

POLICY BRIEF

Making the Grade: Capturing and Communicating School Impact on Student Learning

Introduction

A strong economy and quality of life are tied to strong classrooms. Therefore, public transparency about their performance is critical. Not only does transparency empower parents, it can also drive improvement on behalf of students.

Arizona public schools are subject to a school rating system intended to communicate how well Arizona classrooms meet their obligation to educate students, primarily in the areas of reading, writing, math, science and graduation.

After the adoption of a school rating system in 2000 as part of the ballot referendum Proposition 301, it quickly became shorthand for quality. In 2010, Arizona changed the law to begin to identify school performance using A-F letter grades rather than labels such as “performing” or “highly performing.”

The process by which Arizona calculates school letter grades is now in the middle of an overhaul during which the A-F system has been put on hold. The law authorizing the moratorium requires the new system to be ready for publication by the 2017-18 school year based on 2016-2017 outcomes. This update to the rating system comes in

response to the adoption of a more rigorous set of academic expectations in Arizona and how we test those expectations. An update to federal law will also have an impact on the design. It is essential that the public’s reliance on A-F ratings be honored by strengthening the system to make these new grades a better indication of school quality.

Key Recommendations

1. A school’s impact on student learning must be clear in the new A-F designation.
2. A-F should strategically weight student growth to recognize individual student learning.
3. Arizona should insist on the flexibility intended in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.
4. A-F should reflect high schools’ ability to provide “ready skills.”
5. Arizona should use the so-called fifth indicator to “see” more students.
6. Policymakers should improve how A-F designations are used.
7. School report cards should contain more than school rating outcomes.

I. Background

In 2000, the Arizona Legislature referred to the November ballot an education funding and transparency measure called Proposition 301. This effort paired new reporting on school performance with increased teacher pay, paid for by a six-tenths of a cent sales tax increase. The Legislature also proposed a series of new laws that would only take effect if voters approved the sales tax increase to fund teacher pay. Thus, when voters approved Proposition 301, a series of conditionally enacted legislative requirements took effect. This included Arizona's first school rating system.

Shortly thereafter, the rest of the country followed suit. In 2002, President Bush signed national school accountability into law in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), or what is commonly known as No Child Left Behind. The idea that schools had a job to do, that parents and taxpayers should know if they're doing it, and that every child, regardless of zip code, should not be "left behind" drove the

It is . . . essential that the state of Arizona provide information to policymakers and taxpayers on the academic progress of pupils being educated by Arizona public schools and the quality of those schools.

(SB 1007; Ch. 1 Laws 2000, fifth special session.)

design of school accountability and school rating systems from that point forward.

Now, states all over the country are revisiting these legacy accountability systems to align with updates and expectations in their states as well as the reauthorization of the ESEA, now retitled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

II. Arizona's Evolution

In 2015, Arizona put its process of assigning an A-F grade to each public school on a two-year hold in response to several concurrent factors, including an overhaul of the process by which Arizona calculates school letter grades.

As part of that overhaul, in 2016 the Arizona Legislature revamped Arizona's school accountability law in preparation for the A-F modernization that is now underway. This updated statute requires formula components to be academically relevant and measure how much students learn even if they do not meet the proficiency targets for their grade level. In addition, the new law no longer requires schools with "average" performance to

receive a "C." The Arizona State Board of Education (SBE) is free to adopt what it means to be an "A" school based on performance expectations, not solely being better than the statewide average scores.

It is expected that the SBE, in partnership with the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), will adopt an updated calculation for determining A-F school ratings by January 2017 with new letter grades assigned to schools by the fall of 2017.

Table 1 on the next page summarizes the evolution of Arizona's state test used to measure school performance.

Table 1: Evolution of Arizona’s State Test Used to Measure School Performance.

	K-8	High School
Test Type	<p>Then: An AIMS summative assessment tested all subjects given over the course of a few days or weeks in the spring for grades 3-8.</p> <p>Now: An AZMERIT summative English Language Arts and math assessment for grades 3-8. An AIMS summative science assessment for grades 4 and 8.</p>	<p>Then: Similar to K-8, an AIMS summative assessment was given once a year until students passed, beginning in the spring of the 10th grade.</p> <p>Now: Rather than one test at the end of the 10th grade, students take an end-of-course exam for Algebra, Geometry, and English Language Arts upon completion of each relevant course regardless of the year; accelerated students can take these exams before high school. An AIMS summative science assessment is also administered in high school.</p>
High Stakes	<p>Then: No high stakes practices were applied to K-8 until 2014, when 3rd graders had to pass the reading assessment in order to move on to the 4th grade.</p> <p>Now: Though the score on the state test can trigger a student’s retention in the 3rd grade, schools can promote students to the 4th grade after interventions or if the student tests proficient using other assessments.</p>	<p>Then: Until 2014, high school students had to pass their summative exam in order to graduate from high school.</p> <p>Now: There are no penalties for students who do not pass their end-of-course exams.</p>
Expectations for K-12	<p>Then: The academic standards were aligned in K-10 without evidence that they prepared students for post-high school work and education.</p> <p>Now: K-12 academic standards are articulated to ensure seamless transition from grade to grade, accumulating in “readiness” for work or entry-level college or technical school at the conclusion of the 12th grade.</p>	

III. Features of Current School Rating Systems

Below is the standard set of features that are typically included in states' school rating systems. Arizona must decide which of these features will be included and how they will be weighted in designing its new A-F system.

Student Achievement

Consistent with its intent to report on student achievement, school rating systems rely most heavily on scores from state "standardized" tests. Research consistently shows that the accumulation of test scores from dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of students at a single school is a valid method to measure learning on individual school campuses. It has also recently become possible to reliably compare results from one assessment to another if similar academic expectations are tested.

Proficiency v. Growth

States use scores from their tests in a number of ways. The most common measure used in school rating systems is to note the percent of students who score "proficient" on the test for their grade level. States can also measure student "growth"—how much students learned from the year before if they did not make it all the way to proficiency, or if they potentially scored above proficient. School growth measures, such as how many more students scored proficient this year than last year, can also be used.

Graduation and Dropout Rates

High school graduation measures may include the traditional four-year graduation rate, and may go up to seven years in some states.

English Language Proficiency

While Arizona law already requires students whose first language is not English to become proficient in English, the advent of federal accountability brought with it the requirement to include English acquisition rates in school rating systems.

Measures for Students in the Achievement Gap

Vulnerable or small groups of students need to be accounted for and not lost in large aggregate measures. The federal system closely monitors how students-of-color and poor students perform compared to white or higher-income students, and educational equity advocates strongly support ensuring the public can see this data. The performance of these "subgroups" must be reported and in some way accounted for in our new A-F system.

Other Measures

While the new federal law allows school rating systems to include non-test measures, a recent change to Arizona law requires that A-F formula measures still be academically relevant. Other measures under consideration in Arizona and elsewhere include:

- Improved attendance rates;
- Reduced "chronic absenteeism"; and/or
- A variety of postsecondary readiness measures including earning an industry-specific work credential; improvements to college going rates; and the number of students on track to graduate at the end of the 9th grade.

Data such as school safety, grade point average, or teacher experience are examples of information parents and communities are interested in as well. However, such measures can be manipulated and are not considered to be statistically reliable for holding schools accountable.

It is general practice for states to report their school rating system results in "school report cards." These report cards also provide the type of local information and data that is of interest to communities but is either not statistically reliable or not a purely academic measure. Such qualitative measures as school safety and school programming information used to be contained alongside a school's A-F letter grade in Arizona's report cards, but has not been included in recent years.

IV. Policy Implications: Recommendations For Arizona's A-F System

Arizona's law is basic and clear. In order to provide the most honest assessment of a school's quality, policymakers should keep the A-F system simple and stay aligned with measuring and reporting results for kids. A robust and effective A-F rating system should take into consideration the following recommendations:

1. A school's impact on student learning must be clear in the new A-F designation.

The impact of a school on student learning must be obvious in the A-F designation or Arizona's school rating system will have little value. This core principle should drive all decisions within what is really a school effectiveness rating system.

Arizona's K-8 academic standards are grade-level specific and they assume every student will learn at least a year's worth of content before going on to the next grade. This means our accountability systems must keep track of if and where this happens, where it's exceeded, and communicate it through the A-F designation.

Policymakers must avoid the prior A-F design that predicated being an "A" school on simply being better than average. This passive approach to defining effectiveness enables a school to be above average but not necessarily very good. Though comparability is a component of school choice decisions and a component of certain growth models, it should not by itself define excellence. Arizona removed this flawed approach from law in 2016 and should not pursue it now by regulation.

2. A-F should strategically weight student growth to recognize individual student learning.

Student growth, also referred to as academic progress, was a driver of Arizona's accountability

law but has yet to get the attention it deserves in the A-F formula.

Though student proficiency and student growth are often treated as distinct measures, the reality is that these indicators of school quality overlap in a dynamic system where some students are growing towards proficiency and others are growing past proficiency.

Aggregated school-wide proficiency is an overly simplified definition of school effectiveness and is often correlated more to family income than to the effects of excellent teaching.

Who Uses Ratings and Why

The SBE manages the A-F system pursuant to a law that requires transparency in school performance, and the public is able to take advantage of the user-friendly grades and transparency they bring for different yet equally important purposes.

Parents: Parents consider school letter grades when selecting a school.

Schools: School leaders use letter grades to monitor their own progress, understand how individual classrooms work, and market their successes.

Policymakers: Performance transparency helps policymakers monitor the academic outcomes of their policies.

Taxpayers: Taxpayers can monitor the academic progress of the schools their tax dollars support.

School Turnaround: Schools with "D" or "F" letter grades can face school improvement mandates.

School Closure: Though district schools could face the prospect of being run by a State Board appointed administrator, only charter schools have been closed for poor academic performance.

Grade level proficiency obviously has value and is the foundation for future learning. However, helping a student who is three years behind learn two years worth of content is a better indicator of quality than simply moving a student already at grade level ahead as expected.

By using the growth category in the same way as proficiency and recognizing the value of teaching more than a year's worth of content, Arizona can re-anchor the definition of school effectiveness. It can now indicate how many students catch up to proficiency or pass proficiency rather than defining an effective school as one that keeps students on a steady diet of basic proficiency.

Arizona should consider the creation of a super bucket of student achievement where schools can mix and match points gained through the strongest measures of student achievement, including high impact growth that gets students who are very behind to proficiency in an aggressive period of time (three years would be aggressive but should not stray much past five):

- ✓ A year's worth of growth to stay proficient;
- ✓ More than a year's worth of growth to obtain proficiency; and
- ✓ More than a year's worth of growth to accelerate past proficiency.

Less than a year's worth of growth could still have some incremental value if it shows a student is on track to catch up in a clearly defined time frame.

Two unintended consequences Arizona must avoid in its growth models are: 1) allowing accelerated growth for some students to mask that other students in the school are losing ground; and 2) rewarding incremental growth in individual students who never achieve the proficiency they need to succeed.

3. Arizona should insist on the flexibility intended in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

Though most states, including Arizona, have

worked to improve their standards and continue to do so, state standards are a floor. Arizona's new accountability system should be careful not to treat academic standards as a ceiling.

Unfortunately, due to decades of compliance-driven state policymaking and compliance-driven federal oversight, the ceiling effect has taken its toll. Now, states may be hesitant to experiment with new models to measure effectiveness without a nod from the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) that they will be given the room to do so. The regulations now under design by the DOE should give states room to experiment with growth models that recognize schools that close achievement gaps and move students past minimum expectations.

4. A-F should reflect high schools' ability to provide "ready skills."

A-F point systems should acknowledge the hybrid path most students are on to acquire the "ready skills" necessary for work and/or more education after high school, rather than isolate them as separate tracks. States should identify a comprehensive list of options above required academic coursework that schools can offer their students to ensure they are college, trade school, and/or job ready, and include reliable post-secondary measures that affirm the effectiveness of these pathways. Schools should earn A-F credit for these programs and success in courses that prepare students for the options they will face after graduation.

The design should not force students to pick a track, but rather allow them to mix and match options to learn the fundamentals of a trade, earn some early college credit, or perhaps intern for a local business.

5. Arizona should use the so-called fifth indicator to "see" more students.

ESSA requires state rating systems to utilize four distinct indicators of student achievement, which can be selected from the list of features outlined

above; states are also encouraged to use a fifth indicator. Due to the urgent efforts to close the achievement gap, research is exposing the many places in the student experience where warning signs flash that students are in deep academic trouble. Whether or not a student successfully transitions from learning-to-read in the 3rd grade to reading-to-learn for the 4th grade is an accurate and widely accepted indicator of future student achievement. But many other valid and reliable indicators and measures are available to states. For example, attendance, chronic absenteeism, 6th grade test scores in the lowest performance level, and 9th graders on track in their coursework are all accurate predictions of what is to come.

Arizona should also consider doing more to make outcomes for our most transient students transparent. From the first days of school accountability, states across the country promised schools and teachers that they would not be held accountable for the results of students they did not have the opportunity to teach for the full academic year (FAY). While fair to adults, this policy is less fair to non-FAY students. We know that school transitions, poor attendance, and behavioral problems have negative impacts on student learning. These also happen to be the by-products of numerous family moves.

Transiency is common for poor families, particularly the urban poor. Until we start to tackle this in public policy, it will be very difficult to close persistent achievement gaps. Arizona must find ways to see and understand this data to improve outcomes for these kids. Schools can earn growth points for succeeding with these students. Other similar non-punitive measures should also be explored in the coming years.

6. Policymakers should improve how A-F designations are used.

A school's impact on learning is real. We need to measure it accurately and use what we learn from these results more effectively. As our state, and indeed the country, grapples with achievement gaps,

strong growth measures better reflect the positive impacts schools bring to their students and states.

There is ample evidence that school accountability has started to move the needle on student achievement. Arizona is one of only three states to have gains on the National Assessment of Academic Progress, and recent state AZMERIT scores shine a bright light on the Arizona schools already closing the achievement gap. But the gains remain modest. By improving how we use the A-F designations, we could accelerate this pace.

Arizona should pay more attention to highly successful schools with high levels of student growth so we can:

- ✓ Ensure their classrooms receive the funding they need to sustain their results;
- ✓ Study and understand what makes them successful so we can replicate and expand what works; and
- ✓ Adopt policies that make it possible for them to replicate and expand and offer more seats to more students.

7. School report cards should contain more than school rating outcomes.

A-F is often criticized for being overly focused on the outcome of a school rather than what makes a school. However, the opposite is true—transparency celebrates the results of a positive school culture and design. School report cards are the appropriate place for schools to note their program offerings alongside their A-F letter grades. State law allows schools to report what makes them unique or attractive to families. For example, physical education programming, a longer school year, two teachers in every classroom, arts and music programs, character education, dual-language programs, and community service are all highlights of a school's programming that parents and students want to know about. These things are not quantifiable in an A-F rating system, but can help explain the "why" behind a school's A-F grade and should clearly exist in local school report cards.

V. Conclusion

School rating systems can be esoteric, but done correctly they protect students, respect the efforts of teachers, and inspire excellence. Arizona has a tremendous opportunity with its new A-F system

to grow the gains made in recent years by better identifying excellence, learning from the best, and ensuring what we measure actually matters to student outcomes.

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