



A-F SCHOOL GRADING

Policy Summary

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2019

The purpose of a school accountability system is to spur school improvement and increase student performance by providing transparent, objective information to parents, educators and the public about school effectiveness. A, B, C, D and F school grading recognizes success and exposes failure in a way that everyone can understand.

SCHOOL GRADING INFORMS AND EMPOWERS PARENTS

Federal law requires all states to publicly report school performance information. Unfortunately, most states use vague labels that are difficult to understand, such as “satisfactory” or “making progress,” and require an explanation. **Letter grades do not need an explanation.** Parents and the public understand the difference between an A and a F. This transparency is the catalyst for reform that improves student achievement.

School grading is often seen as “tough love” because it transparently identifies schools that are underperforming and allows parents and the public to easily compare schools. The A-F approach allows schools to recognize and immediately address areas for improvement. Parents deserve to know and understand how their child’s school is performing.

WHY & HOW IT WORKS

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 ratings are crucial for promoting transparency and establishing effective incentives for schools.

Policy 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, to earn A, B, C, D or F grades.
9. Use grades to identify schools for recognition, intervention, and support.

Schools that face accountability under an A-F system feel pressure to improve. Researchers at the Manhattan Institute¹ found positive, meaningful impacts continued six years after A-F was first adopted in NYC but ceased after A-F was repealed. Researching Florida’s A-F system² found schools facing accountability pressure changed their instructional practices in meaningful ways, which explained some of the test score gains.

This proven, common sense reform pioneered in Florida in 1999, has been adopted by 15 additional states³, paving the way to a more transparent system that raises expectations for all schools.

¹ Winters, Marcus A. *Grading Schools Promotes Accountability and Improvement: Evidence from NYC, 2013-15*. Education: Pre K-12. Urban Policy EducationNYC. May 24, 2016.

² Rouse, Cecilia Elena; Hannaway, Jane; Goldhaber, Dan; and Figlio, David. *Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure*. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 2013), pp. 251-28.

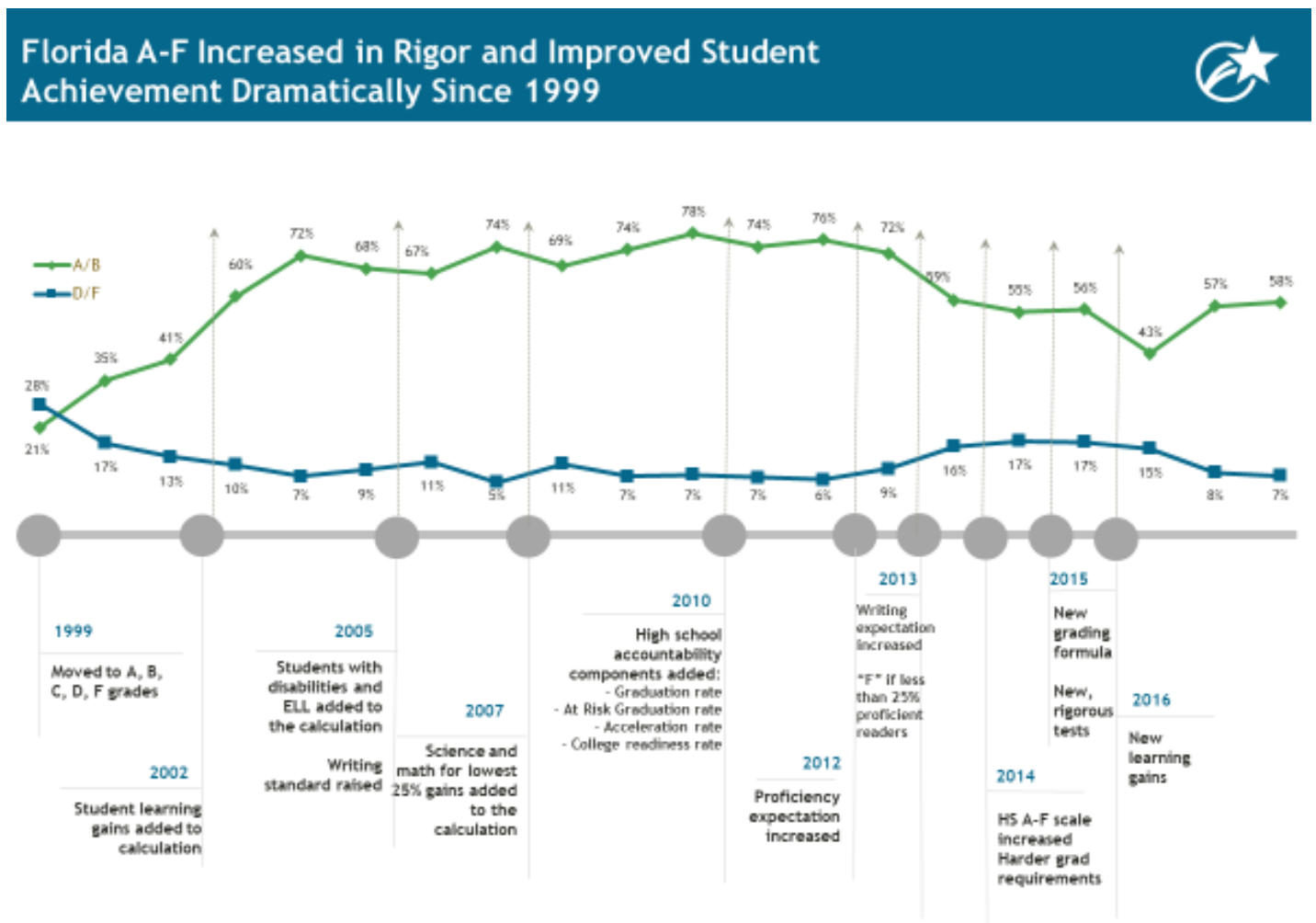
³ 2019 in order of adoption: FL, AZ, IN, LA, NM, OK, UT, AL, MS, NC, OH, AR, GA, TX, TN, and MI - 16 states



State Spotlight: Florida

Florida first released school grades in 1999. There were more D and F schools than there were A and B schools. But rather than placing blame or giving up, Florida educators and school leaders responded to the grades with focused efforts to improve those schools. They focused on the struggling students who, as a result, have made the most improvement.

Today, student achievement is up across the board, and there are far more A and B schools than D and F. **But success is never final, and reform is never finished.** During the last 18 years, Florida has raised the bar on what it takes to earn an A, B, C, D or F nine times, making it far more rigorous.



Arrows indicate years when school grading expectations were increased.