

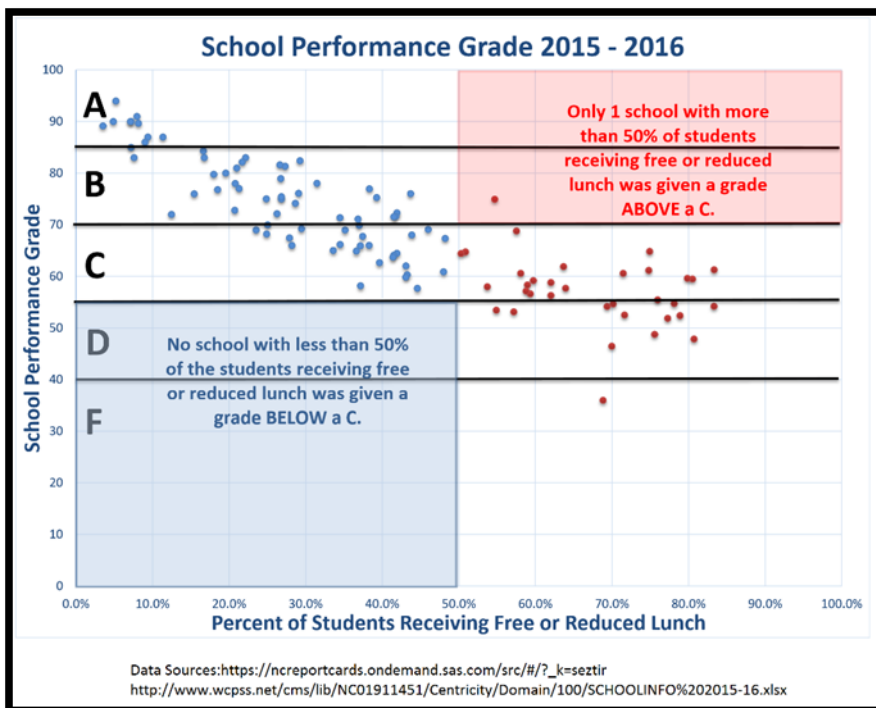


Red4EdNC

The Misconception of School Performance Grades

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In 2013, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a general statute (GS 115C-83.15 2013) requiring schools to be assigned a grade on a scale of A – F labeled School Performance Grades. These grades were released for the first time in the fall of 2015 and are calculated using a formula of 80% achievement and 20% growth. Many parents use this as an overall measure of a school’s effectiveness, but these grades are misleading to parents and especially damaging to the reputation of schools serving economically disadvantaged children. This A – F grading system is giving parents and the community the impression that many of our public schools are doing a poor job...that students aren’t learning. This is simply untrue – let me show you why.



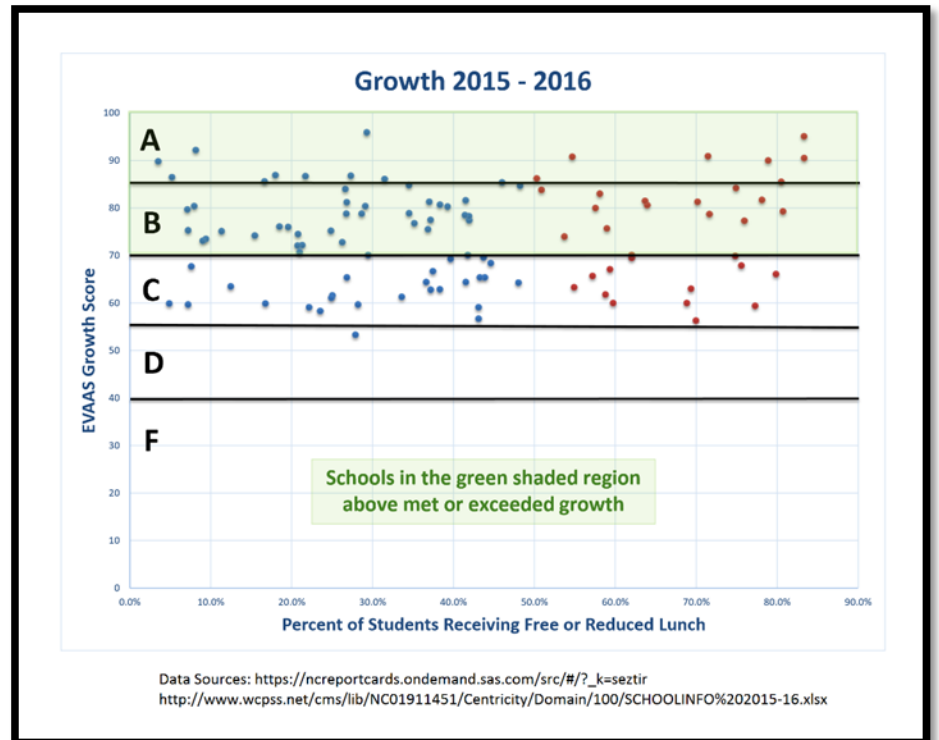
The graph to the left shows each school’s percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch compared to that school’s “performance” grade for the school year 2015 - 2016. Each dot represents a Wake County elementary school. The red dots are the elementary schools where more than 50% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Notice what happens as the percentage of *students receiving free or reduced lunch increases*. School performance grades *clearly decrease*. In addition, this graph shows the A – F grade cut-offs for the 2015 – 2016 school year. It is disturbing to note that **ONLY ONE** school with more than 50% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch

was given above a C. Furthermore, **NO** schools with fewer than 50% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch were given a grade below a C. **These letter grades are not measuring the performance of the school – they are measuring the economic status of the school’s students.**

Economic status has been a hot topic in education recently, and much research has been conducted on the effects of poverty on children. A study was done in 2015 using scans to measure gray matter in the brain. The study found that the gray matter volume for children living below the federal poverty level was 7 to 10 percent lower than typical for their age, particularly in the areas of the brain associated with problem solving, auditory processing and memory (Hanson, Hair, & Wolfe, 2015). Schools are facing new challenges with higher rates of poverty in America. Now, more than half the students in America’s public schools receive free or reduced

lunch, a measure often used as a proxy for poverty rates. In North Carolina, the percentage is higher than the national average with 53% of students receiving free or reduced lunch (Southern Education Foundation, 2015).

Because of the impact of poverty, we must find a better way to measure school performance that doesn't discriminate against schools serving economically disadvantaged students. Growth is a measurement that truly shows a school's effectiveness. The graph on the right represents the same Wake County elementary schools during the same school year as the first graph. It shows each school's percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch compared to the school's *growth*. Notice that the data no longer follows a pattern based on student's economic status. Instead the data is scattered evenly with little to no correlation meaning the growth a school produces has little to do with economic status. Some schools are exhibiting more growth than others, however this measurement no longer penalizes schools with higher numbers of low-income students. **This shows how the school GREW the student, as opposed to the student's economic-based achievement level.**



The reputation of some of the schools teaching a high percentage of low-income children suffers under this system. Two elementary schools that received a D last year would have received an A if graded on growth alone. These are not the only schools that received low "performance" grades even though their growth score tells a different story: 4 schools receiving a C grade would have received an A for growth, 4 schools receiving a D would have received a B for growth, and 10 schools receiving a C would have received a B for growth. All these schools serve a population where more than half of the students receive free or reduced lunch. So, why give the public the impression that these schools are doing a poor job? These schools' grades should reflect the dedication and hard work of the staff and students.

Maybe even more important than the schools receiving low grades are those that receive deceptively high grades. Two schools that received an A performance grade would have had a C growth grade. Yet these schools' grades give the impression they are doing a better job than many others with lower grades. This is because of a provision in the statute that allows schools who have over an 80% achievement score and who met growth to ignore the growth score in the formula if it brings the school's overall grade down. In other words, the school's growth could be stagnant and the school would still receive a very high score. Last year, 14 Wake County elementary schools used this loophole. Those schools' grades are not a reflection of their performance, but rather of the higher income population of students.

Many economically disadvantaged students are entering school behind their peers in proficiency and the school may be doing a great job helping these kids grow, but school performance grades do not show this. So why hasn't the North Carolina General Assembly changed the formula? Last week, the House introduced House Bill 322 which would change the way these grades are calculated to 50% achievement and 50% growth. This is the third time the House has introduced a bill to change the formula in the last two years. The other two, House Bill

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803 and House Bill 300 both introduced during the 2015 – 2016 session, did not make it into law. Even Senator Jerry Tillman, a proponent of the original bill to give School Performance Grades, stated, "I'd rather be in a D school making great growth than in an A school where growth is stagnant. I know if these kids are growing, there has to be good teaching and good leadership for that to be occurring." (Bonner, 2015). The General Assembly needs to change the formula and recognize growth separate from achievement.

It is impossible to take all that a school does and boil it down to a single letter grade. However, to be meaningful, a school performance grade at minimum should reflect the school's *performance* – not the school's economic make-up of students. If a school is going to be graded on how it is helping students learn – helping them GROW – then the school's grade should be based primarily on GROWTH. The public perception that our schools are declining is false – students **ARE** learning and growing in our schools. It is time to recognize the schools using accurate performance measurements and to adjust policy and decisions to meet the challenge of increasing poverty in our state.

Jennifer Orr has taught high school mathematics for 18 years in both Durham Public and Wake County Public Schools. She is currently implementing a volunteer program tutoring students who are below grade level in math in an elementary school with over 50% free/reduced lunch. You can find out more information about the program and how you can volunteer by going to www.projectrisenc.org.

Works Cited

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