The Rest of the Story: What the Texas A-F Letter Grades Do Not Tell You

The 85th Texas Legislature passed a law that requires the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to give A-F letter grades to every public school district in the state beginning in 2018. This is the first time in Texas' 24-year history of rating schools and districts that A-F letter grades will be given, and the change has generated controversy.

"PROPONENTS SAY THE [A-F LETTER GRADE] FORMAT MAKES IT EASIER FOR THE PUBLIC TO UNDERSTAND WHERE SCHOOLS STAND ACADEMICALLY. CRITICS SAY THE LETTER GRADES OVERSIMPLIFY THE PICTURE OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND SCHOOL QUALITY."

SOURCE: EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

Proponents of grading and ranking schools argue that the grades are a simple, transparent, concise way to inform parents and a community about how effective schools are. Critics say that a single letter grade cannot accurately reflect either the full array of programs and services provided by schools, or the uneven challenges of educating student bodies with diverse needs. Critics further argue that A-F letter grades: 1) increase the pressure to pay attention to state tests; 2) ignore most non-test-based school quality factors; 3) demoralize teachers, students and parents; 4) do not explain the underlying causes of either "good" or "bad" ratings; and, 5) are assigned as single-character ratings to schools and districts **after** an entire school year has ended.

Recently, TEA launched a full-scale media campaign to support the start of the letter grade rating system. The agency created a new A-F Resources webpage to help *"provide answers to questions you may have on the A-F system[1]"* that includes videos, a podcast, a blog, infographics and presentations. TEA also unveiled a separate website, TXschools.org, that breaks down the calculations used to assign each rating to both schools and districts. Districts received A-F ratings and campuses received a rating of 'met standard' or 'improvement required'. Campuses also received a numeric grade, which allows *"the public to deduce which letter grade the campus would have received."* [2]

So, if this new grading system is *"easy to understand, is accurate, is actionable, and can be used to improve student results,[3]"* as claimed, then why are so many explanatory resources necessary? Why does it take over 100 pages in the 2018 Accountability Manual to explain the differences between a "B" and a "C"? The supposed simplicity of letter grade ratings seems to evaporate when the explanations and interpretations require this much marketing. Perhaps there is important information that the letter grades, by themselves, do not tell you.

You Don't Know What You Don't Know

- **The grade calculations are complex.** As the WFAA TV anchor in this video succinctly stated, "It's complicated." Just because the system can be displayed on a one-page infographic, does not mean it's easy to understand. There are close to 12,000 different data points (most of which are simply STAAR data incorporated in various ways) used to calculate and assign the A-F letter grades. And yes, a raw score of 60 scales to an "A" – not what most people would anticipate.

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[1] Texas Education Agency, A-F Resources, https://tea.texas.gov/A-F/
[2] Austin-American Statesman, *School ratings under new Texas system to be released next week,* August 7, 2018.
[3] Texas' New A-F Academic Accountability System, Legislative Briefing, August 14, 2018

- **The grades correspond with poverty.** [This infographic](#) shows the 17 states that currently have policies in place to grade and rank their schools. Texas went with letter grades despite ample evidence from these other states, which shows that A-F grades generally work against schools or districts that have high percentages of students who are from low-income families, who qualify for special education programs, or are English learners. Commissioner Morath told reporters that "*it's the fairest accountability system Texas has ever used...[4]*". But in looking at the grade distributions by poverty in Figures 1 and 2, the system's lack of full fairness is revealed.

  Poverty is not an excuse for poor teaching or poor school performance. It is, however, a shorthand for educational disadvantage. According to TEA[5], almost 60% of Texas public school students qualify for free-or-reduced price meals (FRPM), which equates to almost 60% of our students being educationally disadvantaged. As shown in the figures below, the districts receiving Ds and Fs are by and large those serving students from high poverty households, or English learners, and/or students with disabilities; i.e., high percentages of educationally disadvantaged students. Conversely, most high-performing districts, those receiving As and Bs, tend to enroll fewer educationally disadvantaged students. It is noteworthy that there are 53 high poverty districts on the A list and TEA's datafile shows that almost half of these districts enroll fewer than 1,000 students and only four districts enroll more than 20,000 students.

  Elementary and middle schools' numeric grades are based on how well students perform on the STAAR tests or how much improvement they make on STAAR from one year to the next. High schools' numeric grade calculations include both STAAR and non-STAAR related metrics (e.g. graduation rates, [College, Career, and Military Ready](#) indicators). In summary, the schools' results show that those in poorer communities nearly all had lower overall numeric grades than did their counterparts in more affluent communities. To a great extent, the state's inaugural A-F grading system could be considered a proxy for identifying schools that serve high poverty student populations, rather than an indication of educational quality.

- **The grades are impacted by mobility.** The STAAR performance gaps between continuously and non-continuously enrolled student groups range from 6 to 8 percentage points. However, the largest disparity seen between the two groups is in the College, Career, and Military Ready (CCMR) performance where there is a 23-percentage point gap (57% and 34% respectively[6]). And since CCMR indicators are included in the calculations of each domain it impacts the overall grades for both districts and high schools that serve mobile students (defined as non-continuously enrolled).

- **The grades lack context.** What about a grade of "C"? 247 districts and 2,300 schools are rated a C. With this grading system, there is not a way to tell if a "C" is cause for celebration or cause for concern. Context is everything. And there is little, if any, context provided with this grading system.
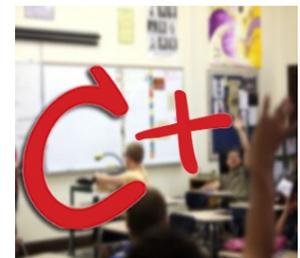
- **Low grades devalue the hard work by our teachers, support staff and our parents.** Instead of identifying what to do differently to improve learning, low grades tend to punish schools and districts that are working with children who need the most help. It will limit the ability to attract and retain highly effective educators, and it will further damage morale at these schools and communities.

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[4] Rivard Report, [Texas' New A-F Rating System for Schools, Explained](#), August 8, 2018.
[5] Texas Education Agency, 2016-17 Texas Academic Performance Report.
[6] TEA, [2018 State Closing the Gaps Data Table](#), August 15, 2018.

Now That You Know, What Can You Do?

Start by advocating to your state and local school leaders about changes you would like to see in the current A-F accountability system. Parents need, and deserve, a wide array of information about a school to make informed decisions. Safety and security are currently receiving a great deal of attention, and appropriately so. School climate and culture, availability of extracurricular activities, dual language programs, library facilities, location and transportation, and services for special needs students are just a few of the criteria that matter to parents. Here are a few suggestions:

"[A SINGLE LETTER GRADE] HAS THE PREDICTABLE EFFECT OF TELLING A SCHOOL WITH A GOOD GRADE THAT ALL IS WELL AND TELLING A SCHOOL WITH A BAD GRADE THAT ALL MUST CHANGE, EVEN THOUGH NEITHER CAN EVER BE ACCURATE." BRIAN WOODS, SUPERINTENDENT, NORTHSIDE ISD

Replace A-F letter grades with more descriptive terms.

- Consider the terms used to describe the Charter School Performance Frameworks that were adopted by TEA in August 2018. For each Academic Framework indicator, a charter school receives one of four ratings: • *Exceeds Expectations*, • *Meets Expectations*, • *Does Not Meet Expectations*, or • *Not Applicable*; or
- Similarly, consider the terms used to describe a student's progress on STAAR: Limited Progress, Meets Progress, or Exceeds Progress Standards.

Address growing gaps between school systems serving high and low poverty communities and their related performance gaps by recalibrating the A-F letter grades.

- Award Challenge Points or Bonus Points or Weights to each domain based on the extent to which educationally disadvantaged student groups make significant progress towards or meet performance targets;
- Include other non-STAAR related indicators of student and school success – this is critical for elementary and middle schools; and
- Include a School Climate Domain with indicators aligned to research that support teaching and learning – extent of student and/or teacher absenteeism, school safety (do students and staff feel safe), school climate (do students, parents, and educators feel valued), access to counselors, access to a school nurse, full day Pre-K, participation in Fine Arts and UIL activities, etc.

Policymakers need to come together with educators, parents, and advocates to create an accountability system that makes sense.

Our children are counting on us to figure this out.

Source: Northside ISD tweet 2018-05-01 at 9.23.23 PM

Figure 1. TEA assigned an overall letter grade to 829 districts. Most districts receiving an A or a B enroll fewer educationally disadvantaged students (as measured by FRPM).

Distribution of DISTRICT Overall Letter Grades by Economically Disadvantaged Students Enrolled
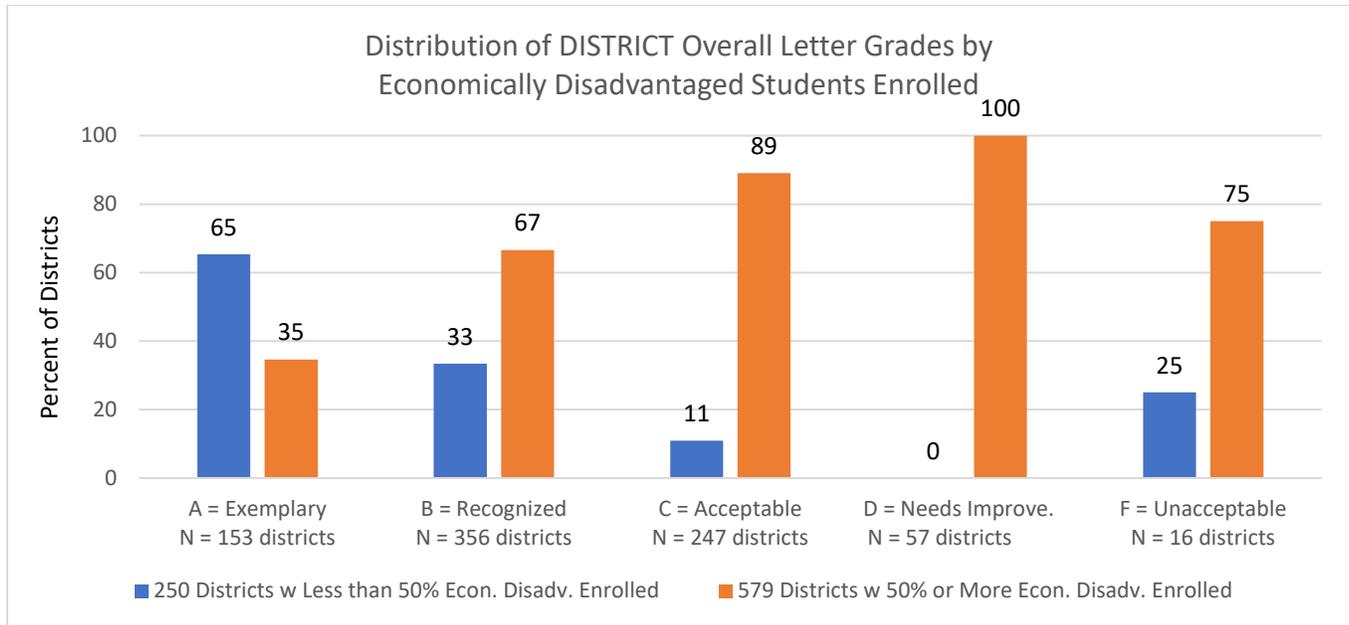
Source: TEA 2018 Accountability Ratings datafile.
Includes charter districts that received a letter grade. Excludes AEA and Hurricane Harvey Provision districts.

Figure 2. TEA assigned an overall numeric grade to 7,558 schools. Most schools receiving an overall numeric grade <u>lower than 80</u>, serve high percentages of educationally disadvantaged students (as measured by FRPM).

Distribution of School Overall Numeric Grades by Economically Disadvantaged Students Enrolled
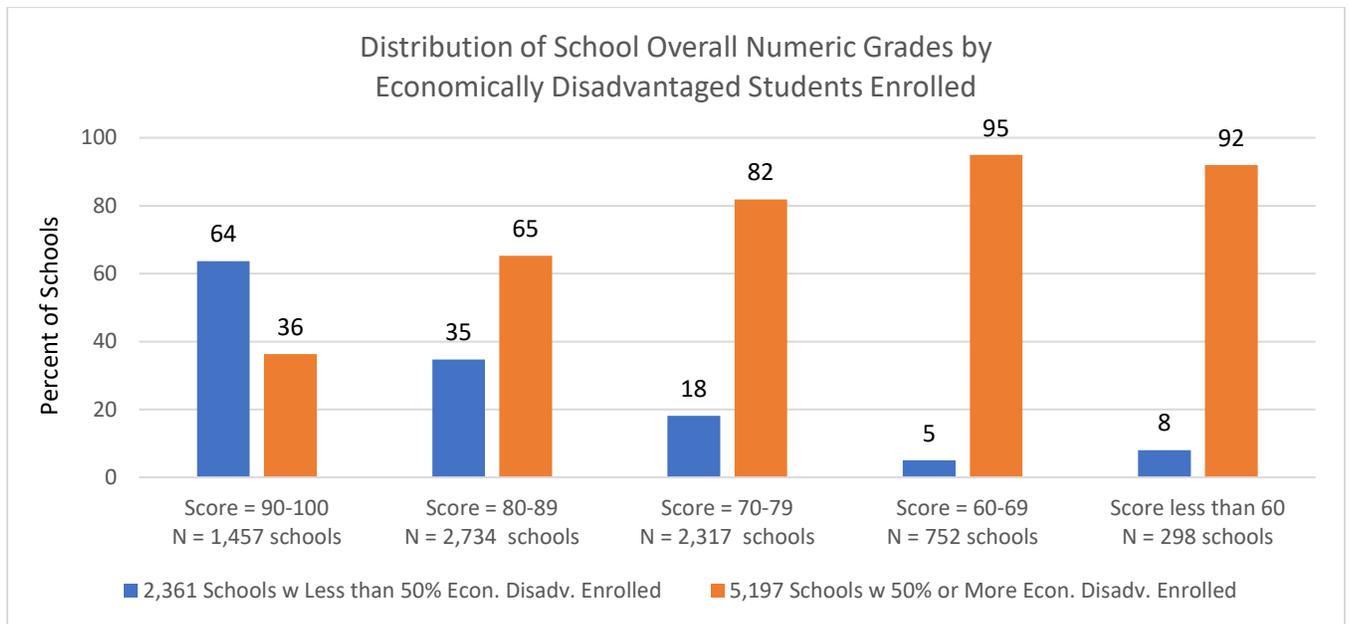
Source: TEA 2018 Accountability Ratings datafile.
Includes charter schools that received an overall numeric grade. Excludes AEA and Hurricane Harvey Provision schools.