

What Does that Grade Mean?

Dr. June Atkinson

Former State Superintendent, 2004-2016

How would you assess the quality of a public school in your area or in another community? What factors should you consider in determining the success of a public school? Would you consider test scores, extra curricular offerings, arts education programs, teacher and principal credentials? How about class sizes? What about the school's atmosphere? Would you talk to parents whose children attend the school? Would the North Carolina's General Assembly performance grading system, A-F, be a part of your assessment?

In 2014, the North Carolina General Assembly decided that parents and communities needed an A-F system to determine the quality of a public school. While parents determine the quality of a private school when they enroll their children, the General Assembly felt that public school parents needed more than just their judgment to determine the quality of a school. Hence, the North Carolina's General Assembly's A-F performance grading system became law.

That law requires the Department of Public Instruction/ State Board of Education to calculate a letter grade for each public school. The formula for determining the grade of a K-8 school is based solely on end-of grade tests in mathematics, reading, and science. Among the specific and detailed statutory requirements, student performance levels on these tests count for 80 percent of the grade, and growth counts for 20 percent of the grade. The end-of grade tests are given annually in grades 3-8 in mathematics and reading and science in grades 5 and 8.

Each high school grade is calculated by using multiple measures. The designation is calculated by using three end-of-course tests in Mathematics I, Biology, and English II, a college readiness test, a workplace readiness test, and the high school graduation rate.

Does this grading system yield any useful information to educators about their schools, and is the system valuable to parents and communities? Does the legislation have the right measures? Is there a better system?

Educators argue that the formula ignores the importance of growth in grades K-8—an important aspect of the impact of a year's worth of schooling. Schools meeting or exceeding student growth may still get a "D" or "F" because 80 percent of the grade is determined by student proficiency levels. Many propose that 50 percent of a school's grade be growth rather than the current 20 percent.

An analysis of the last few years of data shows a strong correlation between the poverty level of students and the grade a school receives. For example, a school receiving an "A" typically does not have a high percentage of students who live in poverty, but a school receiving an "F"

typically has a high poverty level. To date, the General Assembly label of a “D” or “F” has not come with flexibility and additional funds to give extra help and assistance to these schools.

An inherent weakness of the grading system is its strong reliance on just test scores in grades 3-8. The grading system ignores other factors important to parents and students and the long term effects of schooling in building character and other skills not so easily measured by a test. The arts program may be outstanding, students may enjoy the school’s atmosphere, and the parents feel their children are safe and are taught by competent and caring teachers.

Having an A-F grading system masks the strengths and needed improvements of a school. The label of a grade is an attention getter and memorable, but it does not tell the entire story of a school’s success or weakness. A school may be doing really well with some students in math, but more work is needed with others. A grade using only a limited number of measures may mislead the public about the quality of a school.

Some other states have A-F grading systems, but any comparison of school grades from one state to another has little, if any, value. Each state uses a different formula, measures, and weights for those measures. A Florida school receiving a “B” may not get the same grade by using North Carolina’s formula.

My resolution about the A-F system--repeal the legislation. As long as tests are required, post annual test scores and growth in a dashboard. Let each community, in consultation with parents, determine the factors they want to use in assessing the success of a school. Post those measures and results. Just as the General Assembly allows school vouchers to go to private schools without having a grading system, public schools should have the same flexibility. After all, parents of public school students are smart enough to determine school success, given the information they desire, without having the “Scarlet Letter of A, B, C, D, or F.”