



Issue Brief: School Accountability

The State Board of Education is required to issue an annual "report card" for the State, local school districts, and individual public schools.¹ **The annual report card for each school combines achievement/proficiency data and an academic growth score into an overall performance grade.**

The annual report card also designates each school as has exceeded, has met, or has not met expected growth.² The proficiency grade accounts for 80% and the growth score accounts for 20% of the total sum of the overall performance grade. For all schools, the performance grade is measured on a 100-point scale with the following letter grades:

A = 85-100 B = 70-84 C = 55-69 D = 40-54 F = 39 or less

According to the 2023-24 Annual Report on the performance and growth of North Carolina public schools:

- 484 public schools with an overall grade of D or F **met expected growth** but were **still labeled as a “low-performing”** school.
- 318 public schools with an overall grade of A or B or C did **NOT** meet expected growth and were **NOT** labeled as a “low-performing” school.³

Clearly, the current accountability models to grade public schools and incentivize educators are misguided and not aligned with what is in the best interest of students. Further, North Carolina’s current formula to grade K-12 schools was proven by DPI and ExcelinEd – the founder of the A-F school grading system – to be **significantly flawed**. The current model simply places too much emphasis on proficiency, or how students are performing, and does not take into account teacher, administration, and staff performance.

NCSBA Position & Recommendations

¹ G.S. 115C-12(9)c1 and G.S. 115C-83.15(g).

² North Carolina School Report Cards, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed March 2025.

³ 2023–24 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, September 4, 2024.

In May of 2023, DPI’s advisory group on school accountability redesign compared NC to other states that grade schools based on an A–F grading system, and found that **North Carolina has more D and F schools and fewer A schools.**⁴ However, when a single test is used to compare students across all states (i.e., NAEP), **data affirms that North Carolina schools are performing better on a national level than their state performance grades suggest.**⁵ The disproportionately high number of D and F schools in North Carolina, as compared to other states also achieving at or slightly above the national public average, signals that North Carolina must strengthen the validity of our accountability system for assigning school performance grades. While these differences are likely due to the variation in the weight and type of indicators, it can still be useful to review other states’ A–F letter grade distributions.⁶

Further, the **current model of 80% proficiency/20% growth lacks transparency and accessibility** for students, parents, and stakeholders to understand the quality of their school(s). A combined score does not allow for separation in benchmarks and can lead to misunderstandings about a school’s proficiency versus progress.

NCSBA recommends that the General Assembly **revamps the current school grade formula and supports an alternative model**, similar to what was proposed by DPI and approved by the State Board of Education. Even if the legislature doesn’t pursue an entirely new model, more than one grade ultimately allows for better transparency and shared understanding. At a minimum, there should be one grade for proficiency and a separate grade for growth – you would not combine science and English grades. This is the same thing.

NCSBA also recommends that the legislature **divides certain performance bonuses among more educators (staff) in a school and shorten End-of-Grade (EOG) and End-of-Course (EOC) tests.**

Bonuses for grade-level teachers for student performance don’t consider the teachers and staff that came before them or supported them during the current school year. Therefore, bonuses should be split among staff to better reflect the

⁴ Report to the NC General Assembly: Accountability System Review and Recommendations for Evaluating School Quality in North Carolina, Department of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education, May 2023.

⁵ The 2024 Nation’s Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), accessed March 2025.

⁶ Report to the NC General Assembly: Accountability System Review and Recommendations for Evaluating School Quality in North Carolina, Department of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education, May 2023.

community effort required to foster strong student performances. Further, **any attempt to reform the State’s accountability model should require a comprehensive review and revamp of the statewide testing program to ensure it aligns with its intended goals.** Currently, EOG and EOC scores comprise the heavily weighted student performance indicator. These singular tests often require children to sit in one spot for an extended period of time and perform at the highest level at that moment. Shortening EOGs and EOCs may improve students’ chances of accurately reflecting what they’ve learned no matter their testing stamina.

Background

NC Through the National Lens: According to ExcelinEd, as of 2025, sixteen states use an A–F accountability model to report school performance and to meet federal and state accountability requirements.⁷ North Carolina largely modeled its school grade system after the one previously used in Florida, where they began assigning school letter grades in 1999 based on state test scores.⁸ Florida revamped their letter grading system for the 2014-15 school year and their school grades are now based on achievement/proficiency, learning gains/growth, graduation rates, and college and career acceleration, which includes student success on AP or IB exams.⁹ **A number of states that modeled their accountability system after the A-F school grade model have since reassessed and altered their system to better reflect what’s happening inside their schools,** including Utah and Michigan.¹⁰

Whatever approach individual states take with their accountability systems, there are federal requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that must be met annually. Overall, ESSA requires that states establish student performance goals, hold schools accountable for student achievement, and include a measure of student performance in their accountability systems beyond test scores. In their accountability systems, states may set the weights for each indicator, but the weight of the combined achievement indicator must be “more substantial” than non-academic indicators. ESSA also establishes accountability requirements around federal designations of schools as needing “targeted support

⁷ A-F School Grading: Promoting Transparency and Establishing Effective Incentives for Schools, ExcelinEd, accessed March 2025.

⁸ 2014 Guide to Calculating School Grades, Florida Department of Education, July 2014.

⁹ 2021-22 Guide to Calculating School Grades, District Grades, and the Federal Percent of Points Index, Florida Department of Education, July 2022.

¹⁰ North Carolina School Report Cards, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed March 2025.

and intervention” (TSI), additional targeted support and intervention” (ATSI), or “comprehensive support and intervention” (CSI), which don’t directly align with the A-F grading system in North Carolina.¹¹

Potential Improvement: After being directed by the General Assembly, a DPI advisory group first convened in September 2022 to study and create recommendations for redesigning North Carolina’s school accountability model.¹² The report presented a proposal of **a multi-measure model of school performance that sought to expand beyond compliance with federal guidelines and highlight educational values**. Under the proposed model, schools would receive four different grades that would not be combined: academics (proficiency in math, science, and reading), progress (school’s growth, based on EVAAS data), readiness (measure postsecondary preparation), and opportunity (chronic absenteeism, school climate, and intra/extracurricular activities).¹³ DPI presented this model to the House Select Committee on Education Reform in February 2024, but no forward progress has since been made on the legislative side.

Lastly, the report from the DPI advisory group noted that **the identification of schools with a grade of D or F typically correlates with a school’s percentage of economically disadvantaged students**. Reportedly, this pattern has been consistent throughout the years.¹⁴ When viewed as separate measures, growth status does not correlate as closely to students’ economically disadvantaged status, implying that growth should count more than it does in the current system to truly capture a school’s overall performance.¹⁵

¹¹ Technical Guide for School Accountability and Testing Results, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, August 2022.

¹² School Performance Grade Redesign (<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris/school-performance-grade-redesign>), North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed March 2025.

¹³ School Performance Grade Redesign, Presentation to the House Select Committee on Education Reform, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, February 26, 2024.

¹⁴ North Carolina School Report Cards, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed March 2025.

¹⁵ North Carolina School Report Cards, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, accessed March 2025.