



THE OPTIMAL REFERENCE GUIDE

**A-F, Texas Accountability System Reflects
Many Others' Criticisms**

Extraordinary insight™ into today's education information topics

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Anything New in A-F Criticism? Every accountability system has historically been criticized like Texas's A-F accountability system. Schools, districts, and educator groups want to use test scores very little—if at all. That's the bottom line of criticism of A-F, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and most other state education accountability systems. The problem with the alternative systems proposed is that not enough educators, community leaders, and parents know much about the schools outside their own city or state. Without a standardized, externally benchmarked accountability system, everyone's beloved teachers, school, and district may be rated highly. Even skills and performance levels are difficult to judge. Without objective academic measurements (e.g., assessments and graduation rates), will we differentiate the excellent schools (to use as examples) from those that need intervention (to improve the instruction for their students)?

The critics of A-F offer three basic themes. None is substantive. Their alternatives are not true accountability systems. Together, however, the critics and A-F may be partners in a solution.

The first critical theme is "A-F doesn't provide guidance for how to teach students and improve schools." That simply is not the purpose of an accountability system. Accountability identifies the schools that are performing well or poorly overall. Then the education professionals can target those schools using a different system to diagnose why and what to do.

The second theme is "A-F only uses standardized assessments and should take into account a wider variety of criteria." Actually, A-F has four domains. Domain IV Postsecondary Readiness uses absenteeism, dropout rate, graduation rate, degree plans, SAT/ACT/AP/IB, and other indicators. Domain IV is even given extra weight at 35%.

The third theme is "A-F penalizes and is unfair to low-income students and schools." By the way, if Domain II Student Progress is passing, then an F in Domain I Student Performance is going to be removed—according to TEA Commissioner Mike Morath. That means a low-income school's failing status on the assessments is replaced if students show growth/gains from one year to the next. On top of that, Domain III Closing the Gaps specifically rates a school on improving the scores of low-income students.

Austin-area, higher income districts are recommending "high-priority learning standards" based systems to replace A-F and its state assessment scores. This mimics past efforts touting performance-based measurement, authentic testing, and writing samples. The introduction of writing samples into state assessment programs, including Texas, is the only one to have survived the problems of lack of standardization, subjective scoring, time to administer, and cost to score.

Another recommended alternative to A-F is community-based accountability systems (CBAs). CBAs are basically reports designed collaboratively by the community and the schools. CBAs can incorporate and report learning standards. If a district does not have a CBA now, a basic enhancement to their website will create the framework for one. These can be excellent annual shareholder reports. CBAs designed independently by over 1,200 Texas districts are not likely to provide the Legislature a succinct standardized accountability report. Examples cited by advocates have outcomes that range from phone surveys with overwhelmingly positive responses to the same assessment scores as used in A-F.

Congress, through NCLB (now Every Student Succeeds Act), requires every school and district to publish annual report cards with assessment, graduation, highly qualified teacher, and other statistics. The Texas Legislature requires A-F. Let's have the Legislature add and fund CBAs to their requirement. Then the public and parents can choose among the three options for the information that answers their questions the best. Who can complain then?



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