

* *socioeconomic status*

Time to Change NC's Grading System!

By Public Schools First NC staff
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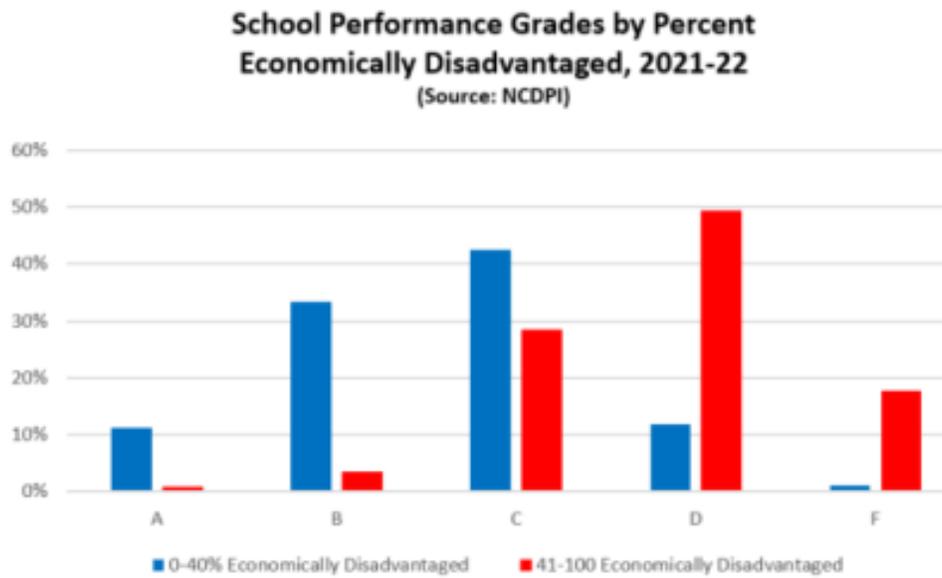
In an attempt to change the current NC school grading system, DPI recently convened an advisory group to design and propose a new model to the NC General Assembly in time for the long session that starts in January. This is welcome news; the current grading system should never have been implemented in its current form.

North Carolina's A-F grading system has been used to evaluate NC public schools since the 2013-14 school year, but the system's deeply flawed formula produces grades that completely fail to provide meaningful information about school quality. People usually expect grades to align well with what's being graded. When a school is assigned an A through F grade, the public generally assumes that the grade reflects the relative quality of the school and what's happening *within the school building and classrooms* in terms of instructional quality and educational environment. In the case of the NC A-F grading system, **this assumption is false**. The formula uses student achievement test scores for 80% of the grade and growth—the factor schools influence the most—only counts for 20% of the grade.

To frame the issue using a different context, imagine a system that graded weight loss clinics based on the average weight of their clients. The system would be loudly ridiculed. A grade based on average weight makes no sense because it doesn't account for how much weight clients lose, their health status beyond weight, nutrition education provided at the clinics, or the many other relevant factors affecting the quality of a clinic.

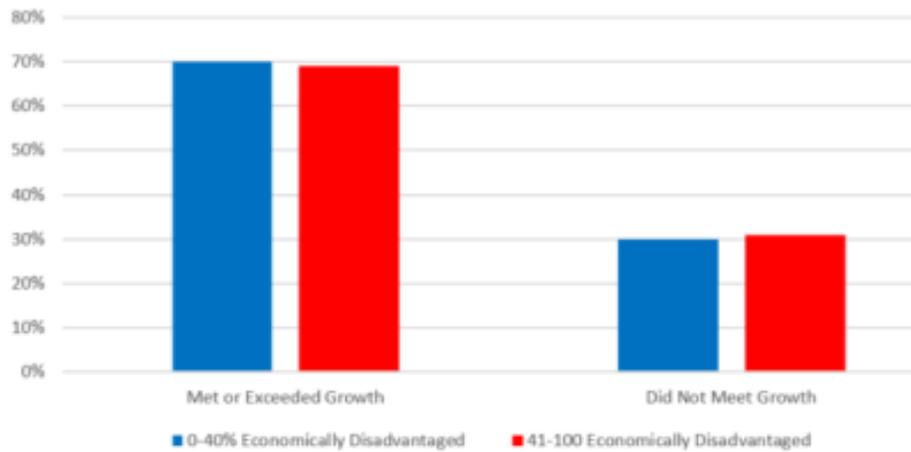
Just like this outlandish clinic grading system, the NC school grading system has a flawed focus. The grades tell us much more about **who attends** the schools than **the learning** taking place inside the schools.

In general, school performance grades simply reflect the economic realities of the students attending the schools. As economic advantage grows, so do the grades, as the chart below shows. Schools with 0-40% economically disadvantaged students (blue) are much more likely to get As than Fs and the reverse is true for schools with 40% – 100% economically disadvantaged students (red).



When growth is the focus, the proportion of economically disadvantaged students is not a distinguishing feature of whether a school met/exceeded growth or did not meet growth. The chart below shows that schools with high or low percentages of economically disadvantaged students had similar growth labels.

Growth Status by Percent Economically Disadvantaged, 2021-22 (Source: NCDPI)



Another issue is that the achievement test scores used to evaluate the schools come from a very small percentage of the overall classes students take. When the numbers are calculated, between 20% and 39% of the courses in any given school count toward the school grade. This percentage is much too low to weigh so heavily in 80% of a total school grade.

The NC Justice Center's report [School Performance Grades: A Legislative Tool for Stigmatizing Non-White Schools](#) also points out the many harmful effects of the current system. It's a great read for anyone interested in learning about more problems with NC's system. We hope that DPI's new effort to change the NC school grading system is successful!

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