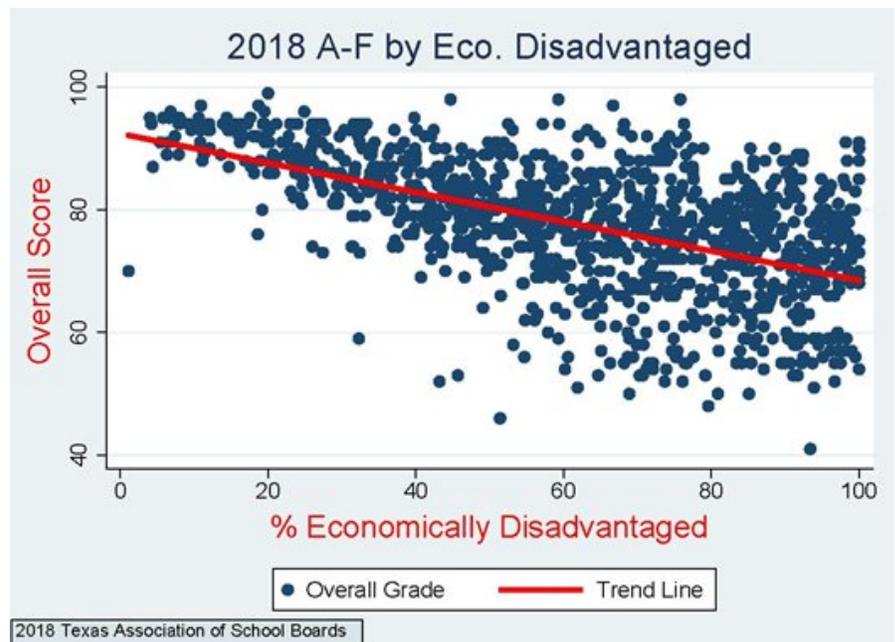




## Striving Towards a Better Accountability

Last week while we were launching our BEST start EVER in Gunter ISD, the state released their A-F rankings of school districts across the state. For those of you who have been with GISD for a while, you might remember an article I posted about this A-F grading system last January. As I reread those thoughts, so much still resonates with our Board and Leadership Team. I wanted to take a few minutes to update those thoughts and expand on what we're doing in GISD related to accountability. Again, a huge thanks to John Wink, Blue Ridge ISD Superintendent who I collaborated with last year to put together some of these thoughts.

**A**ffluence: If you've read one thing about the A-F rankings last week, it was most likely about how it portrayed the state of poverty across our state.<sup>1</sup> As the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) Dax Gonzalez noted, "accountability labels are generally better at tracking economically disadvantaged students than they are at measuring how much our children are learning."<sup>2</sup> Most high-performing districts (earning an A or B) serve fewer economically disadvantaged students while the schools earning Ds and Fs serve many economically disadvantaged students.



**B**ack to Test Prep: The past two years, Gunter ISD has launched a massive Strategic Planning effort<sup>3</sup>, securing the vision for our district for years to come. Hundreds of community members, teachers, students and parents were involved, sharing their hopes & dreams for GISD. We committed to creating a learning environment grounded in voice, choice, reflection, innovation, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration & communication. In fact, at no time, did anyone ever say "we want our kids to work in a test-prep system that focuses on one high-stakes test." Do we teach some test-taking strategies? Absolutely. Do we spend a few days focusing on some highly-tested objectives leading up to the test? For sure. Do we give our kids an opportunity to take a practice test before they see the real deal? You bet. But it should stop there. By buying into a system where 100% of the rating in Elem/MS is based on STAAR only and 80% of the HS and district rating is based on STAAR only, you're buying into more high-stakes accountability and less authentic and meaningful learning experiences. While the students in Gunter have done exceedingly well on most assessments they take, we know that STAAR is

<sup>1</sup> [www.ncforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/A-is-for-Affluent-Issue-Brief-Format.pdf](http://www.ncforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/A-is-for-Affluent-Issue-Brief-Format.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.tasb.org/About-TASB/News-and-Media/Statements/Statement-from-TASB-on-A-F-School-Accountability-L-en.aspx](http://www.tasb.org/About-TASB/News-and-Media/Statements/Statement-from-TASB-on-A-F-School-Accountability-L-en.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/565/Gunter%20ISD%20Strategic%20Plan\\_Page.pdf](http://www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/565/Gunter%20ISD%20Strategic%20Plan_Page.pdf)

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just a tiny reflection of the incredible teaching and learning happening in our classrooms each and every day. And we treat STAAR just like that – an assessment we take one day during the year.

**C**onfusion: The goal of this A-F system was to provide clarity, but it will do no such thing. Not only are there multiple indicators rolled into each domain, the methodology is dense and complex. This rating was based on 32 pages of data that includes over 12,000 data points, explained in an accountability manual<sup>4</sup> that is nearly 200 pages in length. This “grade” then no longer provides a meaningful assessment of how the district or campus is doing. There is also a danger in using an A-F grading system in and of itself. We all understand letter grades, but that 87 you earn on a final report card is based on products and knowledge evidenced in a myriad of ways through a body of work demonstrated throughout an entire school year. To take that same concept of a letter grade and have it come down to essentially one test - it is not the same.

**D**estructive: Klein ISD Superintendent, Dr. Champion said it best – that “just as we would never reduce a student’s worth to a single grade, the reduction of our schools and district to a single grade based on such a limited measure devalues the unique qualities and gifts of (our students).”<sup>5</sup> The system creates a false impression of a school community and stigmatizes entire communities of children based off a single grade. As the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) noted, “the reduction of a campus or district to a single grade dismisses the variance in a school, unfairly reducing every student to the grade assigned to the campus or district.”<sup>6</sup>

**E**vidence: The major problem with the A-F grading system is that it is missing the most important letter, E, which stands for evidence. There is absolutely no evidence that an A-F grading system will help schools or even make them better. In the longest and most researched A-F system in Florida, the number of schools that received an A increased 41%, yet student achievement improved little as most improvements were attributed to rule changes in the system and not in actual student achievement gains.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is substantial evidence from other states that supports the argument that schools receiving letter grades negatively impacted their schools.<sup>8</sup>

**F**ailure: For all of these reasons and more, this system is a failure to our students, our teachers, our parents, our schools, our communities and our state. As a system that was borne out of a desire to provide clarity, it will do nothing but exacerbate confusion and cause a false narrative about school performance. And in a time where teaching and learning must embody 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills like creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication; where schools are striving to prepare students in curriculum in fields like STEM, Health Sciences and the Arts; where our imperative is to prepare students for a future job, many of which do not yet exist – we cannot revert back to a system that will inevitably come down to “teaching to the test.”

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<sup>4</sup> <https://tea.texas.gov/2018accountabilitymanual.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=126&v=E1zDuyddgzs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=126&v=E1zDuyddgzs)

<sup>6</sup> [www.tasanet.org/cms/lib/TX01923126/Centricity/Domain/393/A-F-talkingpoints-2018.pdf](http://www.tasanet.org/cms/lib/TX01923126/Centricity/Domain/393/A-F-talkingpoints-2018.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Tanner, J., (2016). The A-F Accountability Mistake. The Texas Accountability Series. Austin, TX: The Texas Association of School Administrators. [www.tasanet.org/cms/lib/TX01923126/Centricity/Domain/393/A-F-Essay.pdf](http://www.tasanet.org/cms/lib/TX01923126/Centricity/Domain/393/A-F-Essay.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The Oklahoma Center for Education Policy and The Center for Educational Research and Evaluation (January 2013). An examination of the Oklahoma State Department of Education’s A-F report card. The University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. <https://okea.org/assets/files/A-F%20Study.pdf>

School leaders WANT to be held accountable. We just want to be held accountable to the things that are beneficial for students and that matter to our communities:

- **We want to be held accountable** to whether we are living out our mission & beliefs – are the leaders and teachers of Gunter ISD holding ourselves and our students to high expectations; are we teaching beyond the state standards and developing not only life-long learners but teaching good citizenship and high-character?
- **We want to be held accountable** in how we're performing academically in a wide variety of ways and beyond the state assessment: in the number of dual credit hours taken and earned; in the number of students taking and being successful in advanced courses; on the growth our students are showing on the multiple informal and formal assessments we give all year long; on our participation and performance on college preparatory assessments; in the number of students completing coherent sequences in CTE courses and earning certifications with experience on the job site; in the amount of college scholarships earned and the success of our students beyond high school; and honors like being named a 2017 National Blue Ribbon Campus.<sup>9</sup>
- **We want to be held accountable** in how we engage and empower our students: in our participation and performance in extracurricular activities (everything from FFA to the fine arts to student leadership organizations to athletics to robotics to bass fishing) and in the authentic leadership opportunities we offer to our students.
- **We want to be held accountable** in being fiscally responsible: from ensuring our financial stability through a healthy fund balance to being wise in our expenditures to proactively preparing for growth through securing future land sites and developing long-range plans for facilities and personnel.
- **We want to be held accountable** in how we involve our community in what we do and in how we teach our students community service through actually serving our community.
- **We want to be held accountable** in maintaining the most safe & secure environment for our students – and not just in the hardening of our facilities but also in protecting our student's social & emotional wellness.
- Most of all, **we want to be held accountable** to our vision: to be an exceptional school system that develops great people to better our world.

So if not A-F, then what... How do we hold our schools accountable to what a community values for its students? This kind of work requires taking a much broader and deeper look into our district than just the performance on one test. Each year we release a State of the Schools report that does just this. Our 2017 State of the Schools Report<sup>10</sup> is included for your review and we're excited to go even deeper into this work as we prepare to release our 2018 report later this year.

This kind of work also requires a community working together to develop a community-based accountability system that is rigorous and student and classroom centered. For the past 18 months, I have had the privilege to work alongside 62 other public school districts in Texas to develop a grass-roots Community-Based Accountability System (CBAS) where every child is valued and respected and schools can be evaluated

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<sup>9</sup> [www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/8/NationalBlueRibbonSchool\\_9.28.17.pdf](http://www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/8/NationalBlueRibbonSchool_9.28.17.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/158/2017\\_StateoftheSchools.pdf](http://www.gunterisd.org/cms/lib6/TX01917909/Centricity/Domain/158/2017_StateoftheSchools.pdf)

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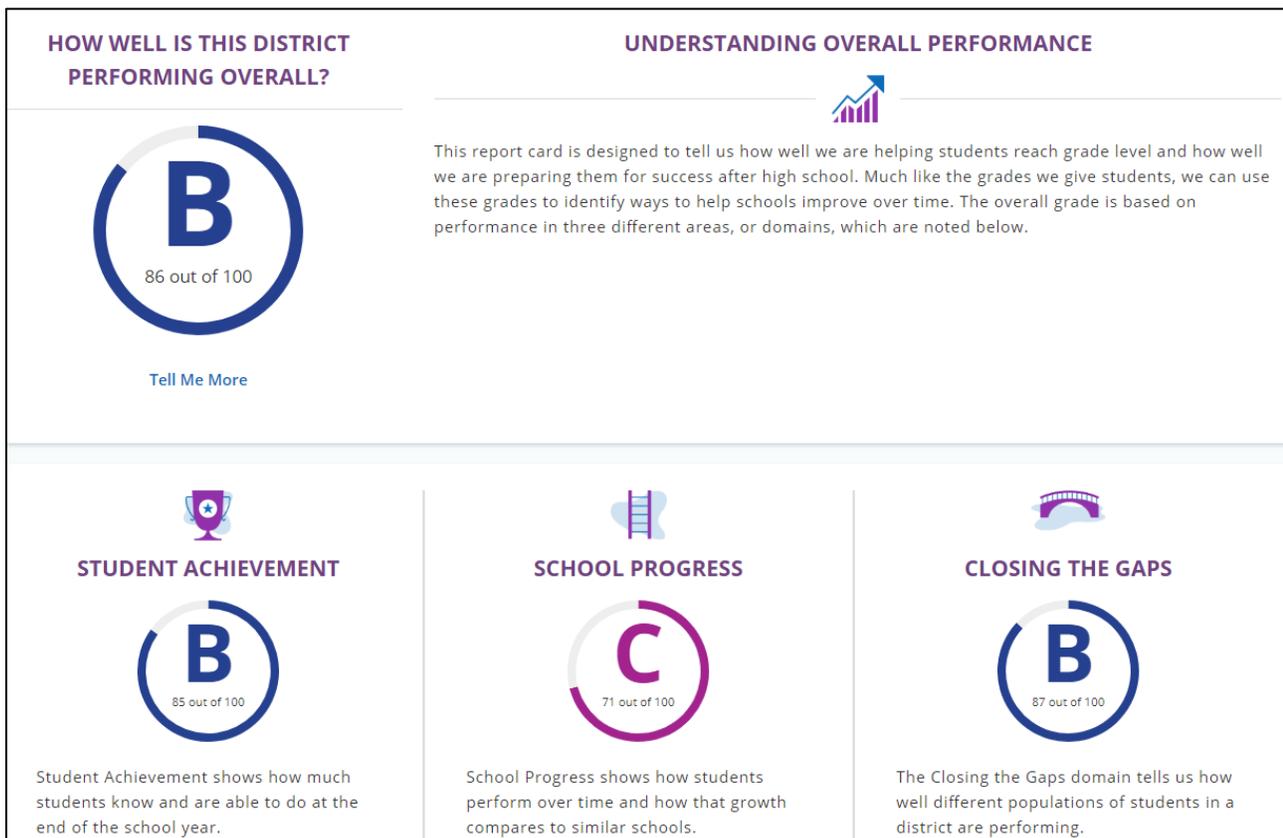
beyond state standardized tests. This collective of districts has partnered with the Texas Association of School Administrators to form the Texas Public Accountability Consortium (TPAC.)<sup>11</sup>

Along with the other Texas districts, we are designing the CBAS model to reflect the diversity, talents, skills, and priorities of communities of all sizes and demographics. Ultimately, the CBAS will allow school districts to identify the unique needs of their community, and evaluate how decisions and changes result in continuous improvement for all students. It will give a full account of what schools do to educate all children, and avoid the inaccuracies that come from assigning a single grade to a system. It will celebrate the hard-earned successes of students, teachers, administrators, and community members and ensure true accountability with reliability and validity, and metrics and indicators to show improvement and growth.

I am so excited about what it could mean for the students, teachers and community of Gunter ISD in the future. But most of all, I am so incredibly proud of the work I see happening in classrooms every single day. I hope that you will partner with us as we strive for a better accountability – one that that helps our students flourish into the kind of thinkers, leaders and innovators that we know they can be and what our world needs them to be!

- Dr. Jill Siler, Proud Superintendent of Gunter ISD

### TEA 2018 District A-F Ratings: Gunter ISD<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> [www.tasanet.org/Page/995](http://www.tasanet.org/Page/995)

<sup>12</sup> <https://txschools.org/>