

STATESMAN IN-DEPTH GRADING SCHOOLS

Low-income schools hurt by A-F system

Analysis: Poor students' schools 30% more likely to earn a failing grade.

By Julie Chang, Melissa B. Taboada and Dan Hill jchang@statesman.com mtaboada@statesman.com dhill@statesman.com

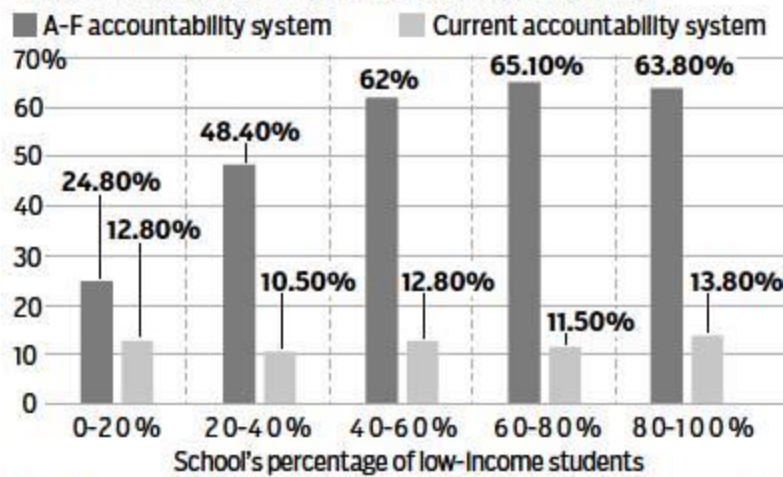


Bastrop High students walk to classes. In the Bastrop district, where 2 in 3 students come from low-income families, the majority of schools received unsatisfactory grades in preliminary results. DEBORAH CANNON / AMERICAN-STATESMAN 2013

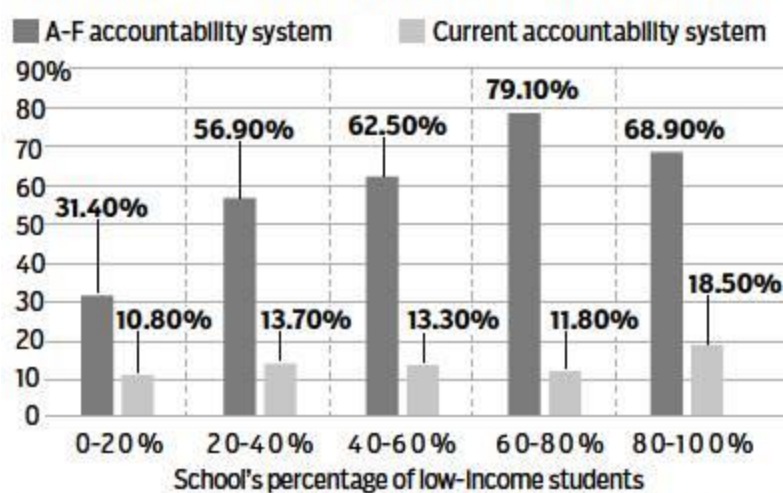
Schools with poorest student population more likely to earn failing marks

An American-Statesman analysis shows that under the A-F accountability system, schools with the wealthiest student populations did considerably better than schools with the poorest student populations. That disparity was not as large under the current rating system, a Statesman analysis shows.

TEXAS SCHOOLS WITH AT LEAST ONE FAILING MARK



CENTRAL TEXAS SCHOOLS WITH AT LEAST ONE FAILING MARK



Source: Texas Education Agency

STEVE LOPEZ / STAFF

One of the biggest complaints about the new A-F school accountability system in Texas is that it unfairly penalizes campuses with high numbers of low-income students.

An American-Statesman analysis of preliminary A-F grades released this month shows that the schools with the poorest student populations in Texas were up to 30 percent more likely than their wealthier peers to earn a failing letter grade in at least one of the four categories. The analysis didn't include alternative education campuses.

The socioeconomic disparity was even wider among Central Texas schools. Eighty percent of campuses where 60 to 80 percent of the students come from low-income families received at least one failing letter grade. Schools with the lowest percentages of poor students were nearly 50 percent less likely to post a failing mark.

"The truth of the matter is that A-F shames and blames poor children, it shames and blames the professionals that love those children, and it needs to be repealed," said the Rev. Charles Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, which advocates for free and high-quality public education, particularly in low-income neighborhoods.

Texas state officials say the new A-F grades are balanced because they measure test scores over time, and give points for improvement. Supporters in the Legislature say A-F is just more rigorous, hence the complaints.

The letter grades released this month aren't official and are meant to show how school districts would be rated under the A-F grades, which will go into effect in 2018. To calculate the advisory grades, state officials used the same data that was used to compute accountability ratings doled out over the summer for the 2015-16 school year.

In the state's current rating system, low-income campuses look much better.

But a Statesman analysis published last week showed that charter schools look better with the A-F grades than they do under the current rating system.

School districts and education advocates have for months condemned the A-F system, saying that it provides little guidance for how to better teach students, and it ignores the challenges that poor children face in the classroom. They fear the bad letter grades that many schools receive will be used to criticize traditional public schools and promote school choice, an umbrella term for alternatives that allow state money to support privately run schools.

Growing research shows parent income is one of the strongest predictors of good scores on standardized tests. Those scores largely determine a school's A-F grade. The wealthier the students, the less likely their education will be interrupted by the lack of such needs as health care, nutritious foods, transportation and housing.

Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath told the Senate Committee on Finance on Tuesday that the agency's own analysis has found little relationship between how wealthy a school is and its performance in the A-F system. He said the only category that shows a strong relationship between socioeconomics and performance is the measure of how well schools did on state standardized tests. Morath said the grade in that category might not count if the school was rated better on how well students' test scores improve.

"Campuses get the better of either their achievement, which is fairly strongly related to socioeconomics, or growth, which is very weakly related to socioeconomics and because of that, the overall rating relationship between poverty and performance is not particularly strong," Morath said.

Molly Weiner, policy director for education policy group Texas Aspires Foundation, agrees with Morath and said the system gives the public more information than the current one.

"We see the A-F system as an improvement on the old system. We can see what are the areas of excellence and areas in need of growth and provides more actionable information for schools and teachers," Weiner said.

Central Texas letter grades

The two highest performing Central Texas districts, Eanes and Lake Travis, also have some of the smallest percentages of low-income students.

In the Bastrop school district, where 2 in 3 students come from low-income families, the majority of schools received unsatisfactory grades. Heather Christie, the district's director of accountability, said how a student or school is performing should take into account various measures, "and the A-F system just doesn't do that for schools as it stands now."

"The data is there that shows students who come from poverty or economic disadvantage have numerous hurdles, including academic," Christie said. "The fact that schools with a high percentage of students who are low-income were the ones earning more of the D's and F's is no coincidence. That's why there are so many superintendents and school boards around the state, including Bastrop ISD, standing up."

At least 150 school districts, including Austin, Bastrop and Dripping Springs, passed resolutions asking lawmakers to repeal the letter grade rating system in favor of a community-based accountability system.

Larkin Tackett, the Austin executive director of charter school operator IDEA Public Schools, said a big part of IDEA's success is making sure that students are held to high expectations, regardless of their income level. About 96 percent of the charter's Austin students are low-income, but they still performed well under the A-F system.

"The biggest in-school factor is the quality of instruction," Tackett said. "When adults in the system get it right, students can achieve their potential. That doesn't mean poverty and all the contextual factors in children's lives don't matter. We believe they matter a lot. That's why maintaining high expectations for those students is so important."

The Texas High Performance Consortium — a group of 22 districts, which includes Eanes, Lake Travis and Round Rock, charged with advising state officials on ways to improve education — recently recommended repealing the A-F system, in favor of one "that is not over-reliant on high-stakes testing ... (and) emphasizes high-priority learning standards."

More than half of the A-F system is based on state standardized test performance. The districts and campuses were graded on how students perform on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness; how they improve on the STAAR year over year; how well students are prepared for college or careers after high school; and how schools and districts close the performance gaps between lower-income and higher-income students.

Dee Carney with Austin-based Moak, Casey & Associates, a leading education consulting firm in the state, said a redeeming quality of Texas' A-F system is that performance is broken down into several categories. She disagrees, however, with the system's definition of a low-income student as one who is federally qualified to receive lunch at a free or reduced price. She said the system should redefine in a more detailed way what constitutes a low-income student and give campuses that serve a high population of them a boost in all categories that the state measures.

Former Texas Education Commissioner Michael Williams said last weekend that the A-F system has potential to be a fair state accountability system, but that schools with similar demographics should be measured against each other so that disparities in the ratings aren't so wide.

"If you add that piece with the fabric that we have, we get closer to a system that is fair," Williams said during a discussion about race in education organized by the Texas Tribune. "Economics is sort of the driver and one of the most significant variables in our learning system. You can't ignore it. It's silly to try to do so, and it's harmful to do so."

Contact Julie Chang at 512-912-2565.

Twitter: @juliechang1.

Contact Melissa B.Taboada at 512-445-3620.

Twitter: @melissataboada

