

Flawed Premise

Recent Arizona news headlines proclaim that Auditor General's June 19th report exposed a broken public school grading system: *"School Grades Mask Poor Performance," "Audit Flunks Arizona's School Grading System,"* and *"Arizona Is Right to Rethink Letter Grades."* Those conclusions only hold if you accept the report's premise - I don't. The "nonpartisan" author of that report was appointed by Governor Doug Ducey in 2018, an out-spoken critic of public schools and a loud proponent of charter, voucher, and private schools.

In today's political climate, data deserves context. As Mark Twain famously said, "Lies, damn lies, and statistics." The biggest problem with data analysis is that too many people outside education confuse two very important test measures: proficiency and growth. Even the Arizona Department of Education acknowledges that "proficiency" is an imperfect term, but changing it would "require overhauling systems" used in the testing world. A better description of proficiency would be "current level" or "status." State tests don't measure whether a student has finished learning; they provide a snapshot of where that student stands compared with same-age peers across Arizona. When 30% of third graders are labeled "proficient" in math, it doesn't mean the other 70% have failed. It means they haven't reached that benchmark, yet. Children don't all learn the same skills on the same day, and that's normal.

Research has consistently shown that proficiency is strongly tied to socioeconomic status. If you know a school's ZIP code, you can often predict its proficiency scores with surprising accuracy. Growth tells a different story. Growth measures how much students learn during a school year. Schools with strong growth take students wherever they begin and help them produce more than a year's worth of academic progress. That's what great instruction does.

This is why I believe efforts to reduce the weight of growth in Arizona's school grades have a nefarious motive. Public schools educate every child. Charter, voucher, and private schools only take students who have higher proficiency levels. If you want to know whether a school is filled with affluent students, look at their proficiency scores. If you want to know whether a school is helping students learn, look at growth. Think about education as a 16-year-old taking a driver's test. Failing because you haven't mastered parallel parking doesn't mean you can't drive. It simply means you haven't mastered that skill, yet.

The strongest indicators of school quality will always be student growth, ACT performance, and graduation rates. Those three measures better reflect effective teaching and long-term success than periodic proficiency scores. If public schools have higher quality teachers, their growth scores will be higher, hence the real reason the Arizona "educational hierarchy" needs to reweight it!

After 38 years in education, including 28 as a superintendent, I've seen these debates come and go. Public schools should be judged only by how much they help students grow, not by measures that largely reflect wealth. Growth - not proficiency - is the truest measure of actual learning.

Dr. Finch can be reached at superintendent@dvusd.org