



A–F District and Campus Rating Systems

In 2018, each Texas public school district was labeled for the first time with an A–F letter-grade rating by the commissioner of education. In August 2019, both campuses and districts received A–F ratings. TASA opposes A–F ratings; we believe that students would be better served by a comprehensive community-based accountability system (<http://www.futurereadytx.org/goals/cbas/>) 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. See the “Texas Accountability Series” of essays: <http://www.futurereadytx.org/project/texas-accountability-series/>

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. Plus, high-stakes standardized tests are unpopular among Texans. When surveyed by the State Board of Education (SBOE) in 2016 (<http://bit.ly/SBOE-survey>), a majority said they do not want a public school accountability system based primarily on students’ standardized test scores. In 2019, respondents to Raise Your Hand Texas’ (RYHT) Public Education Perceptions Poll (<http://bit.ly/ryht-2019-poll>) ranked high-stakes standardized testing among the top three concerns that the 86th Legislature should address – right up there with school funding and teacher pay.

A–F systems have not worked in other states.

Virginia repealed its A–F school rating system in 2015, and New Mexico replaced its A–F system with a Spotlight Dashboard in 2019. When Oklahoma researchers studied the state’s A–F system, they found that test scores have not only stagnated or declined generally, but most severely among low-income students. The significant growth in student performance touted under Florida’s A–F system can be credited to state policy and rule changes that make the results match public expectation, rather than actual improvement.

To reduce the many measures of campus and district performance to a single grade, A–F rating systems use pages of complicated calculations.

No one really knows what a letter grade means. No one can explain the grade, and no one knows what to do to raise it. “A” campuses and districts have just as difficult a time explaining why they received an “A” as “D” campuses and districts have explaining why they received a “D.” The difference is that “A” schools don’t have to.

A–F systems fail to account for varying socio-economic conditions that impact performance.

Letter grades based largely on standardized test scores hold campuses and districts accountable for many factors they do not control. For example, some students come to school not knowing their ABCs. Their schools should not be penalized any more than schools should get credit for enrolling students who already know them.

A–F grades align with wealth or poverty and 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.

A–F rating systems provide no sense of what campuses and districts must do to improve.

In the 2016 SBOE survey, most Texans agreed that accountability should identify areas of support needed for underperforming schools and best practices used by high-performing campuses and districts. “Simple” letter grades are neither transparent nor useful for improvement.

A–F systems create a false impression about an entire neighborhood and shames students.

The reduction of a campus or district to a single grade dismisses the variance in a school, reducing every student to the grade assigned to the campus or district. It also often contradicts the judgments of the people who know our public schools best. A majority of Texans responding to RYHT’s 2019 poll gave the schools in their community a grade of an “A” or “B.”

Community-based accountability systems allow for a more wholistic picture of performance.

While meeting general state standards, districts using these systems can design their own systems of assessment and accountability. They can innovate and customize curriculum and instruction to meet the needs and interests of their communities. More: <http://www.futurereadytx.org/goals/cbas/>