

EDITORIAL: We totally agree: Two grades are better than one

By Sarah McKenzie to the Democrat-Gazette

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"Arkansas' public schools have received an A-F grade since 2015. However, the grades mostly show what kind of students go to the school rather than how much those students are learning."

--Sarah McKenzie, on the Voices page Monday

Normally we allow letter writers and guest columnists to have the last word on a subject. But that's when our editorial policy disagrees with said writer. We happily want to agree, and second, and cheer, Dr. McKenzie's words that she submitted to the page opposite this one.

The executive director for the Office for Education Policy at the UofA wrote that she hoped the state would move to a two-grade system, so "schools get one grade for how much kids are learning, and a separate grade for how many pass the test."

One grade for growth, one for achievement.

Be still, our inky hearts. We've been advocating that for years. And it wouldn't take much but a few votes and a couple-a strokes of pens to make it true. Because the state is already handing out two grades.

Please follow us:

The last time we looked, about a third of Arkansas' 1,035 schools got either Ds or Fs as determined by standardized tests. When these grades come out, invariably the news side of this outfit prints column after column of schools and their grades. Bad grades blister the pages all over.

But each time the paper prints those grades, we think: Why not give two grades to each school? One for performance.

And one for improvement.

The state does exactly that when it hands out bonuses to the school districts every year. The Top 5 percent of schools, as determined by standardized test scores, get a nice bonus per child. Then the Top 5 percent of schools that have improved those scores from year to year get a nice bonus, too. And smaller bonuses per child for the remainder of the Top 10 percent in each category.

Why not do the same with the yearly state school grades?

It is entirely possible--likely--that there is a school out there in Arkansasland that is located in a challenging ZIP code that graded out last year with an F. But improved dramatically from the year before.

For example, if your kid went from scoring 15 percent in math class in the first nine weeks to 59 in the second nine weeks, you might say he still needs a lot of work (he does), but you'd also praise him for the massive improvement. And expect a gentleman's C in the next semester, kid.

Since the state is already keeping up with two different measurements--better to hand out bonuses--then the state should use those numbers when handing out grades. Wethinks it wouldn't take much to make this change in paperwork.

We can think of two reasons why somebody might oppose this idea:

The public would be confused with two grades for each school.

Oh, puh-leeze. We the People are smarter than some give us credit for. Parents, students, principals and teachers aren't confused about two grades each year when bonuses are handed out. To them, the whole thing makes perfect sense. And dollars and cents.

The top-achieving schools might have nowhere to grow. Would you give such a school an A for achievement and an F for growth?

That's a better argument. But can be overcome: Perhaps high-achieving schools wouldn't even get a second grade for growth. Just give them their A or B and their accolades. Yes, parents and teachers (and students) in the richer ZIP codes would understand why their above-average school only gets the one grade. The same way they understand every year when they don't get bonuses for improvement.

This idea--Professor McKenzie's idea, our idea, a lot of peoples' idea--would do much for the most challenging schools, we'd bet.

Imagine the lift a two-tiered system would give to teachers, administrators--and students--to be told that, while they aren't there yet, they are going in the right direction.

That wouldn't necessitate false confidence.

Some of us think it would provide the real kind.