

2017

Grassroots Campaign

Talking Points

A–F School and District Rating Systems

Starting with the 2017–18 school year, the Texas commissioner of education will label each public school district and campus with a rating in the form of an A–F letter grade to comply with House Bill 2804, passed by the 84th Texas Legislature in 2015. TASA opposes A–F ratings for the reasons outlined below. We believe that Texas students would be better served by a comprehensive community-based accountability system that looks beyond high-stakes, multiple-choice tests to meaningful assessments that have value for students, parents, and teachers, as well as measures what each community deems important in promoting college and career readiness. For more in-depth information, see the “Texas Accountability Series” of essays: <https://goo.gl/Yrs74f>.

Why Texas Should Replace A–F with a Community-Based Accountability System

A–F rating systems are based predominantly on once-per-year standardized test scores. Although it is called a criterion-referenced test, the STAAR was designed to rank order students, not assign judgments of quality. A rank-order test can never measure for the amount of what is being analyzed, making the STAAR inappropriate for accountability. In addition, when surveyed by the State Board of Education (SBOE) in 2016, an overwhelming majority of Texans said they do not want a public school accountability system based primarily on students’ standardized test scores.

A–F rating systems have not worked in other states. Virginia repealed its A–F school rating system in 2015. Oklahoma researchers recently conducted a study on the state’s A–F system and found that test scores have not only stagnated or declined generally, but performance drops have been most severe among low-income students. And the significant growth in student performance touted under Florida’s A–F system can be credited to adjustments in state policy and rules to make the results match public expectation, rather than actual improvement.

To reduce the many measures of school and district performance to a single grade, A–F rating systems rely on pages upon pages of complicated rules and calculations. As a result, no one really knows what a letter grade means. No one can explain the grade, and no one knows what to do to raise the grade. “A” schools have just as difficult a time explaining why they were given an “A” as “D” schools have explaining why they were given a “D.” The difference is that “A” schools don’t have to.

A–F systems fail to account for varying socioeconomic conditions that influence performance. Letter grades based largely on standardized test scores hold schools and districts accountable for many factors they do not control. A simple example: Some students come to school not yet knowing their ABCs. Their schools should not be penalized for that any more than schools should get credit for enrolling students who already know their ABCs.

Grades in an A–F system will align with wealth or poverty and likely punish poor schools for being poor. When schools are held accountable for factors they cannot control, poor schools are judged as bad, and wealthy schools are judged as good, when neither is entirely true. A–F systems don’t account for the growth that students make; they assign a label based largely on a snapshot of those students’ performance at one point in time.

A–F rating systems provide no sense of what schools must do to improve. When surveyed by the SBOE in 2016, most Texans agreed that accountability should provide a way to identify areas of support needed for underperforming schools as well as identify areas of effective best practices used by high-performing schools and districts. “Simple” letter grades based on a complicated system of calculations is neither transparent nor useful for improvement.

A–F rating systems create a false impression about an entire neighborhood of children and shames students. The reduction of a school to a single grade whitewashes the variance in a school, unfairly reducing every student to the school’s assigned grade.

A community-based accountability system empowers school districts to design their own internal systems of assessment and accountability that, while meeting general state standards, allow districts to innovate and customize curriculum and instruction to meet the unique needs and interests of their communities.

The foundation of community-based accountability is a four-part system consisting of: 1) student and classroom-centered evidence of learning; 2) strategic use of standardized testing; 3) performance reviews and validation of learning by highly trained visiting teams; and 4) rigorous descriptive reporting to parents and communities. Learn more and see how community-based accountability has been implemented in some Texas districts: <https://goo.gl/X9epnf>.

