



Arizona State Board of Education

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FAQ: How Arizona's A-F Letter Grades for Schools Work

Why does Arizona have an A-F System of grading schools?

Federal and state law require it. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to measure school performance. State law mandates the A-F letter grade system, which is based on a range of quantitative measures including the AzMERIT test.

What purpose does the A-F System serve?

It gives parents a yardstick to compare schools. It gives school leaders a snapshot of where they are doing well and where they need to improve. It creates an incentive for the constant improvement that parents, taxpayers and state leaders expect from our public schools.

When will grades for 2017-2018 be released?

The Board directed the Arizona Department of Education to release A-F Letter Grades for the 2017-2018 school year by Oct. 5, 2018.

How are the grades assigned?

School districts compile test scores and other measures and submit them to the Arizona Department of Education. The Arizona State Board of Education sets "cut scores," the number of points required to earn an A, B, C or D. The Department then calculates the letter grades using the cut scores and the data submitted by schools.

What do the grades measure?

Five quantifiable factors go into the grades.

- Student growth from year to year, or, for high-performing students, maintenance of top achievement. Individual students are compared year to year, rather than comparing one class to the previous year's class. For elementary schools, growth accounts for 50% of a school's grade. For high schools, it is 20%.
- Proficiency on AzMERIT.
- English language proficiency and growth.
- Indicators that an elementary student is ready for success in high school, and that high school students are ready for success in a career or higher education.
- High school graduation rates.

Are these factors important to anyone else?

Yes. The indicators are aligned with the Arizona Education Progress Meter and Achieve60AZ's goals for third-grade reading ability, preparation for advanced math in middle school and high school graduation rates. We're all working to motivate academic improvement.



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You mentioned “quantitative data.” Why is that significant?

The A-F grades are based on elements of success that can be objectively measured – quantitative data. Any observer can look at a test score and know what it means, or measure the change in a test score from one year to the next. “Qualitative data” such as awards earned, the perceived quality of a music program or PTA involvement is subjective. Because these factors are open to interpretation, they’re not included in the letter-grade system (federal and state law also limit what kind of measures can be used). Parents, though, may want to consider such variables when deciding if a school is right for their child.

Why do the grades put so much emphasis on growth?

Arizona has an achievement gap. Some students show up on the first day of classes a full year or more behind grade level. For every student to succeed – the point of the federal law – the A-F system rewards schools and teachers who accelerate their students’ achievement. A grading system that measured only end-of-the-year test scores without considering where the student began the year would be unfair.

Is this system unfair to schools with large numbers of high achievers?

Schools receive growth credit for keeping top students performing at highly proficient levels. They also get credit for high test scores. With the change the Board made to the growth calculation in Spring 2018, high-achieving students who maintain their high level of performance will receive full points.

What does each letter grade mean?

A (excellent): Distinguished performance on the statewide assessment, significant student growth, high four-year graduation rates, students on track to proficiency; overall performance is significantly higher than state average.

B (highly performing): High performance on statewide assessment and/or significant student growth and/or higher four-year graduation rates and/or moving students to proficiency at a higher rate than the state average.

C (performing): Adequate performance but needs improvement on some indicators, such as proficiency, growth or graduation rate.

D (minimally performing): Inadequate performance in proficiency, growth and/or four-year graduation rate relative to the state average.

F (failing): Systematic failures in proficiency, growth and graduation rates (below 67%); performance is in bottom 5% of the state.

What happens to D and F schools?

The A-F Accountability System is not designed to stigmatize schools but rather to help the state identify which ones need support. The Arizona Department of Education partners



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with D and F schools to improve their A-F ranking through the development and implementation of comprehensive, targeted improvement plans. D and F schools are potentially eligible for additional federal funds.

What should parents do with these grades?

The grades measure critical areas key to any student's success in school and career – mastery of math and language arts and their readiness to move on. These are important considerations in choosing a school, but they're not the only ones. Qualitative measures, which will vary in importance from family to family, should also be considered. Some students thrive in a small school, while others seek the wide range of options a larger school offers. If art or music, for instance, are important to a family, they should consider those factors when choosing a school.

Do other states use this kind of system?

Fourteen states use A-F letter grades, and 31 states use a singular rating employing other terms.

What laws require an accountability system?

In state law, ARS 15-241. In federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act.

How was the framework developed?

Senate Bill 1430, passed in 2016, set the overall structure for the current A-F letter grades. An A-F Ad Hoc Committee was created to fill in the details. It included education representatives from the State Board of Education, traditional public schools and charter schools; parents, policy advocates and a representative from the governor's office. The committee held 17 public hearings, 10 open houses and gathered input through surveys of nearly 2,000 people.

The Board has continued to field input from Arizona educators, national experts and the public to continuously improve the A-F framework. In May 2018, five changes were made to enhance the system while providing consistency in the expectations of schools and students. The most important of those changes include:

- Lowering the minimum student count number (n-count) from 20 to 10; and
- Awarding full points in the growth calculation to students with average or expected growth.

These changes will include more students in a school's letter grade calculation and more fairly award points for students who achieve a year's worth of growth.



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The Legislature made changes in its last session. How will school grades be assessed in 2018-19?

Lawmakers made two significant changes:

- They mandated that schools receive a letter grade for each of the five quantifiable factors (see question 4 above), as well as an overall grade.
- They allowed schools to choose from a Menu of Assessments in addition to the AzMERIT test. The board is doing a pilot project with a few high schools who have chosen the ACT or SAT as their alternative test, and is working on the details of how to account for a variety of test scores in determining letter grades for the 2018-19 school year and beyond.