Communications Toolkit
A-F School Grading
2018

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INTRODUCTION

Our ability to prepare students to compete successfully with their peers from countries around the world will determine our future in the global economy. Many factors contribute to raising student achievement, but when we focus our efforts on holding schools accountable for student learning by measuring student performance against objective standards, we see results. Therefore, creating an accountability system that ensures students are ready for college and career by the time they graduate from high school is imperative for our K-12 system.

The principles of accountability are simple and intuitive. Rigorous standards set high expectations for students and educators. Assessments measure progress toward those expectations. And, when clearly communicated, the results of those assessments as well as other objective measures of college and career readiness provide the motivation necessary to change a public education system.

Grading schools with a simple A, B, C, D and F rating is an essential because everyone understands what these ratings mean. Transparent school grades also enable us to recognize effective schools and provide meaningful assistance to those that are not meeting expectations.

School grading systems are based on the essential belief that all students can learn. We must stop making excuses for why students aren’t learning and start organizing ourselves around the understanding that every child can make progress. We need to set high expectations and instill in our young people, and their parents and educators, a demand for hard work and the belief that all children can be successful in school.

This communications toolkit will help you prepare to communicate strategically and effectively the purpose and results of A-F School Grades to your target audiences. This communications toolkit is provided for informational purposes only.

“Success is never final, reform is never finished.”
Jeb Bush, 43rd Governor of Florida and Chair of ExcelinEd
INTRODUCTION

The following key messages and talking points can be weaved into all communication materials including: interviews, op-eds, press releases and parent communications.

KEY MESSAGES

Almost two decades of experience in Florida and subsequent A-F adoption in 14 other states have created more opportunities for students to be better prepared for success in school, careers and in life. Experience and success have provided four fundamental reasons for supporting school grading policies.

Excellence vs. Complacency

A-F school grading has created a system-wide focus on school quality because administrators, educators and parents all understand A-F grades. School communities are not satisfied with a “C” grade or even a “B” grade. In the 15 A-F states across the country, stakeholders strive for excellence in a way you don’t see with fuzzy descriptors that are used in some states like “satisfactory” or “performing” or “yellow” or “near target.” Grading schools on a scale of A-F creates a productive sense of urgency – among parents, teachers, school leaders, policy makers and the public - to ensure our schools are meeting the needs of every student.

Increased Media and Public Attention

Transparency in evaluating schools attracts more attention - from extensive media coverage of individual school effectiveness to realtors who highlight good school grades as a selling point on the housing market. This attention brings more investments in time and energy from families, teachers, administrators, policy makers and all community leaders.

Letter grades provide schools with a tangible sign of their excellence and/or hard work. Although we often see some initial pushback against school grades from some within the education community, it’s not long before everyone begins displaying their grades on the school marquee, hanging banners, or doing local press about the fact that they earned the coveted “A” grade or jumped from a “D” to a “B.”

Community Support Emerges from Transparent, Simple Grading

In an A-F system, low performing schools are easily identified and communities rally around them. A-F states can share numerous stories of communities coming together to improve schools to raise student achievement.

For example, in one Florida district, an entire school board meeting was dedicated to how the county could become the first in the state with no “C” schools. That would not have happened if the old labels of “satisfactory,” “making progress,” and other vague language had still been in place.

Empower Parents to Make Better Choices for Students

Easy-to-understand school grades are crucial for promoting transparency and helping parents choose the best school for their child. That is why A-F letter grades have been incredibly popular with parents. In a
national poll, 84 percent of parents supported assigning schools a letter grade based on how well they educate their students. (McLaughlin & Associates, 2014).

**TALKING POINTS**

**All students can learn.**

- Evidence shows that when schools are held accountable with A-F school grades, educators change their instructional policies and practices in meaningful ways, leading to improved student achievement.
- We must continue to provide parents with information on how their children and their schools are doing.
- We must continue to identify struggling students and schools to make sure they receive the help and resources they need to be successful.
- We are succeeding in [STATE], we have raised the bar and students have met the more rigorous expectations.

**A transparent system will garner attention.**

- Accountability systems are subjected to scrutiny, because of the transparency A-F provides for it, promoting substantial parent interest, public attention and media focus.
- Using clear and transparent A, B, C, D and F descriptors ensures that everyone understands how a school is performing.
- School grading brings a command focus on learning because administrators, educators and parents all "get" the policy.
- In other school rating systems, many people do not understand the difference between “2-star” and “4-star” schools, “performing” and “satisfactory,” “orange,” “purple,” and “blue” categories, etc. The use of the descriptors that people can grasp inherently draws a heightened amount of interest.
- Some states use vague labels, such as “satisfactory” or “Level 1” to rate schools instead of offering parents, policymakers and the public transparent, objective information about school effectiveness.
- In [YEAR], [STATE] made the revolutionary decision to grade schools on an A-F scale just like students—no further explanation needed.
- Behind the A-F simplicity is an objective, data-driven system of accountability.
- The A-F School Grading policy measures what matters: overall student performance and progress, with extra focus on struggling students, and graduation rates and college and career readiness in high school.
- School grading works by holding all schools to the same high expectations and clearly communicating the results to parents.
- Every state with an accountability system wrestles with setting the calculation. Components of a school accountability calculation need to be addressed in ANY system. This not unique to A-F school grading.
- Transparency of the calculation is vital; processes and rules need to be clearly articulated and publicly available.

**A-F school grading provides a balanced measure of student proficiency and student learning growth.**

- To weight growth more than proficiency provides less incentive to ensure students are on grade level. To weight proficiency more than growth will create an uneven playing field.
• Focusing on both proficiency and growth provides a true picture of how a school is doing.
• All students can learn and grow. A strong accountability system must capture measures of that growth.
• Every school has students who perform at different levels of proficiency. Therefore, we cannot simply compare proficiency across schools because proficiency may reflect the performance of students who entered the school, not the impact of the school demonstrated through student growth.
• Using a growth component in the school accountability formula levels the playing field so that schools do not have advantages or disadvantages simply because of the students who attend a school.
• The growth component requires schools to demonstrate that all students, high achieving and low achieving, have made growth.
• Using criterion-based growth in a school grading system ensures students are measured on their individual progress towards meeting a pre-determined expectation of demonstrating at least a year's worth of progress in a year's time towards the mastery of a certain set of knowledge and skills.

Summarize school performance in a letter grade.

• The purpose of an A to F system is not to encapsulate everything that makes a school great, rather it holds schools accountable for their core mission.
• Having a scale that parents, teachers and administrators clearly understand draws them into the accountability conversation. Once engaged and interacting with the school grading website, they will find additional information about the school that is understandable and relevant to foster student learning.

For education to be its best, parents need an honest indicator of how their child’s school is performing.

• [STATE’s] A-F School Grading System provides parents an honest indicator of how their child’s school is performing.
• By grading schools with simple A, B, C, D and F labels that everyone understands, [STATE] will be able to recognize effective schools and provide meaningful assistance to those that are not meeting expectations.
• [STATE] joins XX other states in grading schools A-F.
• The A-F School Grading System provides more accountability and transparency in education. Parents, teachers and community leaders should continue to push to refine the system to improve student achievement.
• A-F promotes excellence. The command focus on learning allows administrators, educators and parents to all understand the labels. No one is satisfied with a “C” grade or even a “B” grade. Everyone strives for excellence in a way you don't see with fuzzy descriptors like "satisfactory" or "performing."

A-F school grading prioritizes excellence over the complacency in the old system.

• There should be no greater goal in education than student academic success.
• According to other states that have implemented A-F school grading, this urgency prompts entire communities to come together to tackle challenges in a school.
• Across the nation, parents, teachers and community leaders are rejecting mediocrity and the status quo, and dedicating themselves to improving student achievement.
• A-F school grades raise the bar and encourage schools to reach beyond excellence every day.
• We are confident [STATE’s] students and teachers can adjust to and exceed these rigorous expectations.
• A-F school grades allow student growth toward high standards and expectations.

A-F school grades provides inspiration.

• A-F school grades bring an increase of public attention surrounding the release of the grades that can inspire pride in successful schools and unleash a competitive fire in struggling schools committed to doing better.

A-F school grading encourages transparency and engagement.

• Just like a report card helps parents understand how their child is doing academically, A-F grades will give parents a better idea of how schools are performing.
• Through the simplicity of A-F letter grades, parents can quickly identify positive and problematic trends at their children’s school and get engaged to help them improve.
• Unlike any other scale, A-F provides a system that is understandable and relevant.
• This shows, in an immediately understandable way, which schools are doing a good job of making sure children are learning and which schools need additional supports to improve.
• A-F school grades distinguish, in an immediately understandable way, schools that are doing a good job ensuring children are learning from schools that are failing and need to work harder to improve.

After more than a [LENGTH OF TIME] of implementation, A-F school grading has consistently raised the bar in [STATE] - challenging schools to reach beyond excellence.

• The outcome? More kids are performing at grade level, the high school graduation rate continues to increase, and students are more prepared for college and career.
• Today, other states across the nation are using this simple but effective tool for driving improvements in student achievement.
• Behind the simplicity is a well-thought out system of accountability that spurs school improvement and increases student performance by providing transparent, objective information to parents, educators and the public about school effectiveness.
• The school grading formula includes student achievement in English, math, science, and social studies, and progress in English and math with extra focus placed on those students struggling the most. Graduation rates and college and career readiness are also accounted for in high school grades.

Because A-F school grades are based on objective measurements of students’ academic success, it shines a bright light on effectiveness and that creates a catalyst for change.

• Recognizing student proficiency and growth are not the only elements that makes for a rigorous and successful A-F school grading system.
• Including essential elements like: clear descriptors, timely reporting, recognition and clear communication with parents can make all the difference.
• A well-designed school report card can guide parents in understanding the performance of their child’s school, where there is room for improvement, and how they can get involved.
• We know a data-driven, transparent accountability system is the foundation of a good education system.
• A-F school grading ensures every student receives the quality education they deserve.
INTRODUCTION

A results summary document should be a short, one-page overview of the school grade calculation, changes from the prior year, results and next steps assists with briefing several audiences. The example below uses model indicators, weights, percentages and numbers of schools. Each state should plan to customize it based on its unique calculation, context, etc.

RESULTS SUMMARY EXAMPLE

[STATE] A-F School Grades Results Summary for 2017-18
In 2017-18, a school’s grade may include up to 12 indicators. There are four achievement indicators, plus indicators for learning gains, learning gains of the lowest 25% of students, English learner progress, middle school acceleration, graduation rate, and college and career acceleration. Each component is worth up to 100 points in the overall calculation.

Progress toward English language proficiency was added to meet the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requirements. [HIGHLIGHT ANY OTHER NEW INDICATORS HERE.] The learning gains of the lowest performing 25% of students fulfills the ESSA required school quality/student success indicator. Schools can earn up to 100 points for each indicator.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Arts</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
<th>Acceleration Success</th>
<th>English Language Proficiency*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Achievement (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Achievement (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Achievement (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>4-year Graduation Rate (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>High School AP, IB, AICE, Dual Enroll or Industry Cert (0% to 100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Gains (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Learning Gains (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Middle School EOCs or Industry Cert</td>
<td>Learning Gains (0-100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Gains Lowest 25% (0% to 100%)</td>
<td>Learning Gains Lowest 25% (0% to 100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The English Language Proficiency indicator is new in 2017-18.

In 2018, nearly half of all schools maintained an “A” (670, 21%) or increased their school grade (943, 29%, green cells). These schools will be recognized as reward schools. 310 schools (10%) (red cells) decreased their grade, and a total of 2,000 schools (61%) (yellow cells) maintained their grades.
### All Schools 2017 Compared to 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2018 School Grade</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>1,160</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lowest performing 5% of Title I schools and all high schools with graduation rates below 67% will receive technical assistance and additional resources from the [STATE] Department of Education as Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools. Other schools that have groups of students that are “consistently underperforming” or groups of students who are performing as poorly as Comprehensive Support Schools will be considered Targeted Support and Improvement Schools. These schools will also receive additional resources and will receive technical assistance from their district.

[AS APPLICABLE, STATES CAN INCLUDE ADDITIONAL DETAILS ON HOW THEY WILL IDENTIFY THESE TWO GROUPS OF SCHOOLS AND WHAT RESOURCES/TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE THOSE SCHOOLS CAN EXPECT TO RECEIVE.]
Example FAQs
A-F School Grading
Communications Toolkit - 2018

INTRODUCTION

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are a great way to introduce newcomers to a topic that they may not know much about. They are also an effective way to explain specific points, answer critics and dispel rumors. Reporters covering A-F school grades ask questions like these, so providing an FAQs document and being prepared with the answers, can help with media engagement and ensure accurate news coverage. Also, FAQs are a helpful feature to include on the state’s A-F website. You can easily add new questions and answers if a new topic or issue needs to be addressed.

The questions in this Sample FAQ document are commonly asked of stakeholders and experts with experience communicating about school grades. The content can be edited or customized as needed for a state. As a best practice, keep each question and answer short and focused on a single topic.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why do we grade schools?

[STATE] grades its schools to show how well students in each school are learning what they need to know to be successful. Assigning a letter grade (A, B, C, D or F) is a way to report a school’s effectiveness in a manner everyone can understand. Used along with rewards for schools that are improving and support for schools that need it, grading schools encourages teachers, administrators and parents to make student achievement their primary focus. Grading schools has a track record of success in [STATE]; our students have shown continuing achievement gains since the first year of school grading in [YEAR].

Additional information on school grades for all of [STATE]’s schools and districts is available at [website address].

Isn’t it unfair to label a school as failing?

No. An “F” is a way to identify schools that need the most assistance, support, and direction for their students to have the same opportunities for growth and success that exist for students in other schools. If [STATE] does not identify schools that need additional assistance and support, we would be failing the students attending those schools and the communities where those schools are located.

How do we grade schools?

[STATE] grades schools using a point system based on student achievement and student progress. All schools are graded using state assessments that measure:

- Student performance in reading and math.
- Student learning gains in reading and math for all students [FOR SOME STATES: and the lowest performing students].
• High school graduation rate. [description of state’s additional indicators such as science or social studies performance, performance on advanced coursework, or college and career readiness].

For more information on the separate components of school grades, see the links to the School Grade Guide Sheet and the School Grades Technical Assistance Paper at [website address].

When did we start grading schools?

The A-F school grading system began in [YEAR].

How many “A” and “B” schools have there been?

The number and percentage of “A” and “B” schools have varied over the years. For most of the past [NUMBER OF YEARS], more than XX percent of schools earned a grade of “A” or “B”. For more information, see [website address].

How many “D” and “F” schools have there been?

The number and percentage of “D” and “F” schools have varied since school grading began. For most of the [NUMBER OF YEARS], less than XX percent of schools earned a grade of “D” or “F”. For more information, see [website address].

What support does the state give to “D” and “F” schools?

Schools that earn a grade of “D” or “F” are classified as Comprehensive or Targeted Support and Intervention schools. These schools are identified for additional assistance and support through the Department of Education including professional development, supplemental academic services, reading coaches, and other support [LIST APPLICABLE STATE INTERVENTIONS].

What rewards do “A” schools or schools that improve their school grade earn from the state?

[IF APPLICABLE IN YOUR STATE] The School Recognition Program provides public recognition and financial awards to schools that have sustained high student performance or schools that demonstrate substantial improvement in student performance. Schools qualify for the award if they:

• Earn a grade of “A.”
• Improve at least one letter grade.
• Improve more than one letter grade and sustain the improvement the following school year.

Each recognized school earns $XX per full-time equivalent (FTE) student.
**Why do we no longer use Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)?**

[STATE] no longer calculates and reports AYP outcomes, a federal measure of accountability, for schools because the state received approval from the U.S. Department of Education to base all school improvement requirements on school grade performance under the 2015 federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

In the past, AYP performance as well as school grade performance were used to determine school improvement measures. This resulted in conflicting and confusing information about school performance. Going forward, [STATE] will be able to use school grades as the sole basis for identifying [STATE]’s lowest performing schools - those schools most in need of support and assistance. AYP reporting will no longer be used to classify schools for school improvement purposes.

**How can I help my school if it earns a grade of “D” or “F”?**

Parents can help schools by keeping communications open with their child’s teacher(s) and participating in parent-teacher meetings and organizations. Here are some specific suggestions:

- Encourage positive school feelings.
- Meet with your child’s teacher.
- Communicate regularly with your child’s teacher(s) by phone/email.
- Sign and return all papers to school.
- Visit your child’s classroom.
- Volunteer in a needed area at school.
- Volunteer to assist on field trips.
- Attend PTA/PTSO meetings.
- Become involved in planning school activities.
- Attend parent-teacher conferences.
- Encourage learning by:
  - Talking with your child about school activities every day.
  - Encouraging your child’s efforts and being available for questions.
  - Insisting that all homework assignments be completed.
  - Providing a quiet, well-lighted place to study.
  - Encouraging your child to read at home.
  - Reading with and let your child see you read.
  - Getting a library card for your child.
  - Providing tutorial assistance for your child if needed.
  - Staying aware of what your child is learning.

**Why did my child’s school grade go down?**

A school grade can decrease for several reasons, but generally the grade may go down if the school had a smaller percentage of students scoring at satisfactory levels on assessments or if a smaller proportion of the school’s students made expected learning gains.

In terms of the calculation, changes in the school’s points total from the prior year to the current year can affect its grade. Schools earn points based on the percentage of students who score at certain levels on assessments.
assessments and for the proportion of students who make expected learning gains. Here are some examples of changes in school performance resulting in a lower grade:

- The school’s earned points total for all school grading measures declined from the previous year. A decline in points earned for one or more of the school grade measures can result in a lower point total for the school.
- The school may not have tested at least 95 percent of eligible students resulting in a loss of points.
- Detailed information on points totals for each school’s grade is at [website address]. The interactive report at [website address] allows users to review total school grade points for multiple years.

**How can my school earn a better grade?**

Schools can improve their school grade by focusing efforts on improving student achievement in areas of greatest need, which can be identified by looking at the school grade measures where the school earned the fewest points.

Once you have identified the areas needing improvement, check with your school and district leadership and ask them about their plans for improvement, and how you can help.

**Why are we changing how schools are graded now? Wasn’t it working fine?**

Recently, [STATE] has transitioned to higher academic standards and new assessments, which are now used to measure school performance for school grades. In addition, every state in the country must now comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which became law in 2015. ESSA requires that states’ school grades calculation (or other school accountability system) include data beyond reading and math scores. School grades must also now include the progress of English language proficiency for students who are English learners and a measure of school quality or student success.

[STATE]’s school grading system has periodically changed over the years to include more students, add new, important components and/or increase the expectations for [STATE]’s students, teachers, and schools. The good news is that each time that [STATE]’s school grading system has increased expectations, schools have responded by raising student achievement.

Looking forward, [STATE] will continue to raise expectations for our schools until we can ensure that every [STATE] student graduates prepared to succeed in college, career and in life.

**What if my child attends a school that has an F grade?**

Begin by looking at the school grade measures where the school earned the fewest points. Once you have identified the areas needing improvement, check with your school and district leadership and ask them about their plans for improvement, and how you can help.

[IF APPLICABLE]: In addition, your child may be eligible to transfer to a higher performing public school or to apply to the state for a [VOUCHER/OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP] to attend a private school that better meets his or her educational needs. Please call your school district office with any questions you may have or visit [website address] to learn more.
INTRODUCTION

An Excuse vs. Reality document can be an effective way to respond to opposing views, dispel rumors and explain specific points. It allows you to take the sharpest or most negative criticisms and counter them with compelling facts, newer data, well-respected research and actual experiences.

An Excuse vs. Reality document can be shared with reporters and is helpful content on a website. You can easily add new entries if an additional topic or new “excuse” needs to be addressed. Further, each of the excuse versus reality entries can serve as the basis of a blog, email outreach campaign, op-ed or letter to the editor.

EXCUSE VS. REALITY

Excuse: “There is no evidence that A-F school grading works.”

Reality: National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data has provided ample evidence that A-F school grades have increased student achievement in more than a dozen states over the last 18 years. Seven out of eight states that started grading schools in 2013 or earlier made greater academic improvement than the national average on NAEP 4th grade reading. At the 8th grade level, six of eight made greater improvements than the national average in math on NAEP.

Furthermore, since Florida started grading its schools, students and subgroups have made substantial improvement and are closing achievement gaps. For example, grade four students in reading are scoring over two grade levels higher; low-income students are scoring three grades higher; and black students and Hispanic students performed over two and a half grade levels higher on the 2015 NAEP than they did prior to implementation of A-F.

Meanwhile graduation rates are at an all-time high. All this improvement continues as states consistently raise the bar on criteria for a school to earn an “A,” on expectations for students to be proficient and on requirements for earning a high school diploma.

Excuse: “There’s a lot more to a school’s performance than a letter grade.”

Reality: The purpose of an A to F system isn’t to encapsulate everything that makes a school great. In fact, there is much more to a school than a letter grade. What letter grades do, however, is hold schools accountable for clear, academic goals that everyone can rally around.

While there are many qualities that make a school great, student learning is the core of every school’s mission. In K-8, this means ensuring that students are reading and performing math at grade level—and if they are not, ensuring that they are making progress toward grade level. In high school, graduation rates are included, since a high school’s key mission is graduating students prepared for college or careers.

Just think: there’s a lot more to a student’s performance than what’s on the report card they bring home. There’s athletics, extracurricular activities, volunteering, music and more than can be mentioned. Yet we’ve never worried about students earning letter grades for specific academic goals we want them to accomplish.
That’s why school grades should be reported to parents on a report card that includes a robust dashboard of additional information about the school, such as attendance data, school culture, extracurricular activities and other important information. Georgia’s school grades website is a great example.

**Excuse:** “This policy is biased against our low-income schools, which face more difficult situations than more affluent schools.”

Reality: One of the greatest strengths of A-F is that it sets the same rigorous expectations for every school in the state. When the adults in the system set high expectations for all their students—and are held accountable for ensuring all their students succeed—you will be amazed at what students can achieve.

Florida’s experience demonstrates that “low income” does not categorically equal low student performance. In 2015-16, of the schools where more than half of the students came from low-income families, nearly 80 percent of the schools earned a grade of C or higher and 30 percent of the schools earned an A or B.

**Excuse:** “School grading is a reform that originated in Florida when the state had one of the worst education systems in the country. Why should our state, which already has a better reputation, do something different?”

Reality: All states can do better, and experiences in states like Florida demonstrate that tremendous improvements in student performance can be achieved regardless of the demographic makeup of a state.

Consider Florida’s size and diversity. Nearly 60 percent of Florida’s 2.79 million students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The Sunshine State has a majority-minority student population, with minority students making up 60 percent of the total enrollment. Slightly more than 10 percent of Florida students are English Language Learners (ELL). On top of that, Florida’s per-pupil funding consistently ranks among the lowest in the country. In fact, Florida has ranked among the lowest quarter of states in per-pupil funding in all but two years since 2004.

The Florida experience has shown that demography is not destiny. The achievement gap is a reality for all states, but Florida’s reforms have helped close it. According to the 2015 Nation’s Report Card National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) data:

- Florida’s fourth-grade low-income readers rank FIRST in the nation.
- Florida is the only state to have consistently narrowed the achievement gap in fourth-grade and eighth-grade reading between white and African American students, since all states began participating in NAEP.
- No state significantly outperforms Florida’s Hispanic 8th graders in math.

**Excuse:** “It is unfair to grade schools because it hurts the self-esteem of the students who attend a ‘D’ or ‘F’ school.”

Reality: It is the very grade that forces adults to change their actions to ensure that the “D” or “F” grade improves, so students can receive the high-quality education they deserve. A clear, transparent accountability system leaves no doubt which schools are meeting the needs of their kids. It is far more unfair to ask kids to be okay with a low-performing school.
**Excuse: “We should not rush this. School grading sounds good, but it is a complicated issue.”**

Reality: Every year we wait to hold schools accountable is another year of students falling behind during the most critical time of their development. Such hesitancy has moved the U.S. from the world’s leader in education quality to the middle-of-the-pack, at best. Students cannot afford to wait for adults to be comfortable with tough policy decisions, and A-F school grading has proven itself to be an excellent tool to help students and schools succeed.

**Excuse: “It’s not possible to grade schools if the state changes its standards and assessments.”**

Reality: Transitioning to more rigorous standards and assessments is critical for preparing students to be competitive for 21st-century college or career opportunities.

While the new tests are generally more rigorous and are measuring more critical thinking skills, the subjects being tested have not changed. States are still testing in English language arts and mathematics, and accountability systems can still measure proficiency and growth by comparing performance on the state’s old test to their new test. To accommodate the new tests, states must reset their grading scales to reflect new criteria for schools to earn A-F grades.

**Excuse: “An ‘F’ school grade means ‘F’ teachers.”**

Reality: Just as an “F” grade on a test does not mean an “F” student, an “F” school does not mean “F” teachers. There are effective teachers in every school. When a school earns an “F,” more attention needs to be focused on why that school earned an “F.” Annual school grades carry a wealth of information about the areas where schools are excelling or may need to improve. Blindly attributing the school’s performance to any one area could be a serious misstep. While in many cases instructional practices need to be adjusted, the district, as well as the state, can provide support to teachers to ensure there is alignment between standards, expectations and instruction.

**Excuse: “These grades will demoralize our hardworking educators at a time when public schools are already being asked to do more for our students.”**

Reality: Experience in A-F states across the country simply does not bear that out. Even if a state initially sets a high bar for grades, history proves that the number of “D” and “F” schools will not remain that way for long. When A-F grading was enacted in Florida, there were more “D” and “F” schools than “A” and “B” schools. Fifteen years later, there are now more than three times as many “A” and “B” schools as there are “D” and “F,” even after Florida officials raised the bar multiple times.

Typically, educators, parents and communities rally in response to a low grade, and examples of success are not limited to Florida. Other states like Mississippi, Oklahoma and Indiana have seen school grades improve over time so that more schools earned A’s and B’s compared to their first year of school grades.

**Excuse: “A-F school grading is just an excuse to justify diverting students from their neighborhood district schools to private or charter schools instead.”**

Reality: There is no evidence that student mobility increases—to private, charter, or any school—because of states implementing A-F school grades. Parents should have the right to choose the best education possible for their child regardless of whether schools earn an A-F grade or any other type of label describing school
performance. When parents do have those choices, A-F school grades can help parents make better decisions for their child.

**Excuse: “A-F school grading unfairly impacts teacher pay.”**

Reality: Teacher salaries are not tied to A-F letter grades. Instead, teacher pay is based on salary schedules and, in some states, teacher evaluation systems that take student performance into account.

However, schools that are improving a letter grade or earning an “A” can be meaningfully recognized. In Florida, schools earning an “A” are awarded $100 per student, and the school then decides whether to use the nonrecurring funds on benefits such as one-time bonuses, computers or playground equipment.

**Excuse: “A-F school grading undermines local decision-making and community engagement.”**

Reality: Enacted properly, A-F school grading strengthens local control of schools on behalf of all stakeholders. **Real** local control happens when parents are engaged and take ownership of the success of their child’s education. This only happens if they can understand the condition of their local schools.

When Oklahoma first released school grades, their A-F website received almost 680,000 hits in the week after initial grades were released. That’s about 25,000 more hits than there are students in the entire state! Clearly, a local community is more engaged when they can understand the rating system.

This also gives educators new opportunities to better engage parents. When parents complain about a grade, a principal/teacher can ask the parent (or community member) to take a couple hours per week to help a child learn to read. Businesses can brag about their local “A” schools and work to improve failing schools in their area.

**Excuse: “A-F school grading creates unnecessary mandates on schools and undermines local control.”**

Reality: Measuring what matters—meaning student outcomes—leaves schools and districts in charge of how they teach students. A-F grades don’t require schools to teach in any specific way or any specific curriculum. Instead, school grades focus on the output of each school, i.e., student performance, rather than the inputs so schools have the flexibility they need to help all students reach their goals. Enacted properly, A-F school grades focus on and reflect the central mandate of public education: student learning.

**Excuse: “Growth should be the only thing that counts in a school’s grade, especially since so many students enter the school year performing below grade level.”**

Reality: Measuring how much a student learns each year is the cornerstone of all K-12 education, not just A-F school grading. When enacted properly, A-F grades measure students’ growth and balances that growth with a measure of proficiency. Using both proficiency and growth provides a more complete picture of how the school is performing.

**[IN SOME STATES]** The A-F framework places greater emphasis on the learning growth of the lowest performing students in a school. Statistically speaking, every school has a lowest-performing 25 percent, even high-performing schools. Low-performing students come from all income levels, all races, all ethnicities and all curricular backgrounds, and they are found in all schools. Focusing on these lowest-performing students helps the ‘right’ kids get the extra attention and resources needed to catch up with their peers.
**Excuse: “Grades should only be based on the percentage of students performing at grade level.”**

Reality: If the accountability system only includes proficiency rates, then schools will not get credit for moving low-performing students toward proficiency. There would be less incentive to work with students who are behind and no incentive to work with students who have the potential to exceed expectations. Including both proficiency and growth provides a much clearer picture of the school’s overall impact on student learning.

**Excuse: “Students earn grades in each subject. Schools should earn a grade for each component, not just one overall grade.”**

Reality: Students do have an overall grade; it is their grade point average. Like a student’s grade point average, the school’s grade summarizes how well a school performed in each area. Assigning more than one grade to the school could create confusion or misinterpretation. For example, if a school earns an overall grade of “D,” but earns an “A” in a single component, some people may be inclined to highlight that “A” grade, even though it is not reflective of the overall school performance.
INTRODUCTION

A policy brief is a succinct, one-page summary of the state’s school grading policy, history and rationale. It assists with explaining essential information to your audiences and can be a helpful handout in workshops, meetings or information sessions as well as for providing basic facts to reporters. Graphics can be added to help tell the story.

SCHOOL GRADING DRIVES SUCCESS

The purpose of a school accountability system is to spur school improvement and increase student performance by providing transparent, objective information to parents, educators and the public about school effectiveness. A, B, C, D and F school grading recognizes success and exposes failure in a way that everyone can understand.

Parents deserve to know and understand how their child’s school is performing. School grading is often seen as “tough love” because it transparently identifies schools that are successful and those that are underperforming which allows parents and the public to easily compare schools. But this tough love approach allows schools to recognize and immediately address areas where they need to improve.

Federal law requires all states to publicly report school performance information. Many states use vague labels that are difficult to understand, such as “satisfactory” or “making progress,” and require an explanation. Letter grades do not need an explanation. Parents and the public understand the difference between an A and an F. This transparency is the catalyst for reform that improves student achievement. A-F letter grades are most effective when they are based on simple, objective measures of school performance.

In June 2014, Education Commission of the States published an influential report on the state of school report cards. In Rating States, Grading Schools: What Parents and Experts say States Should Consider to Make School Accountability Systems Meaningful, a panel of experts identified the following essential indicators of school effectiveness and concluded that every state report card should include them: student achievement, student academic growth, achievement gap closure, graduation rates and college and career readiness.
State Spotlight: Florida

- 1999: Florida passed the A+ Plan and first released school grades.
- 9: The number of times Florida has raised standards over the last 17 years on what it takes to earn an A, B, C, D or F.

A-F School Grading Across the Nation

ExcelinEd’s Fundamental Principles for School Grading

1. Use clear and transparent descriptors of A, B, C, D and F.
2. Include objective, concise student learning outcome measures.
4. Calculate student growth toward proficient and advanced achievement.
5. Focus attention on the learning growth of the lowest performing students.
6. Report results in a timely manner as close to the end of the school year as possible.
7. Communicate clearly to parents.
8. Establish rigorous criteria, with automatic increases, to earn A, B, C, D or F grades.
9. Use grades to identify schools for recognition, intervention and support.
Florida first released school grades in 1999. There were more “D” and “F” schools than there were “A” and “B” schools. But rather than placing blame or giving up, Florida educators and school leaders responded to the grades with focused efforts to improve those schools. They focused on the struggling students who, as a result, have made the most improvement. Today, student achievement is up across the board, and there are far more “A” and “B” schools than “D” and “F”. But success is never final, and reform is never finished. During the last 18 years, Florida has raised the bar on what is takes to earn an A, B, C, D or F nine times, making it far more rigorous. This proven, common sense reform has been adopted by Florida and 14 other states, paving the way to a more transparent system that raises expectations for all schools.

Schools that face accountability under an A-F system feel pressure to improve. The evidence shows that educators change their instructional policies and practices in meaningful ways, leading to improved student achievement and test scores.
INTRODUCTION

The following template and examples provide guidance for drafting a press release when your state is ready to announce A-F school grade results to the public. Be sure that your media team, administrators and others who will be answering reporters’ questions have been thoroughly briefed by your communications team, have read your communications materials and are ready to respond effectively.

A-F SCHOOL GRADES RELEASE DAY PRESS RELEASE TEMPLATE

Headline: New School Grades Demonstrate [STATE]’s Focus on Education is Paying Off for Students

[CITY, STATE], June 29, 2018 - Today, the [STATE] Department of Education released school grades for the 2017-18 school year and applauded [STATE]’s students and educators for contributing to significant improvement over last year.

Governor [NAME] said, “When I was growing up, I had access to a great public education which helped me achieve my goals and build a great career. Every student in [STATE] deserves the same opportunity. [STATE]ians should be proud of the continuous improvement of our K-12 schools. I am thankful for the dedicated teachers, students and parents who work every day to advance education in our schools.”

“I am incredibly proud of our state’s students, parents, teachers and leaders for their hard work, which led to these exceptional outcomes,” said Commissioner of Education [NAME]. “Today’s announcement is further evidence that [STATE]’s accountability system is integral to ensuring all students have access to the high-quality education they deserve. It is particularly important in identifying low-performing schools that need additional assistance to help their students reach their full potential. I am proud that more than [two-thirds] of the schools that were being monitored through the school improvement program improved to a C or better.”

The [STATE] Department of Education calculates school grades annually based on up to [XX] components, including student achievement and learning gains on statewide, standardized assessments, high school graduation rate [ADD ADDITIONAL STATE-SPECIFIC INDICATORS]. School grades provide parents and the public an easily understandable way to measure the performance of a school and understand how well each school is serving its students.

Statewide Highlights

- The percentage of schools earning an “A” or “B” increased to XX percent (X,XXX schools), up from XX percent (X,XXX schools) in 2016-17.
- Elementary schools saw the largest percentage point increase in “A” schools, with XX percent (XXX schools) of elementary schools earning an “A” in 2017-18, up from XX percent (XXX schools) in 2016-17.
- A total of XXX schools maintained an “A” grade (XXX schools) or increased their grade (XXX schools) in 2017-18.
- The number of “F” schools decreased by more than half (XX percent), dropping from XXX schools in 2016-17 to XXX schools in 2017-18.
Low-Performing Schools

- XX percent of schools that earned an “F” in 2016-17 improved by at least one letter grade in 2017-18.
- XX percent of schools that earned a “D” or “F” in 2016-17 improved by at least one letter grade in 2017-18.
- XX percent of the low-performing schools for which turnaround plans were presented before the State Board of Education in July 2017 improved to a C or greater.

In addition to school grades, the department also calculates district grades annually based on the same criteria. XX school districts improved their district grade from a “B” in 2016-17 to an “A” in 2017-18, and XX school districts improved their district grade from a “C” in 2016-17 to a “B” in 2017-18. XX of [STATE]’s XX school districts are now graded “A” or “B,” up from XX in 2016-17. Additionally, XX of [STATE]’s school districts have no “F” graded schools in 2017-18. For more information about school grades, visit [website].

**NORTH CAROLINA PRESS RELEASE EXAMPLE**

*Note: This example press release was distributed by ExcelinEd in support of North Carolina’s report card launch, which included the release of school grades.*

**Headline:** North Carolina Redesigns School Report Cards for Accountability, Transparency

Today, North Carolina State Superintendent Mark Johnson unveiled a complete redesign of the state’s school report card website that will provide clear, transparent information on local school performance to parents, teachers, students and communities statewide.

The new website, [SchoolReportCards.nc.gov](http://SchoolReportCards.nc.gov), was developed at the direction of Superintendent Johnson and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction following guidance from the North Carolina General Assembly. It draws on best practices from Florida, Georgia and other states, as well as the principles of ExcelinEd’s Know Your School initiative. Visitors to the site can use the convenient map or traditional search functions to easily find a wealth of information on individual schools, including A-F letter grades, test scores, graduation rates, teacher quality, demographics and school funding. The site also makes it easy to compare schools on a range of metrics.

“This brand-new website provides the transparency parents and educators need into the characteristics and performance of North Carolina’s public schools, all in an easy-to-use format,” said Mark Johnson, North Carolina State Superintendent. “As a parent, I believe this is the kind of information the public needs about our schools, in an accessible format we can all understand. As a former ninth-grade teacher, I am particularly excited to launch the school readiness indicator, which shows how prepared students are when they enter a school.”

“North Carolina has long been known for its strong school accountability system, but until today, parents often had to dig through pages of data to find out how their children’s schools were actually doing,” said Patricia Levesque, CEO of ExcelinEd. “Now, all of that information is available in one easy-to-browse page.
This is a tremendous step forward for anyone who wants to better understand how North Carolina schools are serving students.”

Learn more about ExcelinEd’s Know Your School Project or more about school accountability policies.

**SUPPORTING PARTNER PRESS RELEASE**

*Note: This is example press release that can be distributed by ExcelinEd or other partners in support of a state’s release of school grades.

**Headline:** ExcelinEd Commends [STATE] on Efforts to Refine A-F School Grading System

Since 201X, [STATE] has employed an A-F School Grading System to help spur improvement among all schools. Equally important, the grades provide critical information about school performance to parents, educators and the public. Today, the [STATE] State Board of Education began the process of refining that system to better serve students and schools.

“The quickest way to see results is to set goals that are demanding yet achievable. School grading systems do this quite effectively and [STATE]’s schools continue to meet the challenge by outpacing the nation when it comes to academic improvement. I commend the [STATE] Board of Education’s commitment to accountability and transparency and for taking the steps necessary to review, update and improve their school letter grading system. Most of all, I congratulate [STATE] educators for embracing this system and putting in the hard work to ensure [STATE]’s students continue to raise the bar,” said Patricia Levesque, CEO of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd).

ExcelinEd’s Senior Policy Fellow Dr. Christy Hovanetz presented how a state school grading accountability system can be improved to the Board today.

Most states use vague labels, such as “satisfactory” or “Level 1” to rate schools instead of offering parents, policymakers and the public transparent, objective information about school effectiveness. In 1999, Florida made the revolutionary decision to grade schools on an A-F scale just like students—no further explanation needed. Since that time 16 states adopted a similar system.

Behind the A-F simplicity is a data-driven system of accountability. ExcelinEd promotes an A-F School Grading policy that measures what matters: overall student performance and progress, with extra focus on struggling students, and graduation rates and college and career readiness in high school. School grading works by holding all schools to the same high expectations and clearly communicating the results to parents. For more information about school grades, visit [website].
QUOTES TO NOTE OR WHAT THEY ARE SAYING

*Note: Your press release can be supplemented with supporting quotes from stakeholders, parents, school administrators, legislators or partner groups. These can be included in your press release or sent as a separate release, as well as on webpages and parent communications. The following quotes are examples from past A-F School Grading releases and news articles.

**Headline: What They Are Saying About School Grades in [STATE]**

“The A through F is not the only answer to improving public education. But if you don't know what the actual state of learning is in your school, how can you begin to improve it?”


“The philosophy behind letter grades is to put more complete and meaningful information into the hands of parents,” said *Janet Barresi*, Oklahoma's superintendent of public instruction. She said the grades have “turbo charged” the discussion in her state around school quality.

—*Janet Barresi*, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Wall Street Journal*

Nikki Wilson, mother of an Eliot student, said the grades are easier to understand than former measurements. She praised the school and its teachers, and said she isn't sure whether the new grading system is fair. But she acknowledged the school district could do more to help students, especially low performers. "The blame goes to Tulsa," she said.


McDonnell called the proposed A-to-F grading scale a "simple but profound change" in the way Virginia rates schools. "Our school grading system is just really not that clear," said McDonnell. "It's one that's couched in some bureaucratic and somewhat incomprehensible language for parents to understand. It doesn't do justice, and it doesn't provide clarity for parents."

—*Bob McDonnell*, Governor of Virginia, *Associated Press*

“When the State Department of Education started assigning letter grades two years ago, Tuba City High School got a D. It could fall to the bottom or head higher. Begay chose to go higher. When he [Begay] was named superintendent, he pledged that the district would achieve the top letter grade of A.”

—*Mary Beth Faller*, Reporter, Arizona Central, *Referencing Harold Begay, Superintendent of Tuba City Unified School District (An Arizona school district on an American Indian Reservation), Arizona Central*

“Because of my experience in New Orleans, I consider letter grades to be amongst the best way to provide information to families. All of this makes me highly skeptical that NYC’s 16-18 page information packet on each school is going to help families make good decisions. Especially when it doesn’t include any kind of final rating. Without letter grades, families know significantly less about the quality of public schools. And when families know less about the quality of public schools, they end up sending their children to schools that will negatively affect their children’s life outcomes. This is why letter grades matter."

—*Neerav Kingsland*, Former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, relinquishment.org
“The A-F grading system in Florida has empowered parents to understand how each school is doing based on student learning and graduation rates — things that are really important to parents. The grades keep schools accountable and provide parents, students, educators and the community with an accurate picture of their local school's quality of education.

“We all need feedback to help us improve, and when schools earn a low grade, it matters. Teachers, school leaders, parents and students join together to work toward a clear, tangible goal. This drive creates a unified purpose — the yearning to accomplish something larger than ourselves.

“Holding schools accountable for student learning should not be viewed as a point of contention, but rather an invitation for improvement as well as an opportunity to learn from what is working in schools across the state. With the A-F grading system, teachers and schools are able to identify strengths, pinpoint weaknesses and home in to create a plan to improve learning.

“The bottom line is that A-F grading is universally understood. If a child is attending a D or F school, parents work to figure out how they can help that school improve, or they look for other options to meet the needs of their child. The grading system gives parents the tools to make these choices in their children’s education.

“When kids understand you have high expectations for them and a plan to help them reach those goals, they will work to meet the challenge. When schools know failure is not an option for your kids, they will, in turn, rise to meet their challenge.

“In the end, Florida’s school grades are about accountability, expecting great things from our students, and giving families and communities the chance to support their local schools. I’m one Florida parent who appreciates the honesty and transparency of the grades.”

—Brenda Duplantis, Parent in Kissimmee, FL & Disability Advocate for Hill & Ponton, P.A. law firm in Daytona Beach, FL, Orlando Sentinel
Example Op-eds
A-F School Grading
Communications Toolkit - 2018

OP-ED INTRODUCTION

Opinion editorials - op-eds - are a great way to emphasize a message, explain a position, advocate for action or challenge an opposing viewpoint. Most local newspapers accept op-ed submissions, usually selecting pieces for publication that are succinctly presented and relevant to current events or other recent coverage. To increase the chances for publication, op-eds should stay between 400 and 600 words.

The following templates can be used to customize op-ed submissions for regional or community newspapers.

- The first example is for a state that has recently implemented school grades for the first time.
- The second example, drawn from an actual release of grades in North Carolina, is for a state that has graded schools for several years.
- The third example could be used for first time release or for release of a newly updated set of grades.

TEMPLATE OP-ED FOR FIRST-TIME SCHOOL GRADES RELEASE

Title: Grades for Students, Grades for Schools

Everyone is invested in the quality of their local school—from students to local businesses. And in [STATE], it just became easier to understand how well individual schools are preparing students for success.

Last week, [STATE] released its first-ever A-F School Grades, meaning each public school (traditional and charter) earned an “A,” “B,” “C,” “D” or “F” label from the [STATE] Department of Education. At www.SchoolGrades[STATE].gov, you can find your school’s current grade, view its past performance (up to five years) and compare its results to other local schools or schools across the state.

[STATE]’s easy-to-understand A-F School Grading System was signed into law by Gov. [NAME] last year, replacing an outdated, complex system that did not give a true sense of a school’s standing, progress or lack of it. The new system will fuel educational improvement by measuring student achievement and providing transparency and accountability.

[STATE]’s A-F School Grades prioritize one of the top measures that matter: student achievement. It is imperative to clearly understand if students are learning a year’s worth of knowledge in a year’s time, and how well schools are closing learning gaps between student groups.

A-F School Grading places excellence over complacency and inspires immediate change. The end goal of education should be to prepare students for success. No one likes an “F” or “D” grade—everyone wants an “A.”

More than a dozen other states across the nation are already using A-F School Grades. These states have found that school grades create an urgency to improve learning and prompt entire communities to rally behind struggling schools.

[STATE], too, will discover that A-F School Grading makes it easy for educators, parents and communities to take strategic steps to improve schools needing help.
Further, A-F School Grading provides a mechanism to recognize great schools. High-performing schools deserve a real, tangible sign of their hard work—whether they earned another “A” grade or improved from a “D” to a “C.” Public attention around school grades inspires pride in successful schools, encourages low-performing schools to replicate the work of those successful schools and ignites a healthy, competitive spirit among schools seeking to better serve our kids.

Simply put, for education to be its best, parents need a clear indicator of how their child’s school is performing. [STATE]’s new A-F School Grading System does exactly that. This simple system takes a vast array of measures and presents it in a way that parents and community members can understand.

Communities and parents expect great things for their children, and A-F School Grading is one proven, cost-effective tool to improve education and ensure each [STATE] student graduates from high school ready to succeed.

I look forward to seeing [STATE] refine this system to improve education and brighten the futures of children across the state.

Author Byline
Word Count: 463

**EXAMPLE OP-ED FOR CONTINUING SCHOOL GRADES RELEASE**

**Title:** North Carolina Must Support Rigorous Expectations for Schools

Last week, the January jobs report looked positive, but the school grades for North Carolina? Not so much.

The two are related.

Beginning with jobs, the economy added 257,000 of them last month. The last three months, in fact, have been the strongest three months for job growth in 17 years.

But even so, the numbers could have been much better. There are companies desperate to hire and unemployed workers desperate to be hired. But the two are not getting together because of a skills mismatch.

The story can be summed up in two statistics. The overall unemployment rate is 5.7 percent but for college graduates it is less than half that. The Information Age is demanding educated, skilled workers, and there is an increasing shortage of them.

That impacts growth in the economy. And it impacts lives.

The pay gap between high school graduates and college graduates is at a 50-year high. It is a phenomenon that only will accelerate with the pace of technology. Government intervention does nothing more than address symptoms. It is not a structural cure.

And now we turn to school grades in North Carolina. Most of the schools that earned a D or F contained predominantly low-income students. Most of schools that earned an A or B contained more affluent students.

How unfair, we are told, to compare the advantaged with the disadvantaged using the same measuring stick.
This was the headline in The News & Observer: “NC public school letter grades reflect wealth of students’ families.”

Critics complain schools are stigmatized for factors out of their control. And so, we should in effect, cut them some slack by getting rid of a grading system rigged against them.

Unfortunately, the students in those schools won’t get cut any slack when they leave school. They either will have the knowledge to further their education and participate in the economy. Or they will not. A company that needs a skill set will not care about the circumstances of a potential employee’s life, just what he or she knows and can do.

What these students learn in school determines that. It determines their futures. And if they are to succeed, what they need to learn is no different than what the kids in the more affluent schools need to learn.

We cannot create different expectations in the classroom for students who will have to meet the same expectations when they leave the classroom.

That is why the same grading system must apply to all schools. For those who consider this harsh or unfair, consider the life outcome of children ushered through an education system that often preordains them to life in unskilled jobs.

The D and F grades do more than point out a sad reality. They create urgency to address it.

Urgency drives results, as we have seen from the countless number of low-income schools that are succeeding in states across the country, using new approaches such as digital technology to assess student abilities and growth, and to provide them personalized education plans.

It is amazing what happens when strong leaders and dedicated teachers create a new culture of success in once failing schools.

We cannot hide from the difficult journey ahead, particularly when we know that in this case, the difficult is entirely possible.

Author Byline
Word Count: 549
**ADDITIONAL EXAMPLE OP-ED FOR SCHOOL GRADES RELEASE**

*Note: Please add state-specific content to increase word count. If kept to 250-word length, this could also run as a letter to editor.*

**Title: A-F School Grading Empowers Parents, Leads to Academic Improvement**

Community engagement is essential to the success of local schools, yet parents are often left in the dark about how their child’s school is performing.

Without vital information, how can parents celebrate their school’s success or call on school leaders to improve? The simple answer is that they can’t — but with the right information they can.

Beginning [DATE], under the leadership of [GOVERNOR AND/OR LEGISLATIVE LEADERS], [STATE] families will have A-F letter grades for their child’s schools, providing information about how students are achieving and progressing in math and reading and graduating college and career ready.

Because grading schools A-F is like a child’s report card, parents intuitively understand that an A represents success and an F represents a need for immediate help.

More than a dozen other states have implemented A-F school grading and have seen improvements in student outcomes after making the school grades public.

That’s because when underperforming schools are identified, leaders can direct the necessary resources to help students in those schools, and communities can rally to get their school back on track.

When parents, school leaders and the community are on the same page, students win.

[STATE] leaders were right to embrace an A-F grading policy, which has a national track record of empowering parents and driving significant improvements for students.

The upcoming release of A-F grades is an opportunity for school leaders to recommit themselves to providing a quality education to each and every [STATE] child. The future of the state depends on it.

**Author Byline**

Word Count: 250
**INTRODUCTION**

Writing a letter to the editor (LTE) of your local or regional newspaper is an effective and easy way to reach a large audience with your message. LTEs are published on the editorial page, which is one of the most read sections in the paper. They are a vehicle for responding to a news article or editorial that has been published already. Note that many newspapers do not publish LTEs responding to LTEs. Letters should be focused on one message to promote or refute an issue. They should be submitted timely and be between 200 and 300 words.

**EXAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Dear Editor,

Families deserve the truth from school grades. States have upgraded their academic standards, assessments, and now, their accountability system for compliance with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) starting with the 2017-18 school year.

When expectations increase, student test scores and school grades will decrease. But once educators and students adapt to the higher expectations; the scores and grades will trend upward.

We drive better academic outcomes—through a continuous but realistic raising of the academic bar.

School superintendents have complained that a sudden drop in grades delivers the wrong message to the public—that the quality of their schools has declined. In fact, students could be performing better and schools still could see grades drop.

Schools work hard to improve their grades and have grown comfortable with what it takes to earn an A so it is hard to raise expectations.

But the alternative is stagnant student outcomes. We must ensure all students are ready for college, a career, and life after high school. Right now, as college entrance exams reveal and as employers are telling us, we are falling woefully short of that goal.

If expectations are low, and the grades are inflated, parents are being misled and the pressure for school improvement is diminished.

Hiding under the guise of compassion—not wanting to stigmatize the students—takes us back to the soft bigotry of low expectations.

When these students graduate, they will have to compete globally. They will have to have the same knowledge and skills, or they will get left out. If they are far off track in getting there, that is not information we should hide or dilute. Instead we should acknowledge it and act on it.

Author Byline
Word Count: 285
Example Parent Letter

A-F School Grading
Communications Toolkit - 2018

INTRODUCTION

A suite of materials directed at parents will help explain the concept of school grading, why this policy is good for the school, district and state and outline next steps and ways to help.

The following parent letter example can serve as inspiration in drafting parent-centered materials.

PARENT LETTER EXAMPLE

Dear Parent,

Our school recently earned its new letter grade from the state department of education as part of the state’s A-F School Grading System. [SCHOOL NAME] earned a [GRADE] this year. The grade [improved/declined/maintained] from last year.

[A SCHOOLS: This is a moment to celebrate, and represents a significant accomplishment for our school community. As educators, parents and students, we can take pride in this achievement. We have done well, but this is also a time to continue to strive for excellence. Though our grade is an A, there is always room for improvement. We are looking ahead to plans for sustaining our A and building upon it. We will continue to work hard to improve student learning next year.]

[IMPROVED GRADE, NOT AN A: This is a moment to celebrate, and represents a significant accomplishment for our school community. As educators, parents and students, we can take pride in this achievement. We have done well, but this is also a time to continue to strive for excellence. Though our grade improved from last year, there is room for improvement. We are looking ahead to plans for earning an A and building upon our current success.]

INSERT SCHOOL-SPECIFIC INFORMATION ON AREAS WHERE THE SCHOOL NEEDS THE MOST IMPROVEMENT AND ON SPECIFIC THINGS THE SCHOOL WILL DO TO ADDRESS THOSE AREAS.]

[D/F SCHOOLS: This year’s school grade highlights areas where we will focus school improvement plans and professional development efforts. The Department of Education will be providing additional resources and expertise to implement strategies focused on improving student outcomes. While we are disappointed in our grade, we are already working hard to improve student outcomes, and our grade, next year.

INSERT SCHOOL-SPECIFIC INFORMATION ON AREAS WHERE THE SCHOOL NEEDS THE MOST IMPROVEMENT AND ON SPECIFIC THINGS THE SCHOOL WILL DO TO ADDRESS THOSE AREAS.]

Though we would all agree that there is more to a school than its letter grade, our letter grade is important for several reasons. It reflects the test results of all our students, student improvement over time as well as graduation rates and the performance of our English learners. Our grade gives us a clear indication of what we are doing well and where we need improvement.

As parents, you can help play a role in the grade our school earns. You can assist by supporting and reinforcing the hard work needed by your student to learn the knowledge and skills taught in school. In addition, where you see weak areas in our school’s student achievement or graduation outcomes, help us shore up those areas by offering mentoring assistance. As always, we need volunteers to help in a classroom
or in the media center at our school. Attend school functions. Communicate with us about your child’s needs.

Together we can strive for excellence in all areas of education. Together we can raise this grade. To learn more and find detailed information on your school’s grade, visit: [website].

Sincerely,
[PRINCIPAL or SUPERINTENDENT]
INTRODUCTION

Social Media can amplify your A-F school grading messages. Key audiences include parents, educators, media, educational organizations and legislators or elected officials. Content repetition is key to making an impact. When applicable, utilizing visuals such as graphics or stock images help to engage with your key audiences. When developing content, be sure to use facts and numbers to tell your story. Finally, it is helpful to use hashtags such as #schoolgrading, #WednesdayWisdom, #FactFriday and #DYK (Did You Know).

TWITTER

• For education to be its best, parents need an honest indicator of how their child’s school is performing. [STATE]’s new A-F #SchoolGrading System does exactly that.
• By grading schools with simple A, B, C, D and F labels that everyone understands, [STATE] will be able to recognize effective schools and provide meaningful assistance to those that are not meeting expectations.
• [STATE] joins 14 other states in grading schools A-F.
• While the new A-F #schoolgrading system provides more accountability and transparency in education, it is not perfect. Parents, teachers and community leaders must continue to work together to refine the system to improve student achievement.
• A-F #schoolgrading takes encouraging steps forward for school #accountability and #transparency.
• Parents and the community deserve to know and understand how their schools are performing. A-F #schoolgrading provides that.
• Accountability should not be confusing. A-F #schoolgrading holds all schools accountable and provides transparency.
• A-F #schoolgrading measures what matters, student achievement.
• In an A-F system, lower performing schools are easily identified and communities rally around them to help raise student achievement.
• [STATE] will release school grades on [DATE], visit www.schoolgrades.com to see your school's grade.
• [STATE] has more A and B schools in 2018 than any other year. Congrats, students are the winners!
• Today [STATE] has released school grades. These grades are a conversation starter & encourages community engagement which is essential to the success of our schools.
• [STATE] school grades have been released! Visit [insert website] to see if your school made the grade.
• Today’s school grades release shows that [STATE] is succeeding! Let’s continue to raise the bar for student success.

FACEBOOK

• Today [STATE] has released school grades. These grades are a conversation starter & encourages community engagement which is essential to the success of our schools. Learn more at [insert website].
• School report cards provide vital school data and empower parents to engage with teachers, their school and their community.
**LinkedIn**

- Consider posting a blog by the Superintendent.

**Example Graphics**

School report cards provide vital school data and empower parents to engage with teachers, their school and their community.

Our school report cards were designed so parents can easily access data in a format that everyone can understand.
INTRODUCTION

Some states choose to develop their own logo specific to school grading or school report cards to help positively define and brand school grades.

LOGOS

![Florida School Grades Logo](image1)

![School and Early Childhood Program Performance](image2)

![North Carolina School Report Cards Logo](image3)

![A-F Oklahoma State Department of Education Logo](image4)
INTRODUCTION

Many states have developed materials to share information about their A-F school grading system. Below are links to select example materials from states that have previously released A-F school grades. These materials may help generate ideas for user-friendly tools that can inform parents and other stakeholders with easy-to-understand, actionable information about school performance.

RESOURCES

Florida

- FL School Grades Overview 2017

- FL School Grades Calculation Guide 2017

- FL School Grades Results Packet 2017

Georgia

- Schools Like Mine
  https://schoolslikemine.gosa.ga.gov/

- Demographics ≠ Destiny
  https://gosa.georgia.gov/demographics-do-not-equal-destiny

- Georgia’s School Grades Reports
  https://gosa.georgia.gov/georgia-school-grades-reports
  https://schoolslikemine.gosa.ga.gov/

Indiana

- Indiana Student Centered Accountability System FAQs

- History of Indiana’s Accountability System
  https://www.doe.in.gov/accountability/history-indiana%E2%80%99s-accountability-system

Louisiana

- School Performance Score Video
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkAynneG7TU&feature=youtu.be

- Louisiana Believes School Reports
**Mississippi**
- Mississippi School and District Grading System Explainer

**New Mexico**
- New Mexico A-F School Grading Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
  [https://aae.ped.state.nm.us/docs/School_Grading_FAQ_V2.0.pdf](https://aae.ped.state.nm.us/docs/School_Grading_FAQ_V2.0.pdf)

**North Carolina**
- North Carolina Report Cards

**Oklahoma**
- Oklahoma A-F District Communications Toolkit
  [https://okeducationtruths.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/a-f-district-communications-toolkit.pdf](https://okeducationtruths.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/a-f-district-communications-toolkit.pdf)

**West Virginia**
- West Virginia’s A through F School Grading System FAQs
- West Virginia A-F Infographic

**Know Your School Website**

ExcelinEd’s Know Your School website is an innovative model state online school report card, designed for parents and the community to easily access information about their schools. This functioning prototype can be easily replicated by other states interested in increasing transparency and public understanding of school accountability measures. The website is designed to give states a road map to achieve excellence in public reporting.

- Intro Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8XPabVSeF8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8XPabVSeF8)
- Website: [https://knowyourfloridaschool.org/](https://knowyourfloridaschool.org/)
INTRODUCTION

This document was created to be a resource for state education departments, governors’ offices and supportive advocacy organizations as they go through the important process of releasing A-F school grades for the first time under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The questions posed here, though not exhaustive, have been common in states that have released school grade results.

Did the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) change the A-F school accountability calculation?

List the changes made to your state’s A-F grading system for 2017-18 to comply with ESSA requirements. Explain the rationale for making the changes.

• Explain how the English language progress and school quality or student success indicators are included for A-F school grading.

NOTES:
What is the purpose of school accountability?

Identify and define the purpose of school accountability in your state, this will be used as a reference for all future communications materials.

- To define and measure what matters, then clearly communicate results.

NOTES:
Who needs to know about school grades?

The audience for school grade results is broad and diverse. List specific individuals, groups, committees and organizations that are interested in school grade results in your state.

- Families
- Public
- Educators
  - District leaders
  - School leaders
  - Teachers
- Education organizations
- Legislators on education committees
- Governor’s Office
- State Board of Education
- Other Policymakers
- Advocacy organizations
- Business groups
- Media
- Higher Ed
- Realtors
- Faith Based Community
- Candidates
- Philanthropies and Foundations
- School Foundations
- Retired state superintendents
- Other teacher groups

Identify audience members that will be part of your coalition.

NOTES:
What do they need to know about school grades?

The information needed about school grades varies by audience. List the specific types of information needed by audience. Focus on the big picture as well as discussions and commentary that have already percolated in conversations and the media.

Everyone will need to know:

- Purpose of School Grades: Why school grades are important
- How school grades are calculated and changes have been made from prior years
- The results and an interpretation of the results
- What will be done to help schools

Specifics:

- Families: How to talk to their child’s teacher and principal about the grade, what is being done for their child, how they can help at home.
- Educators: Technical information on how calculations are performed and data used for the calculations.
- Governor’s Office Staff: Any impact on policy and projected constituent concerns with suggested responses.
- State Board of Education Members: Any impact on policy.
- Legislators on education committees, leadership, sponsors: Any impact on policy and projected constituent concerns with suggested responses. How to talk with other legislators about school grades.
- Legislators: School grades for schools in their legislative districts with talking points.
- Advocacy organizations: How these results compliment their efforts for reform and how they may be able to help you in messaging the results.
- Media - All of the above.

NOTES:
Anticipating Key Opposition Points

Opponents will cite various reasons for not wanting school grading in your state. What controversial conversations need to take place or should be ignored? Start listing the reasons you have encountered thus far and begin developing a message addressing the opposition.

Example opposition points heard in A-F states:

- “There is no evidence that A-F school grading works.”
- “There’s a lot more to a school’s performance than a letter grade.”
- “This policy is biased against our low-income schools, which face more difficult situations than more affluent schools.”
- “School grading is a reform that originated in Florida when the state had one of the worst education systems in the country. Why should our state, which already has a better reputation, do something different?”
- “It is unfair to grade schools because it hurts the self-esteem of the students who attend a D or F school.”
- “We should not rush this. School grading sounds good, but it is a complicated issue.”
- “An F school grade means F teachers.”
- “These grades will demoralize our hardworking educators at a time when public schools are already being asked to do more for our students.”
- “A-F school grading is just an excuse to justify diverting students from their neighborhood district schools to private or charter schools instead.”
- “A-F school grading undermines local decision-making and community engagement.”
- “A-F school grading creates unnecessary mandates on schools and undermines local control.”
- “Growth should be the only thing that counts in a school’s grade especially since so many students enter the school year performing below grade level.”
- “Grades should only be based on the percentage of students performing at grade level.”
- “Students earn grades in each subject. Schools should earn a grade for each component, not just one overall grade.”

NOTES:
How will you tell them about school grades?

Different modes of communication are necessary to reach the entire audience. Make a list of the specific materials that need to be created for communicating with different audiences.

Examples of vehicles that reach a broad audience:

- Press release to news outlets resulting in coverage
- Press conference or event
- Website
- Webinar
- Social media
- School marquee

Specifcics:

- Families: School specific letter and results briefing document or graphic to parents.
- Educators: Technical paper on how school grades are calculated and associated data.
- Education organizations: Pre-release meetings, one-pager on calculation, changes and results.
- Governor’s Office Staff: One-on-one pre-release meetings, one-pager on calculation, changes and results.
- State Board of Education Members: One-on-one pre-release meetings, one-pager on calculation, changes and results.
- Legislators on education committees, leadership, sponsors: One-on-one pre-release meetings, one-pager on calculation, changes and results.
- Advocacy organizations: Pre-release meetings, one-pager on calculation, changes and results
- Media: Embargoed press release with one-pager on calculation, changes and results and interviews with Superintendent and experts on background before releases, interviews on-record day of release, at events and beyond.

NOTES:
When will you tell them about school grades?

Giving information in advance of the public release supports messaging. Create a timeline specifying the order and how far in advance of the release different audiences will be briefed.

- Governor’s Office Staff: 24-72 hours before the public release
- State Board of Education Members: 24-72 hours before the public release
- Legislators on education committees, leadership and sponsors: 24-72 hours before the public release
- Advocacy organizations, specifically those supportive of school grades: 24 hours before the public release
- Media: 24-48 hours before the public release
- Educators
  - District leaders: 48 hours before the public release
  - Teachers and School leaders - at the district’s discretion
- Families: day of the public release
- Public: day of the public release
- Education organizations: 24 hours before the public release
- Other Policymakers and stakeholders: as needed

NOTES:
Where will you tell them about school grades?

Events can help promote the importance of school grades. Identify presenters, events and locations for announcing school grades in your state. Begin detailing the process for inviting, settings. Consider these suggestions:

Press Conference or Town Hall Meeting

- Timing: Morning is best
- Location: Consider a school
- Participants and Messages: Who will talk and what are their specific messages?
  - Governor/Superintendent highlighting successes
  - Policy Director briefing on data
  - Principal or teacher providing example of improvement
  - Business that works with schools
  - Parent highlighting how transparency helps them help their school
  - Student representatives on successes or helping to improve their school
- Press packet to include press release, data, remarks as prepared and other information
- Event Logistics: Visual aids, A/V needs, etc.

School Visits by Governor, Legislator, Superintendent or Other Dignitary

- Timing: Consider day-of or week-of grades release
- Location: Consider largest media markets with High poverty schools earning an A, charter schools earning an A, schools earning an F (to show support and highlight resources available), schools improving a letter grade or two from the prior year (if minimal changes to the system)
  - Consider visiting multiple schools, in multiple areas in one day (Fly around day)
- Participants: Consider the Governor, Lt. Governor, Legislators, Superintendent, school board, principals, teachers, business leaders, students and parents.
- What is the hook? School tour, participating in a class, presenting school with award or recognition check, etc.
- Ongoing commitment: Visit low performing schools throughout the year to encourage or highlight improvement.

NOTES:
**Why are school grades important?**

Improving student outcomes is the fundamental purpose of school grades. Provide an explanation with supporting evidence to demonstrate the importance of school grades in your state. You can use this example in any or all the following communication vehicles.

- Blog
- Op-ed
- Policy talking points
- Research and data evidence
- Individual success stories
- Summary one-pager
- FAQs
- Marquee

**NOTES:**
**Next Steps**

- How often will support and intervention team visit schools once grades are released?
- How often will the Department communicate with Superintendents throughout the year to discuss challenges and successes?
- How will the outreach team work with parents to get input on working with D and F schools?

**NOTES:**
Behind the Scenes

- How many mock data runs will be performed, and for what will they be used?
- How will accuracy be ensured in district-reported data?
- What will school report card include/look like? (develop with Communications team)
- Will there be an appeals process?
  - What pieces of the grade are allowable for recalculation?
  - Will there be a deadline for districts to submit an appeal on behalf of a school?
  - Will the Superintendent have final approval on if a school grade is changed?

NOTES: