

## What are North Carolina's A-F School Performance Grades?

School performance grades ranging from A through F are assigned to individual schools each year based on a [two-part formula](#) made up of a school's achievement score and a school's growth score. The majority (80%) of the grade comes from the **achievement score** and 20% comes from the **growth score**.

Achievement scores are produced mostly from student results on end-of-grade (EOG) and end-of-course (EOC) tests and their related NCEXTEND1 alternate assessment versions. Table 1 specifies the elements in the achievement and growth scores that make up each overall school performance grade.

**Table 1. School Performance Grade Indicators**

Achievement Score Indicators (80%)		
Elementary School	Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading EOG (G3-5)*</li> <li>• Math EOG (G3-5)*</li> <li>• Science EOG (G5)*</li> <li>• EL (English Learner) progress on language proficiency test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading EOG (G6-8)*</li> <li>• Math EOG (G6-8)*</li> <li>• Science EOG (G8)*</li> <li>• EOC NC Math 1</li> <li>• EL (English Learner) progress on language proficiency test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EOC NC Math 1*</li> <li>• EOC NC Math 3*</li> <li>• EOC English II*</li> <li>• EOC Biology*</li> <li>• EL (English Learner) progress on language proficiency test</li> <li>• 4-year cohort graduation rate</li> <li>• G12 students who have passed NC Math III</li> <li>• Scores on ACT/WorkKeys assessments</li> </ul>
School Growth Score Indicators (20%)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EVASS growth index for EOG reading, math and science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EVASS growth index for EOG reading/ELA, math and science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EVASS growth index for EOC ELA and math</li> </ul>

\*Includes NCEXTEND1 alternate assessment results for performance only, not growth. [NCDPI 2022-23 Accountability Framework](#)

A school's growth score is an indication of the progress students have made over the previous year. North Carolina uses EVASS, a value-added growth model, to produce a composite index growth value for each school. The standard expectation is roughly equivalent to a year's worth of expected growth. If a school does not have a growth score, only the school achievement score is used to calculate the school performance grade. For an indicator to be included in the school performance grade calculation, there must be 30 scores or data points. If a school has only one indicator, the school performance grade is calculated on that indicator.

The combination of achievement and growth scores are converted to a 100-point scale, which are then converted to a letter grade. The scale used to assign grades from the 100-scale is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. School performance score conversion to school performance grade**

Score	85 – 100	70 – 84	55 – 69	40-54	< 40
Grade	A	B	C	D	F

In addition to contributing 20% to the overall school performance grade, the school growth score is assigned a label to indicate the degree to which a school's growth has met expectations based on previous and expected performance. These labels are Exceeded Growth, Met Growth, and Growth Not Met.

North Carolina also designates schools, districts, and charter schools as low performing based on schools' A-F grades and growth statuses. To receive the low-performing label, a school must have an overall grade of D or F and have Met or Not Met growth targets. Districts with a majority of low-performing schools also

receive the low-performing label. Schools and districts identified as low performing must develop a school/district improvement plan and notify parents and the public of the plans.

## Who Receives School Performance Grades?

All North Carolina public schools, including charter schools, have received A-F performance grades since the 2013-14 school year. Currently, school performance grades are reported on the [North Carolina School Report Cards portal](#) found on the NCDPI website. An example is shown in Figure 1.



The data used in Figure 1 is for 2021-22. Due to the challenges in instruction and assessment during the pandemic, school performance grades were not reported for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years.

Although private schools currently receive public funds through voucher programs, no reporting requirements for private schools are in place to track school performance.

Figure 1. School performance grade display for one school.

Many districts operate alternative schools, developmental day centers, or schools for students with significant cognitive impairments or multiple handicapping conditions. Once identified, these schools have several options for participating in [North Carolina's Alternative Schools' Accountability Model](#). One option includes the addition of a persistence score (20%), counting achievement as 20% and using growth as the remaining 60% of the total score. These school performance grades are not included in the NC School Report Cards.

## Background on NC School Performance Grades

School performance grades focusing only on student achievement were first introduced in North Carolina in the General Assembly's 2011-2012 session as part of the [Excellent Public Schools Act](#). In 2013, the NC General Assembly revised the Excellent Public Schools Act in Part IX of its [Appropriations Act of 2013](#) and in Section 9.4(b), established the school grading formula with the overall weights still in place today: 80% achievement and 20% growth. Section 9.4 (c) established the requirement to produce an annual report card for the state and each LEA showing the performance grades. These were first published for the 2013-14 school year.

Effective with the 2017-18 school year, and to align with the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the calculation of English Learners (ELs) progress, a measure of English language attainment for ELs, is included in the calculation of school performance grades. As a result, comparisons to school performance grades from years prior to 2017-18 should not be made.

Every year legislation is introduced to change the 80/20 achievement/growth ratio used to calculate school performance grades and include additional factors research has found to be more indicative of school quality. The federal ESSA requirements state that achievement scores must contribute at least 51% of the overall grade, so North Carolina could reduce the 80% value substantially. However, legislative leaders have been resistant to such changes. In [2021, Superintendent Truitt launched an effort](#) to change the

school performance grade model. Her working group released their recommendations in their 2022 report, [Accountability System Review and Recommendations for Evaluating School Quality in North Carolina](#).

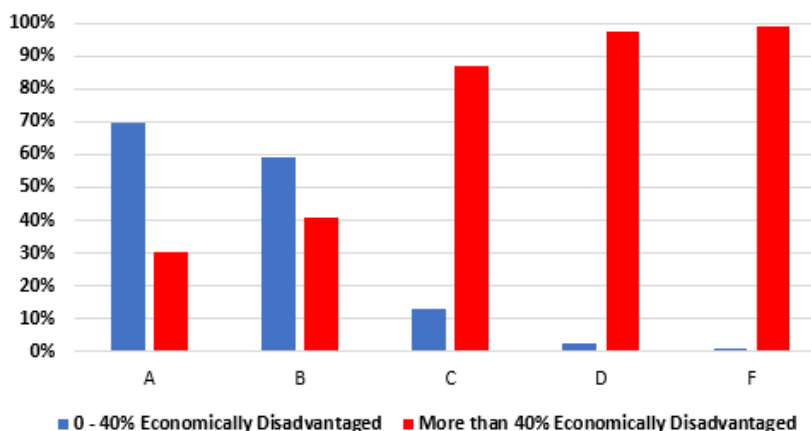
The report noted that as of May 2023, fewer than 10 states used an A-F accountability model to report school performance and to meet federal and state accountability requirements. Of those states, North Carolina's model relies the most on student achievement scores and also has the largest percentage of D and F grades. However, when NAEP scores of the states are compared, North Carolina's scores are higher than most of the comparison states, strongly suggesting that North Carolina schools are performing much better than the state's grading system suggests.

### Pros and Cons of School Performance Grades

Supporters of school performance grades believe that:

- Students will benefit because schools will be held more accountable
- Parents will have data about school performance that they can understand better
- School performance grades will encourage more targeted school improvement

These beliefs rest on the assumption that the school performance grade is an accurate and reliable measure of school performance. However, critics of the NC school performance grading system point out that the school grades are **not an accurate or reliable measure of school performance**.



The system's over-reliance on a few test scores produces grades that are a better indicator of the economic advantages of students than the learning that takes place within the schools.

Figure 2 shows this clearly. Schools with 0-40% economically disadvantaged students (blue) are much more likely to get A grades than F grades and the reverse is true for schools with more than 40% economically disadvantaged students (red).

Figure 2. School performance grades by percent economically disadvantaged, 2022-23 (Data source: NCDPI)

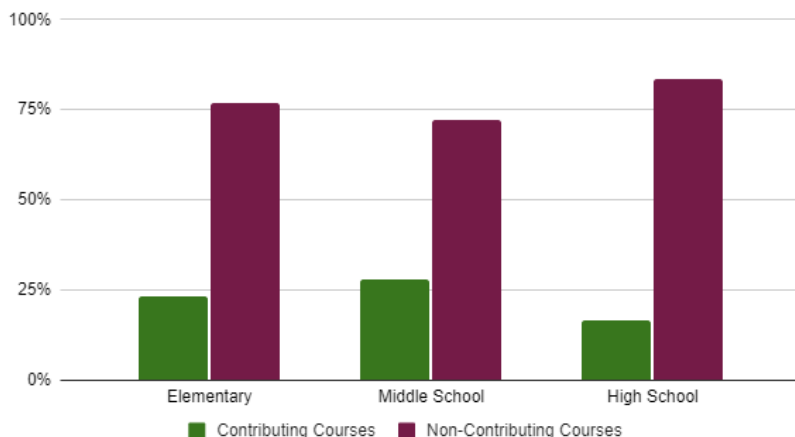
Lindsay Wagner's report "[Yes, 'A' Still Stands for Affluent in NC School Performance Grades](#)" charts the close relationship between the school grades and poverty. The performance grades, "simply highlight systemic inequities that impact high poverty schools, rather than how effective those schools are in educating a vulnerable population of students.

A reason for their continued use may be that the A-F performance grades are routinely used to promote school choice and privatization efforts. This may also be why performance grades are not assigned to voucher-receiving private schools – choice advocates know a direct comparison would show the academic advantages of public schools.

Critics of the NC school performance grades also note that the scores used to assign grades come from a small proportion of a school's overall offerings and do not offer a true picture of school quality.

Figure 3. shows the disparity in the percentage of courses used to calculate a school's achievement score. Middle school had the highest percent (28%) of total courses contributing to the achievement score.

With such a small percentage of classes contributing, it is hard to believe a claim that the school performance score reflects total school quality.



**Figure 3. Percentage of courses contributing to school performance grades**

There are many problems with North Carolina's school performance grades:

- They undervalue student growth and other measures of school quality.
- They do not reflect learning that takes place outside of tested classes and in the overall school community.
- They result in more attention to borderline (passing) students to the detriment of the lowest and highest performing students.
- They are used by privatization advocates to support school choice measures and state school takeovers.
- They make it more difficult to attract and retain highly effective teachers and school leaders who could have a positive effect on the students and larger community.
- They stigmatize schools that receive low grades and will be more likely to alienate parents from being involved in the school.
- They do not generate additional resources/financial support to help schools improve.

## How Should the NC A-F School Performance Grades be Improved?

The recent NCDPI report listed several recommendations. The most important is to recalibrate the weighing of the 80/20 achievement/growth formula to bring achievement closer to 51% and increase the growth weight. It also recommended studying the following eight indicators for possible inclusion in a new school performance grading system:

- Five-year cohort graduation rate
- Chronic absenteeism
- Improvement in student group performance
- Postsecondary Inputs: Percentage of students who participate in career exploration or preparation activities
- Postsecondary Outcomes: Percentage of graduates who either have confirmed acceptance or enrollment in a postsecondary institution, enlistment in the military, or employed
- Extra/Intra Curricular Activity Participation
- Durable Skills as Informed by the Portrait of a Graduate initiative
- School Climate

The working group's recommendations have not yet been acted upon by legislative leaders. In the absence of immediate change, the NC school performance grades should be used with extreme caution if at all.

## Resources and References

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- Wagner, Lindsay. (2019) Yes, "A" still stands for affluent in NC school performance grades. Public School Forum of North Carolina. <https://www.ncforum.org/yes-a-still-stands-for-affluent-in-nc-school-performance-grades/>

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