



Policy Brief: Teacher Agency and Reform

By: Principal Bill Kessler

June 29, 2024

North Carolina's plan to improve elementary schools is actually failing them. The state assigns every school a grade based on end of grade test scores and schools with a D or F score are considered "low-performing." The state directs these schools to improve based on several strategies including the restart option which gives schools charter-like flexibilities. Since 2017, only 46 of 151 of these restart schools have exited "low-performing" status (Helms, 2023). The number of D or F schools in North Carolina has increased from 376 in 2019 to 864 in 2022 and is still over 800 in 2023 (Fofaria, 2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023).

The consequences of the lack of progress go beyond test scores. The continued failure reveals a stubborn overreliance on a policy that wastes state funds, contributes to teacher turnover, and stymies student learning. Furthermore, the state "low-performing" schools policy demoralizes teachers and discriminates against communities by punishing rather than supporting schools, micromanaging teachers, and allotting resources inefficiently.

In some of these "low performing" schools, there are high-performing teachers whose end of grade test scores are so high, or their students grow so much, that they receive bonuses from the state. I spoke with five such teachers at length and asked them why North Carolina's school improvement plan was failing. These teachers were school leaders: high-performing teachers who succeeded in spite of the challenges of working in their "low-performing" schools.

The five teachers explained that the state and districts made out-of-touch decisions that did not seek their input and resulted in squandered efforts and funds that went towards programs that did not work. From the outset, the teachers identified how these programs would not work, but no one asked them their opinion. The teachers also explained that state and district policies were actually driving teachers out of their schools and contributing to the teacher shortage. Furthermore, the teachers shared that the misused resources and ungrounded decisions hurt student performance. Even worse, these policies hurt students psychologically and emotionally, and discriminated against families and communities by labeling schools with letter grades determined largely by student demographics not academic learning.

The graph below shows the strong correlation between socioeconomics and the label of “low-performing.” Nearly all of the D or F schools in 2022-23 were schools where 40% or more of their students were economically disadvantaged. Most of the A and B schools have few students from more challenging economic circumstances. The proficiency grades match up well with the wealth of the home, not the effectiveness of instruction or growth of the students. The “low-performing” label is mostly a diagnosis of family income, not academic performance.

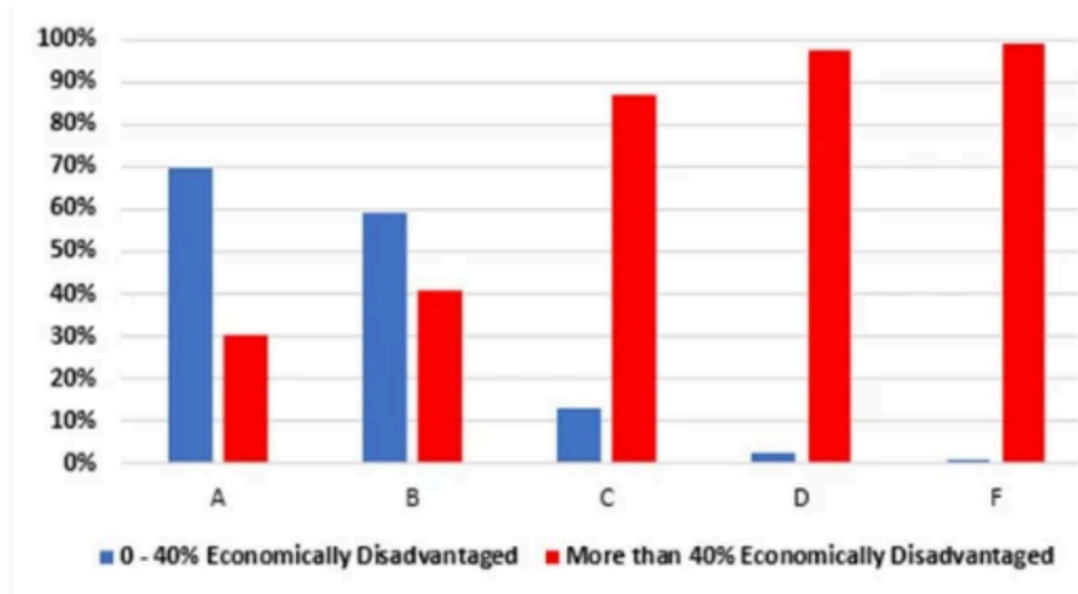
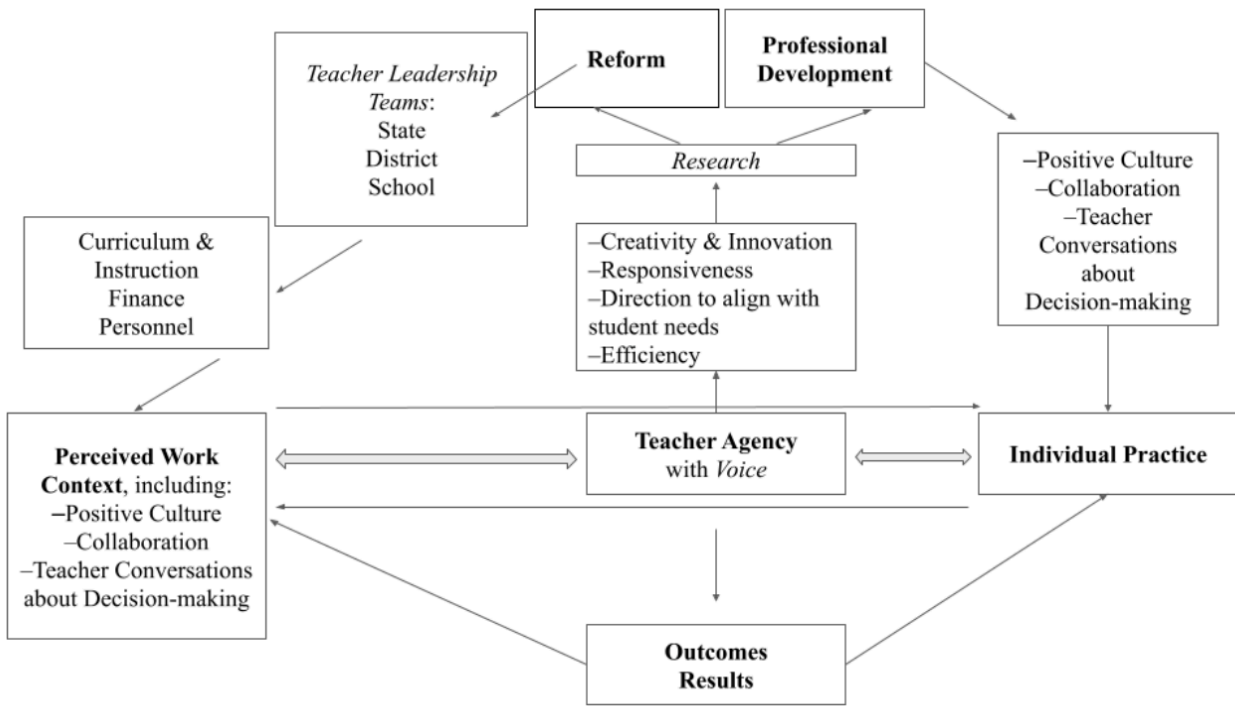


Figure 2. School performance grades by percent economically disadvantaged 2022-23 (Data Source: NCDPI)

The state and districts could make a difference immediately by taking several steps. First, revise the school grading system to move towards growth and learning, not neighborhood socioeconomics. Next, seek out the opinions of high-performing teachers when making decisions about school curriculum, instruction, finance, and personnel. Third, look for ways to support teachers and schools to reverse teacher turnover, attract teachers and students to challenging schools, and provide professional development to increase teacher leadership and collaboration.

The diagram below shows how it could work. The state and districts should start with teachers and their role as change agents and elevate their voice. These actions will promote creativity, innovation, efficiency, and provide direction. Combine this effort with a review of effective research and reform will occur. These efforts will also produce professional development, enhanced workplace environments, and results.



The state and districts should seek out top teachers. Ask them questions. Meet with them. Talk to them. Involve them in decision-making. Form teacher leadership teams to advise and participate in district and state decisions. This will yield school reform and student learning and reverse the tide of school failure.



Public Schools First NC

The views and opinions expressed in guest blog posts are those of the guest bloggers and do not necessarily represent the views of Public Schools First NC, its affiliates, or staff.

publicschoolsfirstnc.org * info@publicschoolsfirstnc.org
 Instagram: @publicschoolsfirstnc * Facebook.com/publicschoolsfirstnc * Twitter: @PS1NC * TikTok @publicschoolsfirstnc

Resources:

Fofaria, R. (2022, September 2). Criticism of school accountability model grows as more schools are designated 'low performing.' EdNC. https://www.ednc.org/school-accountability-model-low-performing-performa/?utm_source=EdNC+Subscribers&utm_campaign=08098a477e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_02_23_05_54_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2696365d99-08098a477e-249257133

Helms, A. D. (2023, February 21). Let's celebrate Allenbrook's success, but not draw simple conclusions. WFAE. <https://www.wfae.org/education/2023-02-21/lets-celebrate-allenbrooks-success-but-not-draw-simple-conclusions>

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023). 2022-23 low-performing state designations. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/2022-23-low-performing-state-designations/download?attachment>