



## Accountability Issue Brief

### Background

#### A-F Grading System

North Carolina implemented A-F school performance grades in the 2013-2014 school year as part of the Excellent Public Schools Act.<sup>1</sup> The General Assembly required A-F letter grades to be included as a component of end-of-year report cards for each school. School grades are made up of two composite scores: **80% school achievement and 20% school growth.**<sup>2</sup> The **school achievement score** is determined by points earned on accountability measures for a school as follows:

- For elementary and middle schools, one point is awarded for each percent of students who score at or above proficient on annual assessments in math and reading (grades 3–8), science (grades 3 & 8), and progress in achieving English language proficiency (grades 3–8)
- For high schools,
  - One point is awarded for each percent of students who score at or above proficient in the following courses:
    - Algebra I or Integrated Math I (end-of-course test)
    - English II (end-of-course test)
    - Biology (end-of-course test)
    - Algebra II or Integrated Math III (passing grade)
  - One point is awarded for each percent of students who do the following:
    - Achieve the minimum score required for admission into a UNC System school or score at Silver, Gold, or Platinum levels in Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses
    - Graduate within four years of entering high school
    - Progress in achieving English language proficiency<sup>3</sup>

The **school growth score** represents the academic progress of a student compared to the average progress of students across the State in a given grade and/or subject. The State Board of Education uses the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) to calculate student growth values with results from the following:

- End-of-Grade (EOG) and End-of-Course (EOC) assessments for grades 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics; grades 5 and 8 Science; and Biology, Math I, and English II
- CTE State Assessments at the middle school and high school levels
- NC Final Exams in grades 4-12 English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies when EOCs and EOGs are not administered
- K-3 Checkpoints for measuring students' reading skill development<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> S.L. 2012-142, Sec. 7A.3.

<sup>2</sup> G.S. 115C-83.15(d).

<sup>3</sup> G.S. 115C-83.15(b).

<sup>4</sup> G.S. 115C-83.15(c) and Educator Effectiveness Model, Department of Public Instruction website, <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/districts-schools-support/district-human-capital/educator-effectiveness-model>

A school's overall grade is calculated based on the following 15-point scale:

**A** = 85–100   **B** = 70–84   **C** = 55–69   **D** = 40–54   **F** = 39 or Less

North Carolina is one of twelve states that has a public school letter grade accountability system.<sup>5</sup> Other states rank schools with star ratings (1 to 5), index ratings (1 to 100), or other systems.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the type of accountability system, the Southern Regional Education Board states that “North Carolina uses the highest weighting of student achievement when compared to other states”.<sup>7</sup> Excluding North Carolina, the average school achievement weight used in an accountability system was 32.9% for elementary and middle school scores (34 states) and 33.2% for high school scores (37 states).<sup>8</sup>

The WestEd report recommends revising the school accountability system stating that “A system that grades schools solely based on proficiency of students does not capture much of the growth, progress, and benefit that students in high-poverty schools attain. Include opportunity-to-learn indicators in the state’s accountability system to enable a better gauge of the ability of high-poverty schools and other schools serving disadvantaged students to contribute to student success. These indicators include measures that can capture how students are experiencing learning, such as measures of school climate, chronic absenteeism, student suspensions and expulsions, extended-year graduation rates, and access to programs that support college and career readiness.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Low-Performing Schools**

“Low-performing schools are those that receive a school performance grade of D or F and a school growth score of ‘met expected growth’ or ‘not met expected growth’.”<sup>10</sup> Growth is based on student performance on the EOG and EOC assessments. In the 2018-2019 school year, 17.9% of the State’s traditional public schools were classified as low-performing.<sup>11</sup>

There is a strong correlation between school performance and percentage of economically disadvantaged students. For the 2018-2019 school year, 95.3% of D and F schools had 40.1% or more of economically disadvantaged students. However, a school’s growth status paints a different picture. 64.7% of schools that exceeded expected growth had a student body that was at least three-fifths economically disadvantaged. (see chart below). Clearly, the current (80%/20%) school achievement/school growth formula does not reflect the educational progress a school is making.

---

<sup>5</sup> A Study of North Carolina’s Accountability System, February 11, 2020, Southern Regional Education Board, page 19.

<sup>6</sup> School Accountability and Performance Grades Issue Brief 2019, The Hunt Institute (used data from the Education Commission of the States’ “50-State Comparison: States’ School Accountability Systems”)

<sup>7</sup> A Study of North Carolina’s Accountability System, February 11, 2020, Southern Regional Education Board, page 11

<sup>8</sup> A Study of North Carolina’s Accountability System, February 11, 2020, Southern Regional Education Board, pages 8-10

<sup>9</sup> Sound Basic Education For All, An Action Plan for North Carolina, WestEd in collaboration with the Learning Policy Institute and the William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

<sup>10</sup> G.S. 115C-105.37

<sup>11</sup> 2018–19 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools, Table 30, page 26, NC Department of Public Instruction

	Growth Status					
	Exceeded		Met		Did Not Meet	
% EDS *	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
0 - 20%	87	12.5%	88	7.6%	58	8.6%
20.1% - 40%	158	22.7%	234	20.3%	95	14.1%
40.1% - 60%	254	36.5%	443	38.4%	248	36.8%
60.1% - 80%	167	24.0%	335	29.0%	219	32.5%
80.1% - 100%	29	4.2%	55	4.8%	53	7.9%
Total	695	100.0%	1155	100.0%	673	100.0%
* Economically Disadvantaged Students						

### **NCSBA Position**

*School Grades:* Measures should strive to capture the level of student learning taking place in each classroom, school, and district. The current formula for school grades, 80% school achievement and 20% school growth, misses the mark. Increasing the weight of school growth will more accurately reflect a school’s impact on school achievement. Alternatively, two separate grades, one for school achievement and one for school growth, provide more transparency and could make it easier for stakeholders to understand.

*Low-Performing Schools:* It is important to modify the definition of a low performing school. NCSBA believes a school that “meets expected growth” should not be labeled as low performing. According to the 2018-2019 State accountability report:

- 86 schools with an overall grade of A or B **DID NOT** meet expected growth.
- 242 schools with an overall grade of D or F met or exceeded expected growth.<sup>12</sup>

It is misleading to say that an A or B school not meeting expected growth is doing better by its students than a D or F school that meets expected academic growth.

*Designation:* Studies show that there is a negative correlation between poverty and academic success. Therefore, in an effort for full transparency, high poverty schools should receive a special designation and targeted supports.

*Testing:* North Carolina’s accountability system should undergo a comprehensive review to develop its defined purpose(s) and revamp the testing program to achieve the stated goals.

---

<sup>12</sup> DPI, 2018-2019 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools