

## SMART STEPS

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### Measuring Poverty, Not Progress

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In our January *Smart Steps* brief we argued that the initial set of A-F accountability ratings released by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) insufficiently adjusts for differing student demographic characteristics and, thus, are an incomplete measure of school success.<sup>1</sup> In this brief we want to more clearly demonstrate that point.

#### TEA's A-F Ratings

Thirty-five percent of the final A-F ratings will be based on the higher of each school's Domain I (STAAR results) or Domain II (STAAR growth) scores. Schools can do well if their students have high scores or if they show improvement. Including academic growth in the ratings is supposed to make them a good measure of school success regardless of where students started academically, but growth will have no impact on the letter grade where Domain I scores are relatively high. Some schools will receive an "A" based on the high-achieving students they serve rather than the quality of the services they provide to those students.

Figure 1 shows TEA's Domain I scores for schools, unless the Domain II grade was higher; then Domain II scores are shown. Both are plotted against the schools' percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The overall pattern shows a distinctive swoop indicating that the percentage of economically disadvantaged students still explains much of the variation in overall school performance.

Figure 1: TEA's School Ratings vs. School Poverty

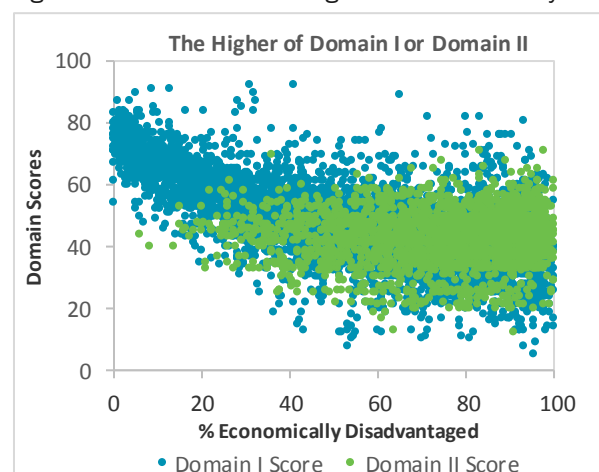


Table 1 translates the Domain scores into letter grades. As the table illustrates, the higher-of-the-two-letter-grades approach does not break the link between poverty and the A-F rankings. The share of economically disadvantaged students is nearly 50 percentage points higher in "F" schools than in "A" schools. No wonder some critics of TEA's approach claim that "A" stands

Table 1: Assigning Each Campus the Higher of its Domain I or Domain II Letter Grade

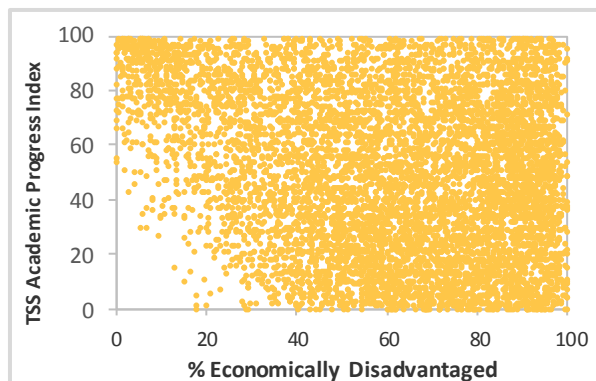
	% Economically Disadvantaged
"A"	31.0%
"B"	53.6%
"C"	67.4%
"D"	76.1%
"F"	80.4%

for affluent and “F” stands for free and reduced lunch.

### TEA’s Growth Measures

Incorporating student growth in the accountability ratings is a very good idea, but TEA’s approach to measuring growth is ad hoc and incomplete. The growth scores (Domain II) are constructed so that much of the progress students make from one year to the next does not count; only progress from one performance level to another counts.<sup>2</sup> This approach is equivalent to telling the schools that helping students improve from a B+ to an A– is progress, but helping them improve from a B– to a B+ is pointless. Furthermore, the Domain II growth scores are adjusted for student ethnicity and language proficiency but not adjusted for student poverty despite clear evidence that poverty affects academic growth at least as much as those other factors.

Figure 2: TSS Academic Progress vs. School Poverty



### The TSS Academic Progress Index

A better approach would be to use a research-based, value-added approach like the one used by TxSmartSchools.org. As seen in Figure 2, the Texas Smart Schools (TSS) approach shows that even when you fully adjust for demographics there is still a correlation between poverty and performance—there aren’t any really bad schools serving advantaged kids—but with the TSS approach there are plenty of high-performing, high poverty schools. No one can claim poverty is destiny with the TSS metrics.

#### About the Author

**Lori L. Taylor** is the Principal Investigator for the Texas Smart Schools Initiative. She is also Director of the Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics, and Public Policy and holds the Verlin and Howard Kruse '52 Founders Associate Professorship at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

#### Notes:

1. Holleman W. & Taylor L.L. (2017). We can do better than A through F. *Smart Steps*, 2(1). Available at <http://txsmartschools.org/pdf/SS%20V-2-1%20TEAs%20A-F%20Ratings.pdf>
2. TEA’s A-F Accountability Resources: [http://tea.texas.gov/Student Testing and Accountability/Accountability/A-F Accountability Resources/](http://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Accountability/A-F_Accountability_Resources/)

### 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.

TXSmartSchools.org is built on the foundational work of the Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) launched by Susan Combs during her tenure as Texas Comptroller. It is supported by Susan Combs through Texans for Positive Economic Policy and administered by Texas A&M University.

**TXSmartSchools.org**

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