

# Grading schools

Learning, not wealth should be rated

by Sarah McKenzie Special to the Democrat-Gazette

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Do you have a pet peeve? I do. It's when the ratings for something don't capture what most people care about. Unfortunately, this is the current situation with Arkansas' public school letter-grade ratings. The letter grades assigned to schools are not telling us much about how well schools are educating their students; instead they tell us more about how well off their students are.

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.

Public schools in richer areas usually get higher letter grades than schools in poorer areas. Last year, nearly 300 schools enrolled at least three out of four students experiencing economic hardships: Only one of them received an "A" grade while 70 percent got a "D" or an "F." Among schools where fewer than one in four students face economic hardships, 73 percent got an "A."

Is this because schools located in poorer communities are doing a bad job educating students? No! A big factor in a school's letter grade comes from how well students do on state tests for reading and math. Students from wealthier families usually do better on these tests. It stinks, but it is true.

Schools can't control who walks in the school door, but they can control the quality of the instruction. What matters most to me, and maybe to you, is how much students are actually learning while they're in school.

Growth is the measure that reflects how much students are learning in school. Growth allows us to see which schools are really helping students learn. There are many schools across the state showing strong growth in student learning. Schools in richer areas don't necessarily have higher growth than schools in poor communities, and vice versa. Growth isn't about the kids, it's about the teaching.

In northwest Arkansas, Haas Hall Bentonville is growing student learning more than 99 percent of our high schools. In Pulaski County, eSTEM Junior High is helping students learn more than 97 percent of other middle schools. In Helena-West Helena, students attending KIPP Delta Elementary Literacy Academy are learning more in a year than students in 86 percent of elementary schools in the state.

These schools are all doing an outstanding job helping students learn, but the letter grades don't always show it. Haas Hall Bentonville got an "A," eSTEM Junior High got a "C," and KIPP Delta Elementary Literacy Academy got a "D." The grades are a reflection of the percentage of students at the schools who face economic hardships: 4 percent at Haas Hall, 68 percent at eSTEM, and 92 percent at KIPP Delta.

How much students are actually learning doesn't count for much.

There are many schools across the state where students show high levels of learning, but the schools mentioned above are open-enrollment charter schools. About 3 percent of Arkansas students go to these public schools that students can attend for free, even if they don't live in the area. Most of Arkansas' 69 open-enrollment charter schools are in northwest Arkansas, central Arkansas, or the Delta region.

A recent report about the high number of "D" and "F" grades among charter schools didn't include how well these schools are helping students learn. On average, students attending in-person open-enrollment charter schools had higher learning growth than students attending traditional public schools. This is true statewide, but importantly also within the northwest, central and Delta areas, because when families choose a school, only local options matter. Many charter-school leaders purposefully chose to locate in under-resourced communities, and we should be thankful when they serve students and their families well.

I want ratings to tell me how well schools are helping students learn, and I suspect that most parents want the same. It is important to know if students are learning, regardless of whether they have passed the test with flying colors or are struggling to catch up. But our current school letter grades generally reflect the characteristics of the students attending a school instead of how much they are learning in school.

The good news is that the state is changing how it grades schools. They're making the amount of learning students do each year more important. If we graded schools based on how much they help students learn and grow, it would be easier for everyone to see how well schools are teaching students. I would like to see schools get one grade for how much kids are learning, and a separate grade for how many pass the test.

At the Office for Education Policy ([oep.uark.edu](http://oep.uark.edu)) we are always talking about student learning. We give yearly awards to schools that show the highest levels of student growth, and we publish databases that include growth scores for all public schools in Arkansas. Check it out to find the information that you really want to know about Arkansas' schools.

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