

## EDUCATION WEEK

# A-F School Rankings Draw Local Pushback

Critics call method simplistic; backers tout transparency

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As states overhaul their accountability systems under the new federal K-12 law, officials in some are pushing to replace or revamp A-F grading for schools, which supporters tout as an easy way to convey to the public how schools stack up. [← Back to Story](#)

In recent years, **at least 18 states have adopted** some version of a system that relies mostly on standardized-test scores and graduation rates to generate letter-grade report cards, similar to the ones students receive throughout the school year. Legislation is pending in a handful of states to join that group.

But in some states that already have them, A-F systems have received fierce backlash from local superintendents and school board members. They complain that the letter grades oversimplify student success or shortfalls, increase pressure to pay attention to tests, ignore school quality factors other than test scores, and demoralize teachers and parents.

Local officials in at least four states are using this year's window of opportunity provided by the **Every Student Succeeds Act** to push back against A-F systems. ESSA, which goes into full effect for the 2017-18 school year, requires states to change several components of their accountability systems, including the measures states must use to calculate rankings and how often they report rankings to the public.

In West Virginia, recently elected **Democratic Gov. Jim Justice said in his State of the State speech** this year that he always thought his state's letter-grade system was ineffective, and he ordered his education department to replace it with a new one.

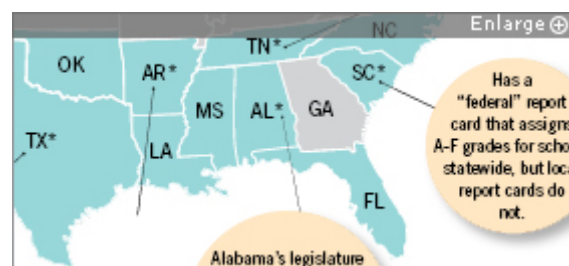
More than 200 local superintendents in Texas are **urging their state legislature**—where the leadership remains in favor of the A-F grading system—to repeal it before it goes into full effect next year, after a "what-if" set of grades was released by the state department earlier this year that ranked many of the state's well-respected suburban districts as performing below average.

And a group of Louisiana superintendents who have long complained about the state's A-F system are **attempting to delay its ESSA accountability plan** from being submitted to the U.S. Department of Education. They say they will create their own accountability system if the state superintendent moves forward with one they say places their already-ambitious A-F accountability system "on steroids."



### Which States Grade Their Schools?

At least 17 states have or are developing some form of A-F grading system for their schools. Proponents say the 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.



"Accountability needs to bring gentle pressure to all of us," said Hollis Milton, the superintendent of the West Feliciana Parish schools and the president of the Louisiana Association of School Superintendents. "But when it becomes Draconian, it begins to affect morale."

Source: Education Commission of the States

## Cautions Raised

Advocacy organizations such as the Foundation for Excellence in Education—founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush—and Chiefs for Change have urged states to hold fast to A-F systems or other systems that rank schools in an easy, understandable way for the public. Letter grades in particular, they say, force districts to pay attention to disparities between black and Latino students and their white peers and can spark rapid change.

"States should have clear and transparent summative-rating systems that are actionable for parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in communities and are clearly communicated for all stakeholders," said Mike Magee, the CEO of Chiefs for Change, which includes state and district superintendents.

Any new overhauls of accountability systems in these states, officials with the Foundation for Excellence in Education have **told state officials during ESSA strategy sessions**, will result in a tipping point that would reverse academic growth.

## ESSA and School Report Cards

**ESSA requires states to evaluate schools** based on English-language proficiency, graduation rates, and scores on statewide achievement tests. They also must add at least one new indicator of school quality or student success, such as school climate, chronic absenteeism, discipline, or college and career readiness. The law also requires statewide report cards to be issued on an annual basis and to report more information to the public, such as per-pupil spending.

Governors and legislators, who shoulder a growing share of education costs, often butt heads with state education departments and local officials on just how straightforward and transparent they're being with the public about the academic status of their districts. And parent groups and accountability hawks have long complained that slogging through more-traditional state report cards filled with reams of data, caveats, and online drop-down menus will give even the most data-tolerant of education wonks a pulsating headache.

But as education departments have begun to release the first rounds of letter grades in recent years, local officials—especially suburban superintendents—have taken exception to the way the grades are calculated. Such systems fail to convey the dynamics of all that goes into a student's success, they argue, and they take issue with the kinds of data sometimes folded into the grades.

To many district superintendents, ESSA is a prime opportunity for their education agencies to break away from a corporate-style accountability movement in the past decade that, in their view, led to mass firings of teachers, state takeovers of schools, and swift administrative turnover with few academic gains to show for it.

The A-F approach still has momentum in some places. Currently, according to the Education Commission of the States, Georgia, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Washington have bills to introduce letter grades to their report cards.

Jim Justice, West Virginia's new governor, laid out one rationale for replacing those systems in his annual speech to legislators.

"Think about A through F for our schools," he said. "We do it on a bell curve. ... 'These get an A. These get an F. All the big meat and potatoes [schools] get a C.' And we call out to the world and say, 'Come to West Virginia. Our schools are mostly all C's.' I don't get it. That's got to go."

In Louisiana, the state's accountability system has created a fissure between the state chief and local superintendents.

John White, the appointed state superintendent, has proposed raising the academic bar for schools in order to receive an A on the state report card, which has upset local superintendents. They have pushed for the state to wait until September to turn in its ESSA accountability plan instead of April. White's department did not respond to a request for interviews.

## Policy Splits

In some states, such as Alabama and Texas, the first round of letter grades has sparked a fierce backlash from local superintendents.

Alabama's legislature in 2012 ordered that by 2014 the education department issue letter grades, but the department has yet to do so. The state board and state Superintendent Michael Sentance decided late last year to give the public raw information that would determine the letter grades, but not the letter grades themselves. Sentance told local news media that he has seen negative effects that letter grades have had across the country.

Texas released preliminary grades on its website earlier this school year, with **a memo from Mike Morath, the state chief** that said: "The ratings in this report are for informational purposes to meet a legislative requirement and represent work-in-progress models that are likely to change before A-F ratings become effective in August 2018. No inferences about official district or campus performance in the 2015-16 school year should be drawn from these ratings, and these ratings should not be considered predictors of future district- or campus-performance ratings."

More than half of Texas' schools got a C or lower in student achievement. More than 200 of the state's superintendents quickly denounced the grades as flawed, simplistic, and demoralizing.

Debbie Gillespie, a school board member of the Frisco Independent district, a wealthy system outside Dallas, said her district sent out waves of communication to explain that its C in the college- and career-readiness category was based on the district's absenteeism rate, not the quality of its dual-enrollment or Advanced Placement courses.

"Our grade is lower than what the perception is," Gillespie said. "We have outside forces telling us that we're failing, and that's not true. When you look at these grades, it's meant to shame us. We're not shameful. We're doing great things."

Not every superintendent agrees.

Last week, the school board of Comal Independent, a suburban district outside San Antonio, **passed a resolution in support of the letter grades**. That's despite the two C's and two B's the district got on its report card.

"I think the bottom line for us is, we philosophically believe that accountability is a good thing," said Kerry Gain, the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum and academic services. "We serve our public school children, and we believe we should be held accountable on whether or not they are learning. That could be a crazy stance, but that's where we are."