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Grading Arkansas' Schools

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Summary Points

- Arkansas schools have been assigned A-F letter grades.
- The letter grades are intended to make it easier for parents to understand how schools are performing.
- Fifteen percent of Arkansas school received an “A”, but most Arkansas schools (66%) received a “B” or “C”.
- The letter grades represent four components of academic performance.
- The letter grades differentiate between schools more effectively than the ESEA “Achieving/ Needs Improvement” system.
- The average achievement gaps between at-risk and not at-risk students are between 15 and 20 percentage points.
- A school’s letter grade can be impacted by the achievement gap between at-risk and not at-risk students.
- Details about the grades are not available to the public, so schools should inform communities about areas of success and opportunities for growth.

Grading Arkansas’ Schools

Report Cards for Arkansas schools released by the Arkansas Department of Education contain valuable information for stakeholders. As in past years, the report cards outline student demographics and academic achievement, as well as rates of attendance, graduation, dropout, grade inflation and college remediation. Report cards also contain information on teacher quality and school environment indicators. There are a few new pieces of information provided this year, specifically a school rating which assigns a letter grade to schools.

What’s in a Grade?

A letter grade of A-F is commonly assigned to students throughout their education to represent how well they are performing academically. Act 696 of 2013 requires letter grades be assigned to Arkansas public schools to help parents understand how well schools are performing.

This Brief

- What’s in a Grade? P.1
- Grading Components P.2
- What Isn’t Graded P.3
- Summary Findings P.4
- Policy Recommendations P.5

As shown in Figure 1, fifteen percent of Arkansas schools received an “A”, but the majority of Arkansas schools (66%) received a grade of “B” or “C”. Fifteen percent of schools received a “D” and four percent received an “F”.

Similar to the letter grades a student receives from their teachers, school letter grades are an overview of several different performance measures. To accurately interpret the grade, it is important to understand the different components of the grading system. Specifically, letter grades for schools represent four main indicators of school performance, and each component is explained in the following brief.

Figure 1: Number of Arkansas Schools by 2014 Letter Grade



Grading Components

By analogy, the letter grade for a student in school may represent test scores, homework completion, classroom participation, and extra credit. Similarly, letter grades for schools represent four main indicators of school performance.

Part 1: Weighted Performance Score

The weighted performance score awards schools points for student achievement on state assessments in literacy and math. The central aspect of a school’s letter grade is derived from the students’ performance levels; more points are awarded for students that meet higher performance standards.

This metric of school performance is familiar to stakeholders but has a new twist for the letter grade calculation. While still based on the four performance levels assigned on state exams in literacy and mathematics (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient and Advanced), the new calculation captures a broader spectrum of student achievement than the traditional “Percent Proficient” measures.

Table 1: Comparison of Weighted Performance Score versus Percent Proficient

Performance Level	Number of Students: School A	Weighted Performance Score School A	% Proficient: School A	Number of Students: School B	Weighted Performance Score School B	% Proficient: School B
Below Basic	10	10 * 0.00 pts = 0 pts	0	0	0 * 0.00 pts = 0.00 pts	0
Basic	20	20 * 0.25 pts = 5 pts	0	30	30 * 0.25 pts = 7.5 pts	0
Proficient	50	50 * 1.00 pt = 50 pts	50	20	20 * 1.00 pt = 20.0 pts	20
Advanced	20	20 * 1.25 pts = 25 pts	20	50	50 * 1.25 pts = 62.5 pts	50
	100 students	80 points	70% proficient	100 students	90 points	70% proficient

The impact of a weighted performance score can be seen in the example of two schools presented in Table 1. Under the traditional percent proficient calculation, both schools would have 70% of students proficient, but using the weighted performance score, School B is awarded more points than School A. School B is awarded more points because its students performed at higher levels than the students at School A.

Part 2: Improvement Score (ESEA Accountability)

The improvement score awards schools points for each annual performance target met in 2014. Arkansas schools have annual performance targets for academic performance and, where applicable, graduation rates. Target attainment is examined for two groups: all students and TAGG (Targeted Achievement Gap Group) students. TAGG students are those students at-risk for lower performance because they are economically disadvantaged and/or have been identified as special education or limited English proficient.

It is important to note that these school performance targets are individualized for each school by student group and content area. There are a variety of ways for schools to meet the targets. Schools can meet these performance targets through one-year performance or a three-year average. Schools can meet academic performance targets by the percent of students scoring proficient/advanced in literacy and math or by the percent of students making enough academic growth from year to year. In addition, schools performing in the top 10% of the state annually automatically meet the targets.

Weighted Performance Score

Awards school points for each student score. Students that meet higher standards are awarded more points.

Below Basic: 0.00 points

Basic: 0.25 points

Proficient: 1.00 point

Advanced: 1.25 points

Scores could range from 0 (if all students score Below Basic) to 1.25 (if all students score Advanced)

Improvement Score

Awards schools points for meeting annual performance targets. Most high schools have six targets and most other schools have four.

Literacy proficiency or growth:
all students

at-risk (TAGG) students

Math proficiency or growth:
all students

at-risk (TAGG) students

Graduation Rate (if applicable):
all students

at-risk (TAGG) students

Scores range from 55 (if no targets were met) to 95 (if all targets were met).

Part 3: Achievement Gap Adjustment

The achievement gap adjustment assigns a bonus to schools with a smaller than average achievement gap and a penalty schools to schools with a larger than average achievement gap. An achievement gap is the difference in academic performance between students with certain risk factors and the performance of their peers who do not have those characteristics. Students who are economically disadvantaged (identified as special education and/or limited English proficient) are at greatest risk for falling behind the achievement of their peers who do not have those characteristics. In Arkansas education accountability, at-risk students are referred to as TAGG.

The average achievement gap in the state is between 15.93 and 19.52 percentage points. Schools with a gap of less than 12 percentage points get a bonus of 6 points added to their Weighted Performance Score. Schools with gaps larger than 23.86 percentage points have 6 points subtracted from their grade. Schools with fewer than 25 TAGG or non-TAGG students are assigned a value of 0 for the achievement gap. This achievement gap calculation is new for Arkansas schools and can serve to highlight disparate achievement patterns for groups of students and help schools identify areas for improvement.

Part 4: Graduation Rate and Gap Adjustment (where applicable)

The overall graduation rate is calculated for high schools, and a bonus or penalty is assigned to schools based upon their graduation gap. Arkansas schools that graduate students have an additional measure of performance based on their graduation rate. The overall graduation rate is included, and schools with smaller than average graduation gaps are awarded a bonus, while schools with larger than average graduation gaps receive a penalty.

The graduation gap is the difference in graduation rates between students with certain risk factors and the graduation rates of their peers who do not have those characteristics. Students who are economically disadvantaged (identified as special education and/or limited English proficient) are at greatest risk for falling behind the achievement of their peers who do not have those characteristics. In Arkansas education accountability, at-risk students are referred to as TAGG (Targeted Achievement Gap Group).

The average graduation gap in the state falls between 6.90 and 10.74 percentage points. Schools with a gap of less than 3.66 percentage points get a bonus of 6 points added to their Weighted Performance Score. Schools with gaps larger than 16.21 percentage points have 6 points subtracted from their grade. Schools with fewer than 25 TAGG or non-TAGG students are assigned a value of 0 for the graduation gap. This graduation gap calculation is new for Arkansas schools and can serve to highlight disparate achievement patterns for groups of students and help schools identify areas for improvement.

What Isn't Graded

Although there are several different measures included in calculating schools' letter grades, there are aspects of school performance not included. While not a criticism of the letter grades methodology, it is important to note that **only** math and literacy assessments are examined, and schools provide instruction to students in many other content areas. In addition, other school characteristics that may be important to stakeholders, such as student engagement, school culture, school environment, and course offerings are not included in this grading system. These components may be important to many, but may not be widely valued throughout the state. Schools interested in examining performance in these areas should develop processes to track improvement on identified characteristics.

Achievement Gap Adjustment

Rewards or penalizes schools for having smaller or larger gaps between the academic performance of at-risk students and their peers who are not at-risk.

Smallest: Less than 12%	+6 pts
Smaller: 12.00 -15.92%	+3 pts
Average: 15.93 -19.52%	0 pts
Larger: 19.53 -23.85%	-3 pts
Largest: 23.86% or greater	-6 pts

Scores range from -6 (if largest achievement gap) to +6 (if smallest achievement gap).

Graduation Gap Adjustment

Rewards or penalizes schools for having smaller or larger gaps between the graduation rates of at-risk students and their peers who are not at-risk.

Smallest: Less than 3.66%	+6 pts
Smaller: 3.66 – 6.89%	+3 pts
Average: 6.90 –10.74%	0 pts
Larger: 10.75 –16.20%	-3 pts
Largest: 16.21% or greater	-6 pts

Scores range from -6 (if largest graduation gap) to +6 (if smallest graduation gap).

Overall Grading Scale

Letter grades are assigned based on total points as listed below.

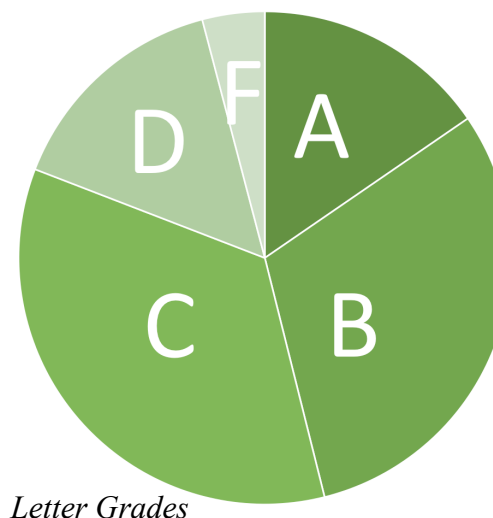
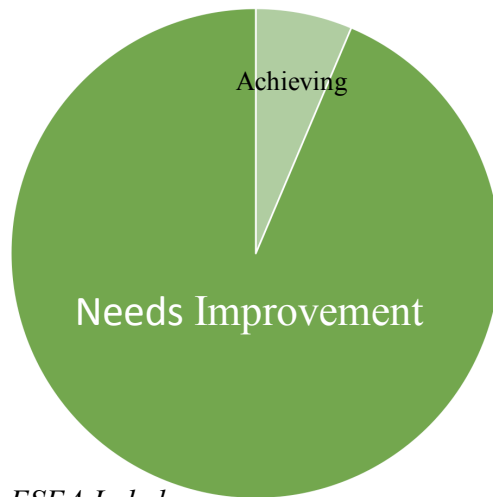
A: 270 points and above
B: 240-269 points
C: 210-239 points
D: 180-209 points
F: Less than 180 points

Summary Findings

The letter grade model is an improvement over ESEA school accountability measures because it represents a broader spectrum of information and is more equitable to schools.

Figure 2 compares school performance under the ESEA measure and the letter grade methodology. Under Arkansas' ESEA accountability model, only 6% of Arkansas schools were identified as Achieving in 2014. If almost all schools in the state are identified as Needs Improvement, the measure becomes relatively meaningless to stakeholders.

Figure 2: Comparing 2014 ESEA Labels and Letter Grade Percentages.



Although more meaningful than Needs Improvement, interpreting the letter grades can

still be challenging to stakeholders. What kind of grade should parents expect? Letter grades are only assigned at the school level, but **overall Arkansas would be assigned a “B”**.

The highest performing schools in the state received an “A” grade even if a very large achievement gap exists within the school. “A” schools are doing very well but can always continue to improve.

Schools receiving “B’s or “C’s should carefully examine their data to identify specific areas for improvement. Each component of the letter grade system can significantly raise or lower the overall score for schools where students are performing well but are not in the “A” range.

Schools receiving “D’s or “F’s are facing many challenges in terms of student performance. These schools should take immediate measures to ensure students are learning. Collaboration with supporters based on identified areas of need and continuous evaluation of progress are critical to school improvement.

Policy Recommendations

While we applaud the intent of Act 696 to make school performance easier for parents to understand, there are several policy recommendations to improve its use.

Make it easier for parents to access letter grades and the data. The letter grades are buried deep in the Arkansas School Performance Report Cards, which are anything but easy to understand. We appreciate the parent handout and informative video, but without easy access to letter grades and the values included in their determination, parents will continue to be left wondering what the label means about their school.

Move toward national comparisons. Letter grades are relevant only within the state and are not comparable across the county. Arkansas needs to think more broadly about measuring student achievement, and Common Core State Standards and PARCC assessments are a step in the right direction.

Address the achievement gap. The magnitude of the average achievement gap between at-risk and not at-risk students is staggering at nearly 20 percentage points. These previously unreported data should serve as a wake up call to school leaders and stakeholders. Arkansas needs to focus on the success of all Arkansas students.

For more information about this policy brief and other education issues in Arkansas, contact us:

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