



## Communications Toolkit

The Maine Department of Education provides this communications toolkit as your district prepares to receive A-F school report cards under the new Maine School Performance Grading System. In this packet you'll find a variety of resources intended to help you prepare as you communicate information about your district's report cards to students, parents, staff, media and your communities.

You make decisions about how best to communicate with your community. We hope this toolkit will provide you with information and materials you can copy and share as is, or modify and incorporate into your own materials. The toolkit includes:

- An overview of why we're implementing this system and how we came up with the system we did.
- Suggestions for educators and parents on how to make best use of the report cards.
- The methodology behind the grading system.
- A list of questions and answers we anticipate you will have and that your parents and community members will have for you.
- A sample press release and letter to parents and communities, which you can adapt for local use after the Maine Department of Education has officially released A-F report cards to the public.

Every stakeholder in Maine should understand that school report cards are only one measure of a school's performance. For that reason, we are also unveiling the Data Warehouse on the day of the report cards release so that parents and community members can dig deeper and explore the data for their schools

For more information on the Maine School Performance Grading System, visit [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

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## Overview

During his State of the State address in February 2013, Governor LePage announced that Maine will introduce a school performance grading system so students, parents, taxpayers and others can easily understand how their schools are doing, just as report cards help parents understand how their kids are doing.

The goals of A-F grading 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 that to their communities.

No one score or grade tells the whole story of a school. That's why the grading system is based on several factors, including student achievement in reading and math, growth/progress in achievement, and, in particular, the performance and growth of the bottom 25 percent of students (for elementary schools) and the graduation rate (for high schools).

We encourage parents and others to dig deeper by visiting the Education Data Warehouse, which contains multi-year, detailed information about each school and provides the ability to compare a school to others throughout the state using a wide range of measures.

We hope people will use both – the letter grade overview and the details that come with digging into the Data Warehouse – to make determinations about how their schools are doing, and to ask informed questions of their school and district administrators.

We also plan to support struggling schools. Until now, we've only been able to provide that kind of support for underperforming Title I schools because of restrictions on the use of federal improvement funds. Governor LePage's proposed budget includes money for school improvement and support. We'll use this funding to assist underperforming schools with direct funds and with technical assistance.

### Maine's grading system

Thirteen other states and New York City have A-F school grading systems in place, with many similarities among them. In seeking a system that would work for Maine, we examined several of these. Florida's was one that was examined closely, but not all elements of Florida's plan work for Maine. We also looked at Oklahoma and Indiana, among others.

From the start, it was clear that the grading system should include student achievement as well as student growth. Absolute performance is essential, but so is helping students improve. For example, if a student starts a school year reading two years below grade level and starts the next school year only one year below level, that school/teacher helped that student achieve two years of growth in one year. If that happened with many students, it should be reflected in the school's grade. Maine's elementary school grading system also incorporates performance and growth among the bottom 25 percent of students. A school must be held accountable not only for improving overall performance, but also for those students who are struggling or might otherwise fall through the cracks.

For more information on the Maine School Performance Grading System, visit [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

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## 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 as 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.

For more information on the Maine School Performance Grading System, visit [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

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# Methodology

## Elementary Schools (Grades 3-8)

Calculations are based on the most recent data available, which are 2012-13 assessments, based on the 2011-12. Data used in the school calculation includes grades 3-8 students who participated in the NECAP in fall 2012, or were assessed using the PAAP in spring 2012, and who were continuously enrolled at the school listed on their assessment results. It takes two years of assessment data for a student to be included in the calculations – hence, a K-3 school cannot be graded. Excluded from the calculations are: schools that have low “n sizes” (fewer than 10 students in a calculated group, to protect student confidentiality, as required by the federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act- FERPA); have no or limited data due to school configuration (K-3); or have changed school configuration.

Elementary school grades are based on the following:

### Measures

#### Proficiency

- **Math Proficiency** – Percent of the students in each school who achieved an achievement level of proficient or proficient with distinction, in mathematics.
- **Reading Proficiency** – Percent of the students in each school who achieved an achievement level of proficient or proficient with distinction, in reading.

**Growth** - Individual student growth, year to year, collectively for the school.

- **Math Growth\*** – All Students – Measures the collective growth of individual students – that is, how well did individual students improve from the previous testing year. Calculation: total mathematics growth points in a school, divided by the number of all students used in the calculation. (See notes below)
- **Reading Growth\*** – All Students – Measures the collective growth of individual students – that is, how well did individual students improve from the previous testing year. Calculation: total reading growth points in a school, divided by the number of all students used in the calculation. (See notes below)
- **Math Growth – Bottom 25%\*\*** – Growth among students in math who scored in the bottom 25 percent in the previous testing year – that is, what was the growth (calculated same as for All Students) among the most struggling students.
- **Reading Growth – Bottom 25%\*\*** – Growth among students in reading who scored in the bottom 25 percent in the previous testing year – that is, what was the growth (calculated same as for All Students) among the most struggling students.

### Assessment participation

Schools are required to meet at least a 95 percent participation rate in the state assessments for validity. Participation of less than 90 percent results in an automatic “F”; participation above 90 percent but below 95 percent results in a one letter grade reduction (those that are already an “F” remain an “F”); above 95 percent there is no reduction.

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**\*Growth Calculation**

The growth calculation measures whether students are improving (or declining) one year to the next based on achievement levels. It is calculated on each individual student's growth (or decline).

Students who advance a proficiency level, regardless of what level they were at, as well as students who maintain a proficiency level of 3 (proficient) or 4 (proficient with distinction) are considered to have made growth. There is a bonus weighting for students who advance more than one proficiency level in a year.

Level 1 (substantially below proficient) and level 2 (partially proficient) have been broken into two levels each: 1A, 1B, 2A, and 2B, making it easier to show growth and recognize advancement even at levels below proficient.

A "1" or greater is considered to be a year's growth.

		Current Year					
		1A	1B	2A	2B	3	4
Past Year	1A	0	1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4
	1B	0	0	1	1.1	1.2	1.3
	2A	0	0	0	1	1.1	1.2
	2B	0	0	0	0	1	1.1
	3	0	0	0	0	1	1.1
	4	0	0	0	0	0	1

**\*\*Bottom 25%**

If there is a null value in the Bottom 25% growth measures (due to the "n size" requirement described earlier), the Bottom 25% value will be replaced with the All Students value for the same subject.

## Secondary Schools (Grade 11)

Calculations are based on the most recent data available, from the 2011-12 Maine High School Assessment (MHSA) and Personalized Alternate Assessment Portfolio (PAAP) in grade 11. High school grades are based on the following:

### Measures

#### Proficiency

- **Math Proficiency** – Percent of the students in each school who achieved an achievement level of proficient or proficient with distinction, in mathematics.
- **Reading Proficiency Level** – Percent of the students in each school who achieved an achievement level of proficient or proficient with distinction, in reading.

#### Progress

- **Math Progress – All Students 3-year Average** – The most recent three-year average of math proficiency (2012, 2011, 2010) plus the difference between that average and the previous three-year average of math proficiency (2011, 2010, 2009).
- **Reading Progress – All Students 3-year Average** – The most recent three-year average of reading proficiency (2012, 2011, 2010) plus the difference between that average and the previous three-year average of reading proficiency (2011, 2010, 2009).
- **4-year Graduation Rate** – Percentage of students from a cohort who graduated after 4 years of high school. (see explanation of [Maine's 4-year and 5-year graduation rates](#))
- **5-year Graduation Rate** – Percentage of students from a cohort who graduated after 5 years of high school. (see explanation of [Maine's 4-year and 5-year graduation rates](#))

### Assessment Participation

Schools are required to meet at least a 95 percent participation rate in the state assessments for validity. Participation of less than 90 percent results in an automatic “F”; participation above 90 percent but below 95 percent results in a one letter grade reduction (those that are already an “F” remain an “F”); above 95 percent there is no reduction.

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# Making the Grade

Using the data to support Maine schools

## Parents

Parents, this is first and foremost for you and your children. You can help improve your child's school – whether it's getting a B or a D.

**Ask yourself:** Does the grade reflect what you know from what your school has shared with you about your child's school and the instruction and support your child is receiving? Is there more data, or are there questions about the data, you would like school officials to share and explain?

**Ask your principal or school board** about their plans for improvement – no matter whether your school received a B or a D or something in between. Every school has plans for improvement. Ask specifics: how will your school's plans lead to improved student achievement? How can you help support your school's improvement efforts?

**Dig deeper!** Go to the Data Warehouse and look up your school. Compare it to similar schools and look at the details.

- How are different groups of students, such as English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and others, doing?
- How does your school's performance compare with other schools that have similar demographics?
- What are the attendance and graduation rates?
- What is the gap between the graduation rate and the proficiency rates in reading and math at your high school?

## School boards and superintendents

School boards and their members play an important role in explaining to families how their schools are doing and what they plan to do to improve.

**Ask your district and school administrators** to explain how the grades reflect the school-improvement plans they have developed.

**Help parents and community members** understand what plans your schools are making to improve and how you are investing limited funds wisely. Engage them and seek feedback.

**Explain the numbers.** How did your schools receive the grades they did? What are the areas to be proud of, and what are the areas that need improvement?

**Make the case for change.** Sure, it could be that more money is part of the solution, but what about the bold changes in how you deliver education that you know will make improvements but parents might resist? Now is the time to make the case.

## For principals and teachers

School grades are like student grades – they provide an opportunity to understand how we’re doing and make plans for improvement. They are a “snapshot.”

**Help students understand** that the school grade is useful information that teachers, principals, school district officials and others can use to see how your school is doing, and to work to improve your grade, no matter what it is now – just like the grades they receive as students.

**Assure students that the grades are not a reflection on them** – it’s something the entire school community will have to work to improve.

**Examine how your local data aligns with the report card.** Are there key areas needing immediate attention? Do they match your building priorities?

**Empower your community** to be informed and involved. Encourage teachers and parents to look at the detailed information about your schools in the Data Warehouse.

For more information on the Maine School Performance Grading System, visit [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

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## Sample Press Release

[YOUR SCHOOL]'S NEW A-F SCHOOL REPORT CARD RELEASED

[CITY]—The Maine Department of Education released [YOUR SCHOOL]'s letter grade report card today to parents and community members as part of the new Maine School Performance Grading System.

[YOUR SCHOOL] received a “[LETTER GRADE],” which reflects several different factors including math and reading proficiency of all students, growth factors that compare test results from multiple years as well as growth in the 25 percent lowest performing students (for elementary schools), and progress and graduation rates (for high schools).

[QUOTE FROM LOCAL SUPERINTENDENT AND/OR PRINCIPAL]

The State of Maine introduced a school performance grading system so students, parents, taxpayers and others could easily understand how their schools are performing, just as report cards help parents understand how their kids are doing. The goals of A-F grading are to provide a starting point and to offer easy-to-understand and concise information showing how a school is doing. We encourage parents and others to explore the new Education Data Warehouse, which provides multi-year, detailed information about our school and allows you to compare our school to others throughout the state using a wide range of measures. The Data Warehouse can be found at: [www.maine.gov/doe/datawarehouse](http://www.maine.gov/doe/datawarehouse).

Information about report cards can be found at: [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

Whether a school receives a higher or lower letter grade, the release of the new report cards represents an opportunity for schools, parents and community members to work together to help every school in the state succeed.

“The letter grade is a quick snapshot of the school and a conversation starter for communities, not about pointing fingers,” said Education Commissioner Stephen Bowen. “It is intended to be a catalyst for discussion and improvement.”

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## Sample letter to parents and community members

Dear parents and community members,

Our school recently received its new letter grade from the Maine Department of Education as part of the new Maine School Performance Grading System.

This grade reflects several factors, including math and reading proficiency of all students, growth factors that compare test results from multiple years as well as growth in the 25 percent lowest performing students (for elementary schools), and graduation rates (for high schools).

Our letter grade is important for several reasons. Though it should be seen in light of a complete context and is one measure of our performance, it shows areas in which we are doing well, and it highlights areas in which we need to improve. The information provided in the report card is clear cut and is available to you online through the Education Data Warehouse at [www.maine.gov/doe/datawarehouse](http://www.maine.gov/doe/datawarehouse). Of course, one grade doesn't tell the whole story. We hope the grade will add to our community discussion about how to constantly improve our school—regardless of where it falls on the grading scale.

[DESCRIBE WORK CURRENTLY HAPPENING IN YOUR SCHOOL/DISTRICT.]

The Maine Department of Education has pledged to support schools that are struggling. The proposed new state budget includes money for school improvement and support, and the Department proposes to use the funds to support schools as they work to improve student achievement.

We hope you will view this grade as a way to become more involved in [OUR SCHOOL/DISTRICT]. You can assist by becoming involved—see how you can use the report card information to support and improve our school: [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

Help us raise the grade together by taking a community approach to the mission of educating children. Together we can strive for excellence in all areas of education. Together we can raise this grade. You can learn more about the report cards at [www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards](http://www.maine.gov/doe/schoolreportcards).

Sincerely,