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# ACCOUNTABILITY

## KEY ISSUES

North Carolina's accountability methods have historically been intended to support every student in meeting college and career ready expectations. Teachers, students, and schools are all held accountable for the growth and achievement of students. But developing accountability measures that accurately reflect student performance and the degree to which schools and teachers have had an impact on achievement has been an ongoing challenge.

North Carolina currently utilizes an accountability model that relies on a system of assigning A-F grades to all schools in the state based on a formula that combines student achievement (80%) and student growth (20%). In addition, North Carolina places a strong emphasis on third grade reading scores, as seen with the 2012 Read to Achieve legislation that requires students to meet certain reading proficiency benchmarks in order to move on to the fourth grade. Finally, low performing schools in North Carolina are defined by law as "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>1</sup> These schools must submit to the state and share with the public plans for improvement that specifically addresses the strategies the school will implement to improve both the School Performance Grade and School Growth designation.

## OVERVIEW

Since North Carolina began to earnestly focus on accountability in 1989, state systems for holding students, schools, and teachers accountable have gone through several iterations.

Measurement and assessment are important components of accountability. Assessments can be "summative," occurring at the ends of grades or courses to capture what students have learned. Or they can be "formative," meaning they are used in the short-term to influence what teachers teach and students learn, sometimes week-to-week, day-to-day, or even moment-to-moment. North Carolina is in the process of developing technology-based platforms that will track student performance and assist teachers and schools in targeting student needs more efficiently. Streamlined information will not only make accountability clearer and simpler, but also may also improve teaching and learning.

The way accountability measures are shared with the public is another important part of the state's accountability plan. Parents and communities need access to clear and understandable information about the performance of schools, teachers, and students. As policymakers pursue information-sharing as a public ideal, they must also take into account the need for fair and accurate information about performance, and the impact that public transparency may have on the ability of schools to improve and serve students well.

Current accountability standards prohibit schools from 'social promotion' at the end of third-grade, requiring through the state's Read to Achieve program that every student can read at grade level by the end of third grade before moving to fourth grade. At all grade levels, the issue of how to support struggling students so they can progress to more advanced work is something policymakers and educators must continually address.

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<sup>1</sup> G.S. 115C-83.15. School achievement, growth, performance scores, and grades. Available at [http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/BySection/Chapter\\_115C/GS\\_115C-83.15.pdf](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/BySection/Chapter_115C/GS_115C-83.15.pdf).

## SCHOOL PERFORMANCE GRADES: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY MODEL

The Excellent Public Schools Act, enacted by the General Assembly in 2012, included among its provisions a new policy to assign school performance grades to every public school in North Carolina.<sup>2</sup> The first school performance grades of A, B, C, D or F were released in February 2015 based on data from the 2013-14 school year.

The original legislation called for the first year of the school performance grades to be calculated on a 15 point grading scale (A = 85, B = 70, C = 55, D = 40, F = less than 40) and then move to a 10 point scale in subsequent years. Legislation passed in 2014 enabled the 15 point scale to remain for the 2014-15 school performance grades and subsequent legislation has kept the 15 point scale constant. However, the 2017-19 budget included a provision that will change the grading scale to a 10-point scale beginning with the 2019-20 school year.

North Carolina is one of 18 states nationally to have adopted an A-F grading system.<sup>3</sup> Supporters of these systems say that they hold schools and districts accountable for results, provide parents with an understandable marker of performance, and encourage school improvement efforts. Common complaints include that many A-F grade systems inadequately account for student growth and other important measures of school quality, and that they create incentives for schools to serve students on the borderline at the expense of the lowest- and highest-performing students. In some states, the grading scales and underlying criteria have changed over time, resulting in confusion, inconsistency, and charges of political gamesmanship. Additionally, critics of A-F grading say that the letter grades are too often used to criticize and punish failing schools rather than to target resources and assistance to schools and students that need it most.

### SCHOOL PERFORMANCE GRADE INDICATORS

| <b>Elementary/Middle Schools:</b>      | <b>High Schools:</b> |
|--|----------------------|
| EOG Mathematics                        | Math I EOC           |
| EOG English/Language Arts/Reading      | English II EOC       |
| EOG Science                            | Biology EOC          |
| Math/ELA/Science EOCs (middle schools) | Graduation Rate      |
|  | ACT/ ACT WorkKeys    |

EOG: End-Of-Grade Test

EOC: End-Of –Course Test

Schools Performance Grades are based on two components: a School Achievement Score and a School Growth Score. A combination of the School Achievement Score and the School Growth Score make up the overall School Performance Grade. Currently, 80% of the School Performance Grade is the School Achievement Score and 20% of the grade is the School Growth Score. Deliberations in the General Assembly have been underway for the past several years re-evaluating the weight given to each of these components.

**School Achievement Score.** Schools earn one point for each school-wide percent of:

- Students who score at or above proficient on annual assessments for mathematics in grades three through eight.
- Students who score at or above proficient on annual assessments for reading in grades three through eight.

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

<sup>3</sup> Burnette, D. "A-F School Rankings Draw Local Pushback" Education Week.

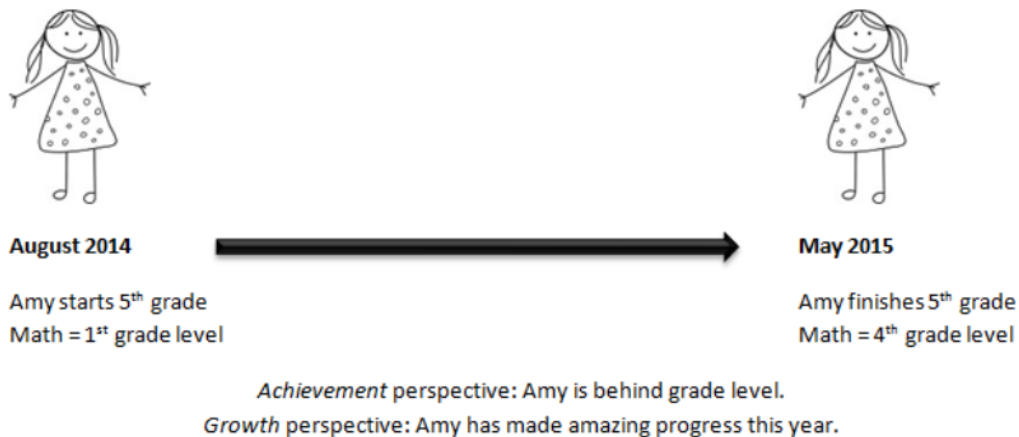
Available at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/03/08/a-f-school-rankings-draw-local-pushback.html>.

- Students who score at or above proficient on annual assessments for science in grades five and eight.
- Students who score at or above proficient on the Algebra I or Integrated Math I end-of-course test.
- Students who score at or above proficient on the English II end-of-course test.
- Students who score at or above proficient on the Biology end-of-course test.
- Students who complete Algebra II or Integrated Math III with a passing grade.
- Students who achieve the minimum score required for admission into a constituent institution of The University of North Carolina on a nationally normed test of college readiness.
- Students enrolled in Career and Technical Education courses who meet the standard when scoring at Silver, Gold, or Platinum levels on a nationally normed test of workplace readiness.
- Students who graduate within four years of entering high school.

The total points are then converted to a 100-point scale.

**School Growth Score.** Using EVAAS (SAS® EVAAS™ (Education Value-Added Assessment System) for K-12 is a customized software system available to all North Carolina school districts. EVAAS provides North Carolina's educators with tools to improve student learning and to reflect and improve on their own effectiveness.), the overall growth score earned by schools is calculated. Growth is calculated by weighting achievement indicators used to calculate the School Performance Grade, but only those indicators with growth values (End of Grade and End of Course test scores) through EVAAS are included. The numerical values used to determine whether a school has met, exceeded, or has not met expected growth shall be translated to a 100-point scale.

Many other states place a greater emphasis than we do on growth while deemphasizing achievement. The reason for this is simple: school achievement scores reflect single point-in-time test results, over which schools have far less control than growth, which is designed to measure the impact schools and teachers have on students' academic progress.<sup>4</sup>



#### ADDITIONAL REPORTING

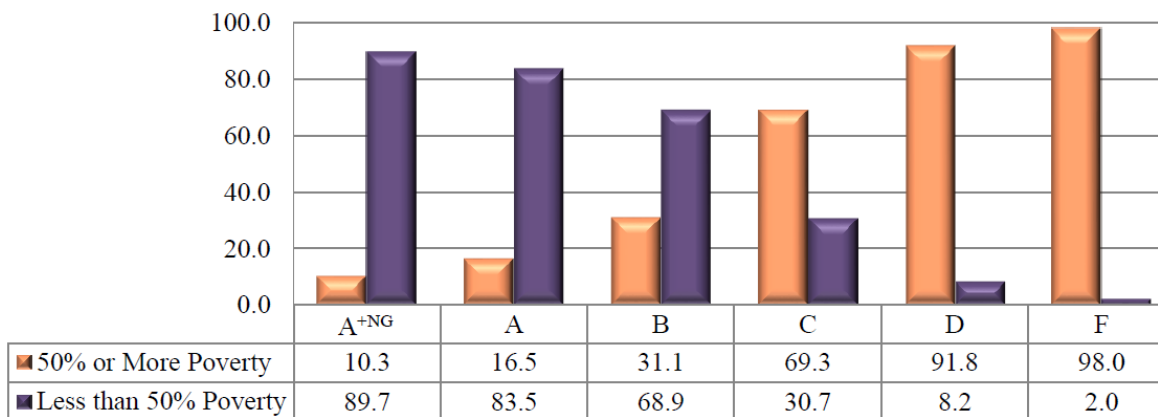
- Growth is reported separately for each school: exceeds, meets, or does not meet expected growth
- A separate achievement score for math and reading is reported for schools serving grades K-8
- The report card that shares the school performance grade for schools serving 3rd graders contains information on the number and percentage of third graders who are retained or promoted based on reading performance

<sup>4</sup> Public School Forum of NC. "A is for Affluent." Available at <https://www.ncforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/A-is-for-Affluent-Issue-Brief-Format.pdf>.

## SCHOOL PERFORMANCE GRADES AND POVERTY

In 2016-17, only 16 percent of schools with at least half of their students living in poverty (“high-poverty schools”) received A’s or B’s, compared with 64 percent of all other schools. At the other end of the performance spectrum, 35 percent of high-poverty schools received D’s or F’s, compared with only 4 percent of all other schools. In the entire state, only two schools with less than half of their students living in poverty received F’s, compared with 96 high-poverty schools.<sup>5</sup>

### Grades by School Poverty Percentage



Source: NC DPI, 2016–17 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools Executive Summary

An analysis of North Carolina’s 2013-14 school performance grades by Duke University’s Will Wilson revealed a 61 percent correlation between a school’s free and reduced-price lunch population and its achievement score. By contrast, Wilson found only a two percent correlation between that same measure and a school’s growth score.<sup>6</sup>

## THE CASE FOR EARLY INVESTMENT IN LITERACY

The structure of standards and curriculum in many schools marks the transition from third to fourth grade as the shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Research on school achievement often points to third grade reading ability as a highly reliable indicator for later school success. For many reasons, ensuring students are reading at grade level by the third grade has been a high priority for teachers and policymakers.

A major goal of public education in North Carolina is to ensure every student graduates career and college ready. A wealth of resources and attention is focused on the final years of high school to keep students on track for graduation and encourage them to choose their best career or college path. However, North Carolina has been learning for years that investment earlier in a student’s education has incredible impact on later success and ultimate preparedness for their future.

<sup>5</sup> NC DPI, 2016–17 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools Executive Summary. Available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/2017/documentation/exsumm17.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer,G., Common ground on school grades: We need to grade our schools, but we need to grade them differently. Available at <https://www.ednc.org/2015/03/18/common-ground-on-school-grades-we-need-to-grade-our-schools-but-we-need-to-grade-them-differently/>.

Study after study has revealed that the greatest predictor of high school graduation is the ability of a student to read by the third grade. An analysis by MetaMetrics of the Public School Forum's Roadmap of Need data found that in North Carolina, third grade reading performance was the most positively correlated with ACT scores, which are used by the state as a capstone evaluation of college and career readiness.<sup>7</sup> In fourth grade, students who still struggle to read and comprehend begin to fall farther behind their peers the longer they lag in literacy skills.

Recent legislation in North Carolina has attempted to address early literacy and a number of programs and resources across the state are focused to ensure literacy skills for every child in North Carolina.

## READ TO ACHIEVE

The Read to Achieve program is a part of the Excellent Public Schools Act which became state law in 2012 and applied to all schools at the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. The program focuses on preparing students to read at grade level by the end of third grade, and prevents them from moving to the next grade level until they can prove their reading competency. Under this law, third-grade students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade will receive special help, including summer reading camp and other interventions to make sure that they can read well enough to be able to do fourth-grade work.

The original 2012 Read to Achieve law required 36 tests to assess whether third-graders are up to grade level in reading comprehension, but greater flexibility has been provided after the specific requirements of the law proved to be challenging to implement. Teachers, parents and school administrators complained that the law is overly strict and requires too much testing – three tests for each of 12 reading standards, all administered in the second half of the school year. In June 2014 Governor McCrory signed a law passed by the General Assembly to give school districts more flexibility in how and when they test students. Alternative assessments are allowed as long as they are approved by the State Board of Education and teachers are allowed to spread testing throughout the third-grade year.

NC DPI has a wealth of resources available for parents and teachers to better understand the policies and implementation of Reach to Achieve at <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/k-3literacy/achieve/>.

## LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The North Carolina General Assembly provides the definitions for “low-performing schools” as well as “low-performing school districts.”

- Low-performing schools are defined as 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" as defined by G.S. 115C-83.15.<sup>8</sup>
- A low-performing school district is a local school administrative unit in which the majority of the schools in that unit that received a school performance grade and school growth score as provided in G.S. 115C-83.15 have been identified as low-performing schools, as provided in G.S. 115C-105.37.<sup>9</sup>

By law, low-performing schools and districts must develop a plan for improvement that is accessible to the public.

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<sup>7</sup> MetaMetrics, The NC CAP "Roadmap of Need" Supports the Importance of the Read to Achieve Act. Available at <https://lexile.com/about-lexile/white-papers/>.

<sup>8</sup> G.S. 115C-105.37(a).

<sup>9</sup> G.S. 115C-105.39A(a).

Beginning in 2011 and with the support of the federal Race to the Top grant, North Carolina implemented a successful state-wide program to turn around the state's lowest-performing schools. These interventions included comprehensive needs assessments, planning support, as well as coaching and professional development. After four years of services provided by the state's District and School Transformation (DST) division, 83 percent of the 118 schools ranked in the bottom five percent of public schools improved their overall performance and no longer fall in the bottom five percent. And 70 percent of those schools met or exceeded growth.

However, state lawmakers chose not to continue this support strategy, known as "Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools" (TALAS), which was largely funded with federal dollars through the Race to the Top grant. The NC Department of Public Instruction is now only able to serve less than half of the low-performing schools that they used to serve, and in a limited capacity, through TALAS.

A different alternative for low-performing schools is the Innovative School District (formerly known as the Achievement School District). The intention of the ISD, as enacted by the General Assembly in 2016, was to place up to five of the state's lowest performing schools into a new school district run by charter management organization (CMO). Similar efforts have been met with intense controversy in Tennessee and other locales. In North Carolina, the ISD proposal has faced considerable local pushback, resulting in the state choosing to begin with just one elementary school (instead of five) in Robeson County.

Low-performing schools do have another option to pursue in an effort to lift themselves out of low-performing status. These schools can apply for the state's "restart" program, which offers them charter school-like flexibility in terms of how they structure their school days, hire and fire teachers, and spend state funds.