



MAKING THE GRADE:

Parent Perceptions of A-F School
Report Card Grade Accountability
Regimes

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Abstract

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires that states provide a public evaluation of the performance of each public school while providing broad discretion in how states devise performance frameworks. One common method consists of states assigning each school an A-F letter grade based on English and math proficiency rates and other measures of academic performance. Proponents of the summary letter grade system cite its simplicity as a virtue while detractors contend that the system is simplistic to a fault. To bring greater clarity and context to these ongoing debates we solicited opinions from parents regarding state letter grade systems. We conducted nine semi-structured focus groups with parents in Texas, Arizona, and North Carolina (three focus groups per state). These conversations revealed that most parents were not aware that the state grades schools. Once the performance framework was explained, most parents expressed a belief that it is overly simplistic and insufficiently deferential to what they perceive as the subjective nature of school quality. Parents also revealed substantial tension between their conception of school quality and the way it is operationalized in the report card, with the latter ascribing much greater importance to state test scores.

Parent Perceptions of A-F School Report Card Grade Accountability Regimes

The idea of evaluating states and schools on their educational performance traces its origins to *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 government report that famously concluded that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a People” (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 13). The report ignited urgency around the concept of school accountability. Central to those concerns and efforts was a belief that educational performance metrics across schools and states needed to be collected and published so that key stakeholders (e.g., parents, local elected officials, and superintendents) knew which schools needed to be held to account, even if disagreement lingered over the proper mechanism for doing so.

Since *A Nation at Risk*, the general (if nonlinear) trend of accountability systems has featured enhanced granularity of publicly reported performance data. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell’s “wall chart” represented the first government effort to facilitate comparison of educational performance across states. The chart displayed an accessible list of school metrics including SAT and ACT scores, teacher characteristics, and school expenditure data (Ginsburg, Noell, & Plisko, 1988).

Energy toward replicating or scaling the process initially stalled due to concerns that the dearth of standardization in performance metrics did not readily allow for interstate comparison. By the mid-1990s, however, a broad bipartisan consensus recognized that the country had not made good on addressing the issues raised in *A Nation at Risk* (Olson & Jerald, 2020). The Clinton Administration’s 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

required each state to adopt standards of student learning and to assess student progress along those standards in at least three grades.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002), yet another reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, represented the zenith of the performance-based accountability movement. NCLB required states to publish school-level test score results for students in grades 3-8 (Jacob, 2017; Peterson & West, 2006). It also mandated test administration during one year in high school and required scores to be reported for major subgroups, including “major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families” (Martin, Sargrad, & Batel, 2016). For the first time, parents were guaranteed insight into how their child’s school was performing compared to other schools. The summary letter grade system (i.e., states assign schools grades ranging from A to F) emerged as a popular technique for facilitating comparison across schools. Florida Governor Jeb Bush first adopted the system in 1998 (preceding NCLB by four years), and 15 states have since adopted similar performance frameworks, though Michigan, Utah and Virginia later abandoned the system (Blad, 2023). Methodological approaches vary in terms of how states grade schools, as seen in Table 1. Broadly, idiosyncratic differences notwithstanding, academic proficiency and growth as determined by state tests play instrumental roles in determining each school’s grade (Adams et al., 2016b).

Table 1.

Inputs included in State Letter Grade Systems

	<u>Elementary/Middle School</u>	<u>High School</u>
Arizona	English language proficiency/progress - 10% Student achievement - 30% Student growth - 50% Other - 10%	College and/or career readiness - 20% English language proficiency/progress - 10% High school graduation rates - 20% Student achievement - 30% Student growth - 20%
Florida	Achievement gap – 25% Middle school acceleration/high school readiness – 12.5% Science achievement/growth – 12.5% Student achievement – 25% Student growth – 25%	Achievement gap – 20% College and/or career readiness – 10% High school graduation rates – 10% Science achievement/growth – 10% Social studies achievement/growth – 10% Student achievement – 20% Student growth - 20%
Indiana	Attendance/chronic absenteeism – 5% English language proficiency/progress- 10% Student achievement – 42.5% Student growth – 42.5%	College and/or career readiness – 30% English language proficiency/progress- 10% High school graduation rates – 30% Student achievement – 15% Student growth – 15%

Louisiana	<p>Science achievement/growth and social studies achievement/growth - 25% elementary, 23.33% middle school</p> <p>Student achievement (includes English language proficiency/progress) - 50% elementary, 46.67% middle school</p> <p>Student growth - 25%</p> <p>Other- 5% middle school</p>	<p>College entrance exam (Participation/achievement) - 25%</p> <p>College and/or career readiness - 8.33%</p> <p>High school graduation rates - 41.67%</p> <p>Science achievement/growth and social studies achievement/growth - 4.17%</p> <p>Student achievement (includes English language proficiency/progress) - 20.83%</p>
Mississippi	<p>Achievement gap - 27%</p> <p>English language proficiency/progress - 5%</p> <p>Science achievement/growth - 14%</p> <p>Student achievement - 28%</p> <p>Student growth - 54%</p>	<p>Achievement gap - 19%</p> <p>College entrance exam (Participation/achievement) - 4.75%</p> <p>College and/or career readiness - 4.75%</p> <p>English language proficiency/progress - 5%</p> <p>High school graduation rates - 19%</p> <p>Science achievement/growth - 4.75%</p> <p>Social studies achievement/growth - 4.75%</p> <p>Student achievement - 20%</p> <p>Student growth - 38%</p>

New Mexico	English language proficiency/progress- 10% School climate/culture – 10% Student achievement/growth – 5% Student achievement – 33% Student growth (including achievement gap) – 42%	College and/or career readiness – 12% English language proficiency/progress – 5% High school graduation rates – 9% School climate/culture – 10% Science achievement/growth – 5% Student achievement – 25% Student growth (includes achievement gap) – 30% Other- 4%
North Carolina	Achievement scores (including English learner progress) – 80% Student growth – 20%	Achievement scores (including English learner progress) – 80% Student growth – 20%
Ohio	Achievement gap – 20% Attendance/chronic absenteeism - .63% English language proficiency/progress – 10% Science achievement/growth – 11.46% Student achievement – 21.88% Student growth – 29.16%	Achievement gap – 13.5% Attendance/chronic absenteeism - .48% College and/or career readiness – 18% English language proficiency/progress – 4.5% High school grad rates – 18% Science/achievement growth - .48% Social studies achievement/growth - .96% Student growth -23%

Oklahoma	Attendance/chronic absenteeism - 11.1%	Attendance/chronic absenteeism – 11.1%
	English language proficiency/progress – 16.7%	College and/or career readiness – 11.1%
	Science achievement/growth – 5.6%	English language proficiency/progress – 16.7%
	Student achievement – 33.3%	High school graduation rates- 11.1%
	Student growth – 33.3%	Science achievement- 16.7%
		Student achievement – 33.3%
Tennessee	Attendance/chronic absenteeism - 10%	Attendance/chronic absenteeism - 10%
	English language proficiency/progress - 10%	College and/or career readiness - 20%
	Science achievement/growth - 15%	English language proficiency/progress - 10%
	Student achievement - 30%	High school graduation rates - 5%
	Student growth - 35%	Science achievement/growth - 7%
		Student achievement- 23%
		Student growth - 25%
Texas	English language proficiency/progress – 10%	College and/or career readiness- 30%
	Student achievement – 40%	English language proficiency/progress- 10%
	Student growth – 40%	High school graduation rates- 10%
	Other- 10%	Student achievement – 50%

Source: Education Commission of the States (2021)

States are granted broad latitude in devising school performance rating systems, and this discretion became even greater with the 2015 authorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the successor to No Child Left Behind (Gunderman, 2022; Walsh, Moynihan, & Yin, 2022). California, for example, uses a dashboard system that allows the public to explore school performance metrics while remaining officially agnostic about what those measures mean as indicators of school quality. Connecticut, Washington DC, Iowa, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and South Dakota use rating systems that score schools between 0 and 100 points (Dalton, 2017). The system is more prescriptive than a dashboard, but still invites some interpretation as to what those numbers denote. The school letter grade system (i.e., A-F letter grades) is the most prescriptive. It uses a universally familiar convention to make clear judgements about whether schools are excelling (a grade of A), failing (a grade of F), or doing something in between. Its simplicity is by design. The neoliberal education reform group ExcelinEd, a major supporter of the letter grade system, claims that while most states use “vague labels that are difficult to understand and require an explanation...A-F school grading systems, on the other hand, embrace transparency to recognize success and expose failure in a way everyone can understand.” (ExcelinEd, n.d.).

The Theoretical Case for Test-Based Accountability

Polikoff et al. (2014) explain that there are two non-mutually exclusive theories supporting administrative, test-based accountability systems. Principal agent theory holds that the promise of reward or threat of sanction for performance should direct school personnel to expend greater effort or focus on test score performance. While No Child Left Behind originally envisioned consequences for the lowest performing schools, ESSA is not prescriptive about school turnaround efforts beyond requiring that states must adopt turnaround plans for the lowest

performing schools (Black, Rea, & Reck, 2021). A minority of states officially prescribe sanctions for the lowest performing schools (e.g., closing schools or transferring their governance responsibilities away from elected school boards to mayors or governors). However, even those states rarely make good on the threat of sanction (Black, Rea, & Reck, 2021; Wall, 2023). Whether state accountability frameworks absent the threat of sanction nonetheless retain the potential to catalyze greater focus on student achievement is unclear.

The experiential goods literature meanwhile posits that transparent information about school quality helps families to make better educational choices (Polikoff et al., 2014). It also pressures schools to enhance their performance in the interest of remaining competitive in the education marketplace. The A-F letter grade system amounts to an effort to maximally integrate market-based and administrative-based accountability by offering parents clear judgement about school quality rather than information about school quality. According to ExcelinEd, “In the A-F states across the country, stakeholders strive for excellence in a way you don’t see with fuzzy descriptors like ‘satisfactory’ or ‘performing.’ Grading schools on a scale of A-F produces a sense of urgency to ensure our schools are meeting the needs of every student.”

Evidence Supporting A-F Grading System Effectiveness

Some empirical evidence supports the theory that A-F grading systems can successfully galvanize school improvement efforts. Rouse et al. (2013) observe that elementary schools in Florida under accountability pressure “changed their instructional practices in meaningful ways, and that these responses can explain a portion of the test score gains associated with the Florida school accountability system” (p. 251). Winters (2016) observes a similar phenomenon in New York City. Mayor Bloomberg adopted a letter grade system as part of a more comprehensive suite of school improvement efforts and analyses indicates that students in schools that received

an F grade in the final year of the system's implementation performed better than they would have had their school received a higher grade. Specifically, student scores were .19 standard deviations higher than would be expected in math and .17 standard deviations higher in English/language arts (ELA). Notably, an evaluation by Rockoff and Turner (2008) of the letter grade system in New York City in its first year of implementation observed achievement effects that doubled the magnitude of those observed by Winters.

The methodologies employed by Winters compared to Rockoff and Turner are essentially identical, indicating that the diminishment of the effect over time is authentic and not explained by difference in measurement. Bailey et al. (2020) document that the effects of many initially successful education interventions fade out over time. Lee and Reeves (2012) specifically observe diminishing returns to accountability frameworks introduced by No Child Left Behind. Overall, while evidence suggests that summary school rating systems can initially animate test score improvement efforts, it is unclear whether or to what extent they can do so in perpetuity.

Evidence Against A-F Grading System Effectiveness

Detractors of summary letter grades have found evidence that racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps are larger in schools that receive better grades, inviting concern about whether the incentives are sufficiently aligned with the needs of historically underserved students (Adams et al., 2016a). Moreover, research generally indicates that school quality can explain only a small fraction of student performance, and that most performance is predicted by student socioeconomic characteristics (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). Adams et al. (2016b) observe that letter grades issued in Oklahoma do not properly account for this empirical reality, and that achievement differences generally become statistically insignificant after controlling for student demographics. Finally, the National School Boards Association challenges whether differences

in state test scores are truly indicative of improvements in student learning. Descriptive evidence indicates that letter grades appear to be uncorrelated with state performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NSBA, 2020).

The Politics of A-F Grading Systems

In the political arena, summary school letter grades have faced increased bipartisan scrutiny in recent years. Among Democrats, opposition generally echoes opposition from teachers unions that the system does not adequately capture the intricacies and nuances of school performance and that it encourages teachers to “teach to the test” rather than focus on content mastery (Long, 2015). In 2023, for example, a majority Democratic legislature and Democratic Governor in Michigan put an end to the state’s five-year-old letter grade system. The bill’s sponsor called it a “duplicative, confusing system that... does nothing to actually improve a school’s performance. It is way too focused on standardized testing data which has no bearing on what our schools are dealing with” (Chambers & LeBlanc, 2023).

Republican members of the House in Michigan voted overwhelmingly against scrapping the state’s A-F letter grade system. Elsewhere, however, Republican lawmakers have publicly deliberated whether the system is intellectually compatible with a newly popular ethos among conservatives that accountability ought to be fully enforced through market mechanisms. Whereas the A-F letter grade system entrusts state agencies to render clear judgements about school quality, the “parental empowerment” movement entrusts parents to make these judgements, evidenced by their subsequent decisions about where to enroll their child(ren). Tension between the A-F accountability system and the market-centric system is readily apparent. Kingsbury (2023), for example, observes that most classical charter schools in Texas receive lower grades than the districts in which they operate despite growing demand for the

former and declining enrollment in the latter. In 2023, lawmakers in Utah abandoned the letter grade system due in part to recognition that it was rendered obsolete by the state's adoption of a universal education savings account (Tanner, 2023). In short, A-F letter grade accountability systems are losing support politically. School accountability systems are intended to inform stakeholders, including parents, about the quality of education offered by schools. As such, it is important to understand how parents use state-issued letter grades to make decisions about where to enroll their child(ren).

Method

The current study sought to understand how parents make sense of, use, and value information including state-issued school report grades when making decisions about their child(ren)s' schooling. This work was guided by the following questions:

1. What sources of information do parents use to appraise school quality?
2. To what extent are parents aware of their state's accountability system and how it works?
3. What aspects of schooling matter most to parents when appraising school quality?
4. To what extent do parent-assigned letter grade ratings of their child's school align with state-issued letter grade ratings?

To answer these questions, we conducted focus groups with parents who had children enrolled in public schools in three states that currently employ a letter grade accountability system – Arizona, North Carolina, and Texas (three focus groups per state). We partnered with Roscow Market Research to identify participants and conducted a total of nine focus groups between September 5 and October 3, 2023. Participants completed an informed consent form prior to the start of each focus group and were each given an incentive of \$150 for their

participation¹. Each focus group was conducted via Zoom, followed a semi-structured protocol, lasted between 60 and 75 minutes in length, was recorded, and transcribed. The semi-structured protocol included questions that asked participants about their views on the purpose of education; the types of information they sought out when making decisions about which school(s) to enroll their child(ren); the letter grade they would assign to their child's school²; the extent to which they were aware of their state's letter grade accountability system; and what metrics they would ideally include in such an accountability system.

Participants

A total of 44 individuals participated in our focus groups, including 14 from Arizona, 16 from North Carolina, and 14 from Texas. Thirty-seven participants completed our voluntary demographic survey. These participants had an average of 1.81 (SD=0.88) children currently enrolled in school. Half of the participants were male; half were female. A slight plurality of participants was White (36.11%), and a majority enrolled their children in suburban schools (70.27%). See Table 2 for demographics of the participants who completed the survey.

¹ The study was approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (23-421 EX 2308).

² For parents with more than one child currently enrolled in school, we asked for them to respond regarding their perspectives on the oldest currently enrolled child's school.

Table 2.

Demographics of Participants

<u>Variable</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
No. of children currently enrolled (N=36)			1.81	0.88
<i>Gender (N=36)</i>				
Female	18	50.0%		
Male	18	50.0%		
<i>Race/Ethnicity (N=36)</i>				
African American/Black	8	22.22%		
Asian American	3	8.33%		
Hispanic/Latino/a	12	33.33%		
White	13	36.11%		
<i>Urbanicity (N=37)</i>				
Rural	3	8.11%		
Suburban	26	70.77%		
Urban	8	21.62%		

Note: Seven participants did not complete the demographic survey.

Data Analysis

The first three research questions were answered through qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts. The nine focus groups yielded 209 pages of transcripts. They were coded using ATLAS.ti version 23. A hybrid coding approach was employed (Saldaña, 2015). Upon the completion of the nine focus groups, the first two authors met to discuss notes they had taken throughout the focus groups and drafted a memo; an initial codebook was created based on this

memo. The second and third authors coded the transcripts. Additional codes were created based on the transcripts. Two transcripts were jointly coded by the second and third authors. This process helped refine code definitions and develop a shared understanding of code meanings and their application. The research team met twice to identify emerging themes and arrive at key findings (Maxwell, 2013). The fourth research question sought to understand the extent to which parents' letter grade ratings of their child's school were in line with the state-issued letter grades of the school. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

Findings

Focus group data from parents in states that use A-F grading systems revealed important insights. Parents shared: (1) the sources of information they use to appraise school quality; (2) the aspects of schooling that matter most to them when appraising school quality; and (3) the extent to which they are aware of their state's accountability system. We then explore the extent to which parent priorities align with the inputs included in their state's letter grade accountability system, as well as the extent to which the grades they would give their child's school align with the grades issued by the state.

What sources of information do parents use to appraise school quality?

Participants shared that they looked to a range of sources of information when attempting to appraise school quality. Several suggested that they looked at real estate websites, including Zillow or www.realtor.com, for school ratings. Others relied on www.greatschools.org, which rates schools on a 10-point scale against others in a given geographic location, not uniformly across the United States. Several others shared that they were interested in reviews that others posted about the school online, including those in social media networks. A parent from North

Carolina shared, “I would definitely join community Facebook groups and ask other parents.” Participants who had recently moved to the state or metropolitan area they were in shared that they relied on their new co-workers for guidance on the local schools. Others shared that they began by finding information online or through referrals, but ultimately elected to visit schools before deciding where to enroll their child(ren). One parent in Arizona shared, “There [were] three or four schools in my areas...based on the [online] ratings. [I] got to go to a couple of the schools...talk to them and get more information.” Another parent from Texas shared, “...we walked around the schools, met the staff...just to get a feel of how the school was, and that’s how we choose our school.” Several parents described a process that began with online resources or reviews of schools to identify school(s) to personally visit. Only two participants shared that they sought information from the state’s education department website as part of their decision-making process.

To what extent are parents aware of their state’s accountability system?

When we asked parents if they were aware of the existence of their state’s A-F grading system, some were aware of it while others were not. Those that were aware of their existence had little understanding of what inputs were behind the grades the state issued. However, the simplicity of the system worked; parents understood that a higher grade meant that the school was supposed to be academically better. As one parent from Arizona shared, “I knew [the A-F grading system] existed. ...I just didn’t know what’s included [and] what [the state was] looking at entirely. But I know it’s out there and I know getting a higher score is a really good thing...but that’s all I knew about it.” A Hispanic parent from Arizona who was not aware of the letter grade system’s existence prior to our focus group shared that she wished she had known about the system and that there was standard messaging regarding what the grades meant. He shared,

“Who’s A rating is it? Is it the Arizona Department of Education? I feel like...there should be some standard messaging such that once you see [the letter grade], you know exactly what it means. And even if you don’t know, you know exactly where to go to find out what that means.” Only one parent in our focus groups shared that they understood that the grades were primarily reflective of standardized test scores; however, she did not understand that it was a product of both proficiency and growth measures. The overwhelming majority of participants from all three states were unaware of how to find their child’s school’s letter grade.

What aspects of schooling do parents prioritize?

In each focus group we conducted, we asked participants to collectively create a list of inputs that might go into an accountability system if they were to create one. The list was compiled using Zoom’s chat feature. Participants were then each asked to identify the three to four items that were their top priorities³. Across all nine focus groups, a plurality of participants identified academic metrics including standardized test scores (n=16) and graduation rates (n=16) as inputs they would include in an accountability system. Parents were also interested in the extent to which their children were being prepared for college (n=12) and the student-to-teacher ratios (n=12), as well as items that were less easily quantifiable such as the frequency and quality of communication they had with their child’s teachers (n=8). See Table 3 for the frequency with which participants identified various inputs they desired to be included in school accountability systems.

³ If parents listed more than four items, we only counted the first four items they invoked.

Table 3.

Top 10 Inputs Parents Desired to be Included in Accountability Systems

<u>Input</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Standardized test scores	16	38.1%
Graduation rates	16	38.1%
College preparation	12	28.6%
Student-to-teacher ratios	12	28.6%
Communication with teachers	8	19.0%
Safety/student discipline	8	19.0%
Special education services	8	19.0%
Student grades	8	19.0%
Teacher credentials (i.e., degrees, certification)	6	14.3%
Teacher turnover	6	14.3%

N=42; 2 participants elected not to weigh in.

We also explored the extent to which parents identified similar inputs across focus groups. Focus groups are a useful way to collect qualitative data. Mertler (2019) notes that “people are often more comfortable talking in a small group opposed to a one-on-one interview” and that “interactions among the focus group participants may be extremely informative due to people’s tendency to feed off others’ comments” (p. 175). However, a pitfall of focus groups can be the possibility of groupthink developing (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). As such, we also explored how often each of the inputs was discussed by focus group. Student-to-teacher ratio (or a similar response, such as ‘class sizes’) was identified in the most focus groups (n=6). Five

additional inputs were addressed in five of the nine focus groups. See Table 4 for a list of inputs desired by parents for inclusion in school accountability systems by focus group.

Table 4.

Inputs Desired by Parents by Focus Group

<u>Input</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Student-to-teacher ratios	6	66.7%
College preparation	5	55.6%
Graduation rates	5	55.6%
Safety/discipline	5	55.6%
Standardized test scores	5	55.6%
Teacher credentials	5	55.6%

Note: Unit of analysis for this table is the focus group (N=9)

Parent inputs were further explored by state. We were interested in learning if parents in different states invoked particular inputs at differing rates. For each state, there was at least one input that was articulated across all three focus groups; however, interestingly, what universally emerged in each state differed for each of the three states under study. See Table 5 for a list of the inputs invoked across focus groups by state.

Table 5.

Inputs Identified by All Focus Groups for Each State

<i>Arizona</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-to-teacher ratio • Teacher turnover
<i>North Carolina</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized test scores • Student/teacher diversity • Teacher credentials
<i>Texas</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety/student discipline

Arizona

Student-to-teacher ratios and teacher turnover were the inputs articulated by parents across all three of the Arizona focus groups conducted. One participant shared that he believed that teacher turnover was important “because if...teachers like where they’re at, it’s going to be a good atmosphere for...not just...staff, but also the students.” Another shared, “I like to see consistent teachers.” Participants in each group also stressed the importance of class size. Several observed that when teachers leave and cannot readily be replaced, class sizes often grow.

North Carolina

Standardized test scores, student and teacher diversity, and teacher credentials were discussed in each of the three North Carolina focus groups. Parents viewed test scores not only as evidence of student learning, but also as a proxy for other facets of schooling which they

valued. One parent shared, "...if you had to choose one [metric to consider], which one are you going to choose? ...you're going to choose the school that has the highest [state] test scores, right? ...I'm going to look at the high [state] test scores and I'm gonna hope it's because of the teacher engagement, the student engagement, and [fewer] discipline issues...where kids feel safe." Diversity was another issue discussed in each of the North Carolina focus groups. Black or African American participants initially invoked it most often. Participants shared that they were not exclusively interested in racial diversity, but also religious diversity, cultural diversity, as well as other types of diversity. They viewed it important that their children learn to engage in a world where these differences exist. Participants shared that it was also important for diversity to exist in the staff, teachers, administration, and school board as well. Teacher credentials were the third input that was discussed in each of the North Carolina focus groups, though participants readily admitted that they were unsure how to measure it. Of primary interest to them was that teachers were continually updating their skills and receiving relevant professional development, whether that involved additional certifications, formal postsecondary education, or informal types of learning.

Texas

One input surfaced in each of the Texas focus groups – safety and student discipline. For most of the parents who invoked student safety, it was their number one concern. Participants described the need for there to be a safe environment before it could be an environment conducive to learning. One parent shared, "I really feel sorry for all kids in [their school district]...with shootings and fights and...the disrespect for teachers and authority. It's just really hard to teach in these times." Parents shared that they wanted to know the rates of violent incidences at schools as a metric for judging their quality. It is worth noting that as of this

writing, Texas experienced one of the most recent high profile school shootings among the three states included in this study⁴.

How aligned are state-issued and parent-assigned school letter grades?

Each parent was asked to assign a letter grade for their child's school, along with a rationale for why they assigned the grade. Parents were also asked to privately share with us the name of their child's school using the chat feature in Zoom. We subsequently visited the Arizona Department of Education, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, and Texas Education Agency's websites to find the state-issued letter grades for each of the participant's child's school. Of interest was to learn how similar or different parent and state appraisals of school quality were. Of the 34 participants who shared their child's school name with us, 18 gave their child's school the same letter grade as did their state's accountability system (52.94%). Of the 16 participants whose assigned grade differed from what the state assigned, half (n=8) assigned a higher grade than the state (e.g., parent assigned the school an A, state assigned the school a C) and half (n=8) assigned their child's school a lower grade than the state. Thirty of the 34 participants (88.24%) assigned their child's school a letter grade that was either exactly the same or one letter grade different from that which the state assigned the school. Although in many cases, the parent-assigned grades were either identical or similar to those issued by the state, the reasoning beyond participants' grades were vastly different from the inputs their state department of education considered and were primarily based on their child's individual experience at the school. The accountability systems for each of the three states included in this study are primarily based on standardized test scores; however, parents rarely mentioned test scores when justifying the letter grade they assigned for their child's school.

⁴ Two teachers and 19 students were killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas on May 24, 2022.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the extent to which state letter grade accountability systems were useful to parents in making decisions about schooling for their children, as well as the extent to which these accountability systems were in line with the priorities of parents of school-age children. Most of the parents who participated in this research shared that they located information about schools from sources other than the state education department website. While some of the participants were aware of the existence of the letter grade system, and most understood that a grade of an A, for example, indicated high school quality, there was little understanding of what went into the state-issued grades. A couple of parents stated that they knew standardized test scores were part of it, but they did not understand how the grade was arrived at beyond that. When asked what should inform a letter grade-based accountability system, a plurality of parents invoked standardized test scores as an input; however, it should be noted that more than three in five parents did not list test scores as a priority. About half of parents assigned their child's school the same grade as the state, albeit often for very different reasons than those that informed the state's letter grade assignment. In short, parent priorities often focused on the specific experiences that they and their child had with the school, not overall measures of test score proficiency or year-over-year growth.

Part of the theory that undergirds the use of A-F letter grade systems suggests that transparent information will help parents effectively make decisions about schooling for their children (Polikoff et al., 2014). However, the overwhelming majority of parents who participated in this study sought sources of information other than the A-F ratings when making educational choices for their children. The summary letter grade system appears to fall short of reaching one of its critical objectives.

A recent and dramatic expansion in publicly subsidized private school choice offerings invites new questions altogether about the wisdom of the A-F system. Between 2022 and 2023, 10 states have adopted some form of educational savings accounts (ESAs) legislation, which allow parents to direct a portion of the tax dollars that would have been expended on their child's public education to non-public educational options (EdChoice, 2024; Marshall & Pressley, 2024) – none of which will receive an A-F rating. Private schools will not be assigned an A-F letter grade. Rather, policymakers are entrusting accountability entirely to market forces, exposing tension in the avowed belief that parents are best situated to make schooling decisions for their children with an accountability mechanism that asserts the state prominently into the education marketplace (Kingsbury, 2023).

There are limitations worth noting in this work. The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability; rather it is that of transferability (Maxwell, 2013). The perspectives shared with us in these focus groups represent those of the 44 participants who shared their views with us and might not be reflective of the views of other parents in Arizona, North Carolina, and Texas – or those from other states that employ A-F letter grade accountability regimes. Additional quantitative studies should be conducted to understand the extent to which these findings hold across larger, representative samples. Also, the participants in this study predominantly lived in suburban areas and enrolled their children in suburban schools. The schools they enrolled their children in also performed average to very well according to their assigned letter grades; only one participant enrolled their child in a school that earned a state-issued grade below a C. Future research should explore the views of urban and rural parents, as well as the perspectives of those whose children attend schools that perform more poorly on state metrics.

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