



Assessment and the new Florida Standards

The case for a one-year transition

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As Florida students, educators and leaders adjust to the new Florida Standards, many questions remain about how students will be tested on the standards, and how schools will be held accountable.

Over the last several months, school districts across the state have voiced concern about school readiness for the new Florida Standards Assessment — set to be administered in spring 2015 — and called for a one-year pause in the issuance of school grades. Duval County’s superintendent is among them, with the Duval County School Board set to vote on a formal resolution in October calling on the state to suspend school grades for a year.¹

Having a strong, trusted and stable accountability system is important. Our annual public opinion poll² shows that test scores and school grades are still by far the most often used factor that parents and citizens consider when making judgments about schools. Because of this, it is crucial that the grades be meaningful and accurate.

The case for a one-year pause

Making a single-year “clean break” will help parents and citizens better understand the grading system, prevent the tendency to directly compare year-to-year grades created under two different formulas, and, ultimately, strengthen trust in the accountability system. Here’s why a one-year pause in school grades is needed:

There is no reliable way to measure student growth between the FCAT 2.0 and the new Florida Standards Assessment. The growth that individual students show from one year to the next is a major component of school grades. The only way to ensure that student growth is calculated in a way that is meaningful and reliable is to take a single year to reset school grades. During the transition from the FCAT to the FCAT 2.0, the state did not take a year off from school grading. Instead, the state linked the two tests to measure

¹ Duval County Public Schools. (September 2014). Resolution 2014-08-A, to be considered on October 7, 2014.

² Jacksonville Public Education Fund. (December 2013). *Annual Survey of Education Perceptions in Duval County*. Retrieved from <http://jaxpef.org/news/2013/12/new-poll-shows-broad-community-support-for-education-improvement.aspx>.

growth, an apples-to-oranges comparison that lead to widespread concern and dozens of changes to the school grading formula.³ In addition, the Florida Standards Assessment has not been field-tested in Florida, leaving administrators with even more questions about the new test.

Significant consequences for schools and students remain in place. The state is withholding sanctions based on low school grades in 2014-2015, but that is just one of many ways schools are held accountable because of grades. School Recognition funds would still be administered. Teacher value-added scores would still be based on linking two different tests. In addition, many school districts, including Duval County, have their own independent accountability systems based on school grades. Finally, school grades are of great interest to parents and citizens, which can have ramifications for enrollment and reputation.

Other states have shown that a one-year suspension of school grades can strengthen, not weaken, support for strong accountability. Giving schools a chance to reset and learn what will be expected, and parents and citizens time to understand the higher expectations that students will be held to will build public trust. At a minimum, such a pause is not likely to pose a long-term risk to the overall existence of school grades. Other states, including Texas, found that paired with strong communication to districts and parents, a one-year transition was effective. In the spring of 2012, Texas launched a new testing program called the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness or STAAR, replacing the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Texas, which also has a strong accountability system, did not issue school ratings in the spring of 2012. It began issuing school ratings again in 2013. The Texas Education Agency also made available a significant amount of information on the transition on its website, and renamed the test. This maintained a strong accountability system with minimal confusion.

A course forward: More time and more communication

A successful transition to the Florida Standards will require work from both the state and districts. These standards are more challenging, and they will better prepare *all* students to succeed in college, career and life. Here are a few recommendations that will help with a smooth transition and strengthen Florida's school grading system for years to come:

- The State Legislature should **not issue new school grades for the 2014-15** school year, creating a clean transition between accountability systems.
- The Florida Department of Education should **strengthen its communication with educators, students and citizens** to clarify its process for issuing standardized tests, determining cut scores and measuring student growth.

³ Jacksonville Public Education Fund. (January 2014.) *Understanding and Updating School Grades for Florida's Future*. Learn more at www.jaxpef.org/schoolgrades.



- The State Board of Education should consider **improving the way that it measures student growth** to allow for a more accurate snapshot.⁴
- The Florida Department of Education should **continue to release school grades component data**, including results of the Florida Standards Assessment, during the single transition year. This will ensure that the accountability culture in Florida schools remains strong and that parents still have access to a variety of school performance indicators.
- School districts should **provide teachers with more support** and professional development to ensure that they are fully trained on the new standards and are prepared to use them in their classroom.
- School districts should **provide parents with a clear understanding of the new standards**, the process of implementing the new test and strategies for supporting their children in the transition.

⁴ Learn more about possible ways to measure growth at www.jaxpef.org/schoolgrades.

