



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.

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.

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,



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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 are grades for 2016-17 just now being released?

Previously, A-F scores were based on AIMS tests results. The more rigorous AzMERIT test replaced that test, and the Legislature placed a moratorium on letter grades from 2014-16 to allow teachers and students to adjust to the new test. The 2016-17 grades are the first under the new system. The first results were released in the fall, and the experience was similar to what happens when Microsoft or Apple releases a new operating system: the real world revealed bugs that needed to be worked out. A technical advisory committee gathered input and suggested changes. Now that the committee's work is done, the board is setting cut scores for each letter grade. Going forward, we expect to release grades as a new school year begins.

Was the public involved in suggesting improvements?

Definitely. We sought input through every phase of developing the letter grades, using surveys returned by nearly 2,000 people, hosting 10 open houses, 17 public meetings and giving school leaders ample opportunity to provide input.

What has changed since last fall?

Eight changes fixed bugs identified with the release of the preliminary scores. The two that affected the largest number of students:

- Correcting coding to properly award points for students recording high growth scores.
- Creating a new, hybrid model for the 108 mostly rural and charter school sites with non-typical configurations, most often combining K-12 in a single building.

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. We have heard this criticism and will continue to refine the grading rubric to address it.



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Why are the cut scores falling by a few points? How is a score in the 80s an A?

This is a new grading system for Arizona, based on a test that is far more rigorous than AIMS. Schools and students are still adjusting to it. Research has shown that it takes at least five years to get good assessment data. The State Board of Education wants to recognize where schools are on this journey and acknowledge those that are doing a good job.

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 will partner 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.

Are more changes coming?

Yes. Just as we expect schools to constantly evolve and improve, we are constantly looking for ways to improve our performance in assessing schools.



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What are you looking at?

Federal law requires us to make three changes to the 2017-18 accountability system, including removing the science assessment from the proficiency calculation. We'll look for a way to award bonus points for science proficiency scores. Apart from federal requirements, we will continue to study and refine as necessary the relative weights for growth and proficiency, seeking to make the system as fair as possible for all schools. We'll also look at lowering the minimum number of students in a subgroup for their scores to be included in a school's results; some educators say the current student number of 20 is too high.

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 school board, traditional public schools and charter schools; parents, policy advocates and a representative from the governor's office. The committee held 17 public hearings and gathered input via surveys. After preliminary grades were released, the committee continued to refine the framework. The committee's work is done, so it will sunset.

Would a dashboard give a more complete picture of a school?

A bill being debated in the Legislature would require a dashboard, showing a variety of measures for a school. Whether that is an improvement is a matter for elected lawmakers to decide. We will implement whatever they require.