We Can Do Better than A through F

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Texas Smart Schools Initiative

At the behest of the Legislature, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has graded every Texas school and school district on a scale from A to F. Unsurprisingly, many superintendents are very unhappy with their grades.

One sore spot is the fact that TEA only partially adjusts for student characteristics when assigning the letter grades. Critics argue that the lack of adjustments for student need punishes schools for having challenging student bodies.

Since demographic adjustments are at the heart of the Texas Smart Schools (TSS) information system, we thought it might be useful to compare and contrast the two measures.

TEA's Four Different Letter Grades

The TEA's grading scheme[1]—which is still a work in progress and likely to change—assigns four letter grades to each campus, one for each of four domains:

- Domain I: STAAR Results
- Domain II: STAAR Growth
- Domain III: Closing the Gaps in STAAR
- Domain IV: Non-STAAR academic indicators.

Domain I measures performance based on what fraction of students score at or above the "Final Level II Proficiency" threshold on the STAAR test, with no demographic adjustments or subgroup analyses. Domain II, which appears to be based on Index 2 from the 2016 accountability system,[2] counts the points students accrue by meeting (1 point) or exceeding (2 points) their prior year's performance levels on STAAR. It appears to punish schools where ELL students and racial/ethnic subgroups fail to show progress but does not incorporate any adjustments for student poverty. Domain III rewards schools where the Domain I performance of economically disadvantaged students exceeds expectations, but only adjusts for poverty at the school level and does not adjust for any student characteristics other than poverty. Domain IV uses non-STAAR indicators like graduation rates and SAT scores, again with no apparent adjustment for student demographics.

The TSS Academic Progress Index

None of the four TEA Domains uses the strategy most preferred by educational researchers—a demographically adjusted measure of each school's contribution to student success (a.k.a. its value added). TSS does. Our researchers use state-of-the art statistical modeling to adjust the individual progress of each student in reading and math for the influence of key characteristics such as poverty, special education status, language proficiency, prior performance, and grade level. Not one factor at a time, but in a model that recognizes that poor English language learners are more challenged than poor stu-

dents who are native English speakers. The nuts and bolts of the TSS model are not as easy to explain as the four Domains—there is a whole report on the methodology[3]—but the TSS approach does a much better job of identifying schools that are doing a great job serving the neediest kids.

The clarity that comes from more complete demographic adjustments lets TSS see success where TEA sees failure. For example, Floyd Elementary in Mesquite ISD, which is 95% poor and 55% ELL, received an F, F, D in Domains I, II and III, and outperformed 94 percent of Texas campuses according to TSS. In fact, 84 of the 1,812 schools that TEA labels with an "F" on one or more of the STARR-related Domains (I, II or III) are top performers once demographics are taken into account in the TSS model.

Furthermore, unlike TEA's A-F system, TSS also includes the spending side of the equation. The TSS Fiscal Index measures how each school and district's core operating expenditures compare to that of similarly situated "fiscal peers." Thus, the Fiscal Index identifies schools and districts where educational expenditures are lower than would be expected given their cost environment. Combining the Academic Progress Index with the Fiscal Index yields the TSS Smart Score, a useful combination of metrics that identifies the schools and districts that are achieving great things in cost-effective ways.

Takeaway

Ultimately, TEA's A-F accountability ratings receive an Incomplete for only partially considering the widely varied characteristics of Texas schools. As designed, A-F does not measure what everyday Texans need to know about how efficiently their education dollars are being spent, and whether or not Texas schools are effectively serving all types of students. We are confident the TSS Smart Scores do the job that A-F cannot.

About the Authors

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Notes:
1. TEA's A-F Accountability Resources: http://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Accountability/A-F_Accountability_Resources/
2. TEA's 2016 Accountability Manual: http://tea.texas.gov/2016accountabilitymanual.aspx
3. Texas Smart Schools Methodology Reports: http://txsmartschools.org/highlights/

About TXSmartSchools.org

TXSmartSchools.org is an online resource which allows anyone to access Texas school and district-level data and "Smart Scores" free of charge. It uses comprehensive academic, financial, and demographic data to create the fairest, most apples-to-apples comparisons available. The goal is to improve education by identifying Smart Schools that are both effective and efficient and then highlighting their successful practices.

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