

Kentucky Board of Education
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Report from the Secretary
Education and Workforce Development Cabinet

ESSA, School Ranking and School Grading

As Kentucky continues the important work of redesigning the state's school accountability system with the latitude granted states by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), important conversation surrounds the classification system that will be used to evaluate, rank, and rate the performance of schools and school districts. While the regulations for implementation of ESSA are not yet final, language in the statute requires that schools in the bottom 5% of performers be identified by state education agencies for comprehensive supports. The requirement that schools in the bottom 5% be identified implies that states will be required to come up with some method of ranking schools. Collectively, policy and education leaders in Kentucky should have no problem with developing a thoughtful approach for ranking schools that complies with ESSA requirements.

In addition to conversation about school ranking, discussion about ratings for Kentucky schools has been rich. There appears to be some support for the use of a dashboard with various indicators providing a holistic picture of schools' performance. While the use of a dashboard could be promising, we believe a dashboard should be used to supplement a clear and easy to understand, single summative school rating. And there is no school rating system more clear and easy for parents and communities to understand than an A-F school grading system.

While there may be confusion about what the names of accountability classifications mean, including colors, stars, or levels, parents understand very clearly that a B school has overall performance that is at a higher level than a D school, that an A school has overall performance that is at a substantially higher level than a D school, and that an F school is probably not a place where they want their child to attend. The use of an A-F school grading system focuses attention on schools and student populations that are in the most need, providing a clear and transparent mechanism for identifying schools for targeted and comprehensive interventions. Depending on the grades awarded, school grades have the potential to be both sources of "community pride or catalyst[s] for community action".

The Foundation for Excellence in Education's (ExcelinEd) grading model includes valid and reliable indicators that are based on objective, concise student learning outcome measures. Those indicators are then aggregated into a meaningful, transparent, easy to understand A-F grade. Like other promising education reforms, more than a few states are implementing rigorous school grading systems. To date, 17 states have adopted an A-F school grading model. Adopting states include states surrounding Kentucky, like Indiana, Ohio, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. In fact, Georgia's first A-F school grades were released just this year, with schools' grades determined by a combination of factors including student achievement, student growth, and achievement gap closure.

A frequent criticism of accountability systems that give letter grades to schools and school districts is that labeling a school as *failing* says to children attending the school that they are in some way failures. That argument, however, is misguided. First, it is clear that the letter grades given to schools are grades for the schools, not the children who attend the schools. Further, what should be more concerning for parents and community members than a school grade of F, is the fact that the school's performance is so subpar that it warrants a letter grade of F. It is time for Kentucky to adopt an accountability system that is honest about schools' performance. Only an honest and transparent assessment of schools' performance can lead to the targeted support and intervention needed to provide high quality learning experiences for all of Kentucky's children.