to wait for adults to be comfortable with tough policy decisions, and the A-F school grading has proven itself to be an excellent tool to help students and schools succeed.

*“It’s not possible to grade schools if the state changes its standards and assessments.”*

Transitioning to more rigorous standards and assessments is critical for preparing students to be competitive for 21st century college or career opportunities.

While the new tests are generally more rigorous and are measuring more critical thinking skills, the subjects being tested have not changed. States are still testing in English language arts and mathematics, and accountability systems can still measure proficiency and growth by comparing performance on the state’s old test to their new test. To accommodate the new tests, states must reset their grading scales to reflect new criteria for schools to earn A-F grades.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: Data from the 2014 Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Dept. of Education. The 2014 expenditures are the most recent nationally comparable data available.



***“An F school grade means F teachers.”***

Just as an F grade on a test does not mean an F student, an F school does not mean F teachers. There are effective teachers in every school. When a school earns an F, more attention needs to be focused on why that school earned an F. Annual school grades carry a wealth of information about the areas where schools are excelling or may need to improve. Blindly attributing the school’s performance to any one area could be a serious misstep. In many cases, instructional practices need to be adjusted, and the district, as well as state, can provide support to teachers to ensure there is alignment between standards, expectations and instruction.

“These grades will demoralize our hardworking educators at a time when public schools are already being asked to do more for our students.”

Experience in A-F states across the country simply does not bear that out. Even if a state initially sets a high bar for grades, history proves that the number of D and F schools will not remain that way for long. When enacted in Florida, there were more D and F schools than there were A and B schools. Fifteen years later, there are now more than three times as many A and B schools as there are D and F, even after Florida officials raised the bar multiple times.

Typically, educators, parents and communities rally in response to a low grade. These successes are not limited to Florida. Other states like Arizona, Oklahoma, and Indiana have seen school grades improve over time so that more schools earned A’s and B’s compared to the first year of school grades.

***“A-F school grading is just an excuse to justify diverting students from their neighborhood district schools to private or charter schools instead.”***

There is no evidence student mobility increases - to private, charter, or any school - because of states implementing A-F school grades. Parents should have the right to choose the best education possible for their child regardless of whether schools earn an A-F grade or receive a fuzzy label describing their performance. But, when parents do have choices, A-F school grades can help those parents make better choices for their child.

***“A-F school grading unfairly impacts teacher pay.”***

Teacher pay is not tied to A-F letter grades in any way in any state. Instead, teacher pay is based on salary schedules and, in some states, teacher evaluation systems that take student performance into account.

But schools that are improving a letter grade or earning an A should be meaningfully recognized. In Florida, schools earning an A are awarded \$100 per student, and the school decides whether to use the non-recurring funds on benefits such as one-time bonuses, computers, or playground equipment.

***“A-F school grading undermines local decision-making and community engagement.”***

Enacted properly, A-F school grading strengthens local control of schools on behalf of all stakeholders. Real “local control” happens when parents are engaged and take ownership of the success of their child’s education. This only happens if they can understand the condition of their local schools.

When Oklahoma first released school grades, their website received almost 680,000 hits in the week after initial grades were released. That’s about 25,000 more hits than there are students in the entire state. The local community is more engaged when they understand the rating system.



This gives educators new opportunities to engage parents. When parents complain about a grade, a principal/teacher can ask the parent (or community member) to take a couple hours per week to help a child learn to read. Businesses can brag about their local ‘A’ schools and work to improve failing schools in their area.

***“A-F school grading creates unnecessary mandates on schools and undermines local control.”***

Measuring what matters - outcomes - leaves schools and districts in charge of how they teach students. A-F grades don’t require schools to teach in any specific way or any specific curriculum. Instead, school grades focus on the output of each school instead of the inputs so schools have the flexibility they need to help students reach their goals. Enacted properly, A-F school grades reflect the central mandate of public education: student learning.

***“Growth should be the only thing that counts in a school’s grade especially since so many students enter the school year performing below grade level.”***

Measuring how much a student learns each year is the cornerstone of all K-12 education, not just A-F school grading. When enacted properly, A-F grading measures students’ growth and balances that growth with a measure of proficiency. Using both proficiency and growth provides a more complete picture of how the school is performing.

The A-F framework places greater emphasis on the learning growth of lowest performing students in a school. Every school has a lowest-performing 25 percent, even high-performing schools. 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 helps the ‘right’ kids get the extra attention and resources needed to catch up with their peers.

***“Grades should only be based on the percentage of students performing at grade level.”***

If the accountability system only includes proficiency rates, then schools will not get credit for moving low-performing students toward proficiency. There would be less incentive to work with students who are behind and no incentive to work with students who have the potential to exceed expectations. Including both proficiency and growth provides a much clearer picture of the school’s impact on student learning.