



Questions and Answers

What is the Maine School Performance Grading System?

All parents and community members deserve to understand how well their children's schools are performing and what is being done to improve them. The goals of the Maine School Performance Grading System (A-F report cards) are to provide a starting point, with easy-to-understand and concise information showing how a school is doing, and to make sure that schools are accountable for explaining school performance to their communities.

How can you sum up a school in one grade?

You can't. In our current system, we have lots of pieces of data that come out throughout the course of the year, including NECAP test scores, science test scores, SAT scores, federal AYP status, AP participation, graduation rates and more. Each of these tells a different, sometimes inconsistent, story. And for each one, unfortunately, there are those who judge a school entirely on that one piece of data.

A school receiving a low grade may be doing many things right – successful sports teams, unique clubs, high performing individual students. The letter grade shows, based on already-public and objective data, how a school is serving its students academically.

Maine's School Performance Grading System takes several key pieces of data and converts them to a single letter grade that parents, community members, taxpayers and school officials can understand. From there, we encourage everyone to dig deeper, look at the data in the Data Warehouse, visit schools, ask teachers and principals questions, and make informed decisions about how their schools are doing, and how to improve them, whatever their grade.

Which measurements are used, and why?

Maine considered including other factors, such as science assessments, which are only given in grades 4, 8, and 11, or parent, student, or teacher surveys, which currently do not exist. In the end, it was decided in the first year we would go with the data that already exists and is used in Maine's federal accountability system. These are: reading and math proficiency on the New England Comprehensive

Assessment Program (NECAP) tests in grades 3-8; proficiency on the SAT and the graduation rate in high school.

These are many of the same factors, including growth, that were extensively reviewed as we prepared Maine's application for flexibility under the accountability requirements of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in collaboration with three working groups. Most states are using these same measures to revise their federal accountability system. We welcome discussion about what factors might be added in future years to Maine's School Performance Grading System. All of the data used in the calculation – with the exception of student-specific data for the growth factor – are publicly available now.

Why is the high school progress measure based on three-year averages instead of just the current year's proficiency compared to last year's?

Every student and every class is different. In the elementary grading system, we are able to see how each student performed compared to the previous year because we test in every grade from 3 to 8. We can give an elementary school a "growth" score based on the collective growth of all individual students.

Because we test in only one high school grade – 11th – we cannot see how each student performed compared to when they were in 10th grade. If we were to use year-over-year scores, we'd be comparing this year's class to last year's. Under such a scoring system, a school with a one-year lapse could see a big drop in score, only to be followed by an unrealistically high score the next year, when all it was doing was bouncing back to its norm. We did not want to penalize schools for temporary drops or reward them for simply recovering after a temporary lapse.

The three-year average allows us to see a school's trajectory. A school that's making consistent gains will still see those reflected in its score and its grade. A school that suffers a one-year lapse won't be penalized in the way it would with a one-year comparison.

Because this system compares class to class, rather than the growth of individual students, at the high school level we use the term "progress" rather than "growth."

The report card does use the most recent single year's proficiency as the measure for the performance (achievement) piece of the score.

Why is there a bottom-25-percent factor in the elementary school grading but not in the high school?

In grades 3 through 8, the focus is on helping students catch up to grade level. If students are below proficiency but catching up, that indicates positive work by schools and that should be reflected in the school grade. We know from research that reading at grade level in grade 3 is key to success throughout elementary school, so helping students catch up as soon after that as possible is vital. By the time students are in high school, proficiency is essential, as students must be ready for college or careers when they graduate.

Also, because at the high school level we are not able to compare the same students but rather have to compare students from one class to students from another, the bottom 25 percent comparisons are not productive.

Finally, with 53 percent of high school students below proficiency, there is little movement in the bottom 25 percent. We ran the numbers, and it made virtually no difference in the ratings.

What other states do A-F grading and what factors do they use?

Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia, as well as New York City, all have school grading systems. Student achievement and growth in achievement are elements of most or all of these systems. Several are now using the achievement and/or growth of the bottom 25 percent of students as a factor.

Indiana includes college and career readiness, which is measured by the percentage of students who receive a passing score on Advanced Placement or the International Baccalaureate exam, or receive three college credits, or get a passing score on an industry certification exam. New Mexico includes student attendance and the results of classroom surveys, and other states include other factors. Maine considered additional factors such as post-secondary enrollment and the level of remedial courses needed upon entering college or university. While those were not ultimately included in the grading formula, they could be considered in the future, and we welcome a public discussion of the elements of the report card calculation.

Is there a law that requires giving schools grades like this?

No. The A-F grading simply uses already-existing data to generate a grade. In his research on effective school systems and education reforms, Gov. LePage became aware of the states already issuing school

grades and believed it would be beneficial to generating local and statewide discussion and action to improve schools and outcomes for students.

Does it work?

Yes. In Florida, ranking schools immediately generated dialogue in school communities and resulted in better community involvement and improved schools, especially those that received an “F.” Florida benefited from a variety of education reforms that were implemented together, over time.

My child’s school received an “F” – what does that mean for his/her education?

The school grades are based on aggregated data. Some students are doing just fine, and chances are your child’s school is doing some great work, despite the low grade. The letter grade tells us the school as a whole needs improvement in educating all its students in a satisfactory manner. And we in the Department plan to help with that.

How long has Maine been working on this? How does it relate to Maine’s ESEA waiver request?

Maine DOE, along with several working groups, began work on Maine’s ESEA waiver request in May 2012. The groups spent considerable time reviewing factors that could be used to measure school performance and growth. In the end, Maine’s September 2012 submission (still awaiting US DOE approval as of April 2013) included performance and growth measures almost identical to the ones now being used for the A-F grading system. While the ESEA waiver has many merits – and is a big improvement over the previous unfair and unrealistic NCLB accountability system – simplicity is not one of them. So, the A-F report cards will use largely similar info, packaged in a way that parents and others can get a quick overview of how their school stacks up.

It is also important to note that the anticipated ESEA waiver will not apply to non-Title I schools in Maine, which account for about 200 of the 600 public schools in Maine. The school grades will be applied to all public schools, including public charter schools and schools with 60 percent or more publicly subsidized students. This will hold all schools accountable and will provide an opportunity to support all struggling schools – not just those that receive federal Title I funds.

When will the next set of grades come out? Will it always be in the spring?

Maine's testing cycle determines when we have the data necessary to calculate the grades. And that cycle will change in the 2014-15 school year when Maine adopts the Smarter Balanced assessments, which will be given in the spring rather than the fall. For the next two years, we anticipate giving elementary school grades in the spring and high school grades in the fall. There could be some adjustment after that.

Will career and technical education schools (CTEs) be graded?

No. CTE students are primarily students of a "sending" public high school, which is where testing takes place.

Why don't I see my school on the list?

There are three reasons a school might not appear on the list:

1. It does not go beyond grade 3. It takes two years of test data in a row to be able to calculate the growth factor in the grading formula. So a K-3 school will not be graded.
2. The school is new and does not have two years of data that can be used. Or, in the case of a high school – four years.
3. Low "n count." Federal student privacy laws preclude us from publishing student data when there are fewer than 10 students in a group (a class of fewer than 10 students, e.g.) for fear that it could identify individual students.

Are public charter schools included? How about the "academies?"

Yes. All public schools and private schools with at least 60 percent publicly-subsidized students (the "Big 11," or "academies," as they are called) will receive grades. Because the two existing charter schools opened for the first time this year, they do not have the two years of test data necessary to calculate a grade, so they do not receive grades this year.

Why has Commissioner Bowen visited schools on his Promising Practices Tour that are receiving low grades? Are they not “good” schools?

The Commissioner selected schools that were demonstrating promising practices. This included schools that were identified with challenges, such as through SIG and other programs. While their improvement journeys are still not complete, they have also made progress in many areas, including increased attendance, decreases in behavior referrals, etc.

The Commissioner never said those schools are doing everything right, any more than he would say that all struggling schools are doing everything wrong. The letter grade provides a shorthand for school performance, but it does not tell the full story.

The distribution of letter grades looks a lot like a bell curve. How did you choose that method?

After thoughtful consideration, it was decided that a standard bell curve would be utilized in year one to establish a baseline, but will not be needed in future years. The schools did fall fairly naturally along that bell curve - as you see, the majority of the grades were C's, and there are more A's and B's than D's and F's.