

POLICY ALERT



February 22, 2012

Proposed changes to the School Grades formula: What do they mean?

Background

In 2011, students in Florida took a new version of the annual standardized test previously known as the *FCAT* (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test). The adoption of this new test, known as *FCAT 2.0*, required the Florida Department of Education to also create a new set of proficiency standards to go with it, known as “cut scores.”

The new cut scores, approved by the State Board of Education on January 23, 2012, will go into effect for the spring 2012 administration of the *FCAT 2.0* and the subsequent calculation of 2012 School Grades (which are based primarily on *FCAT 2.0* performance). As students adjust to the more challenging test and accompanying higher performance benchmarks for the first time, both individual student scores and School Grades are projected to drop in thousands of schools state-wide next year. Duval County could have more than 20 F schools (currently there are five).

On February 28, 2012, the State Board of Education is scheduled to vote on a second set of changes to the formula used to calculate School Grades. This proposal includes additional requirements that would result in further grade drops among schools locally and state-wide.

The proposed changes

Numerous additions and modifications are under consideration at the February meeting of the State Board of Education. The changes that have generated the most debate include:

- The addition of achievement scores for all students with disabilities (ESE) and all second-year English Language Learner (ELL) students into the School Grade formula. Previously, the formula only included learning gains for these students. This would result in some dedicated ESE centers receiving grades for the first time based on the same academic performance expectations as general education schools. In Duval, all dedicated ESE centers would receive ‘F’ grades due to the severe disabilities of the students served.
- The creation of a new threshold that would automatically drop any school’s grade to an ‘F’ if fewer than 25% of its students demonstrated reading proficiency on the *FCAT 2.0*.
- A change in the way learning gains are calculated. Learning gains measure the amount a student’s achievement changes from year to year. The School Grades formula takes into consideration how many students made more than one year’s worth of growth (previously defined as at least one year’s gain + 1 point). The proposed change would require the lowest-performing (Level 1) students to demonstrate greater learning gains than others (one year’s gain + 2 points) in order for the school to get credit for that students’ progress.

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The impact to Duval County

According to calculations performed by Duval County Public Schools, the proposed changes would result in an additional increase in the number of 'F'-graded schools — above and beyond the already expected increase due to the changes in cut scores.

Locally, the most notable would be that Alden Road, Palm Avenue and Mount Herman Exceptional Centers would all receive a school grade for the first time. Because these centers are specifically for students with the most severe physical and intellectual disabilities, they would all receive a grade of 'F.'

The changes would also likely have a financial impact because they would create an estimated 24 additional "Intervene Status" schools. The district is required to make personnel changes and implement other programs at Intervene schools that can be costly.

JPEF comments and recommendations

The Jacksonville Public Education Fund recommends that the proposal be revised to take into account the wide differences among students classified as having disabilities. Judging a school by the *FCAT 2.0* achievement level of students with severe developmental disabilities and students who have only just begun learning English would not give the community an accurate evaluation of that school's performance. We suggest that the State Board of Education reject this part of the proposal and modify it to avoid punishing schools designed specifically for students with severe disabilities. We recommend the state keep its current standard that English language learners have two years of English instruction before their achievement (not simply growth) is factored in to School Grades.

With such far-reaching ramifications, it is imperative that schools be given adequate time to adjust to these changes should they be enacted. If these rules are approved in February, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund would recommend that they not go into effect until the 2012-2013 school year. Because students are taking the new FCAT 2.0 for only the second time this spring, this summer will be the first time for calculating learning gains based on the test. Implementing the changes to the School Grades formula in 2013 would allow schools and students the necessary time to plan for meeting these expectations.

What citizens can do

The Jacksonville Public Education Fund urges Duval County and Florida residents to contact members of the State Board of Education to speak out about this issue. To find contact information for the State Board of Education members, go to <http://www.fldoe.org/board>.