

SENATE STAFF ANALYSIS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

BILL: SB 636
 SPONSOR: Senator Pruitt
 SUBJECT: High School Grades
 DATE: April 20, 2001 REVISED: 4/24/01 _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>White</u>	<u>O'Farrell</u>	<u>ED</u>	<u>Favorable</u>
2.	<u>McKee</u>	<u>Hickam</u>	<u>AED</u>	<u>Fav/2amendments</u>
3.	_____	_____	<u>AP</u>	<u>Withdrawn: Fav/2 am.</u>
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____	_____	_____

I. Summary:

This bill changes the required ranges of percentage grades that equate to letter grades and grade points. Under the bill, the required range will be 90-100=A; 80-89=B; 70-79=C; 60-69=D; below 60=F.

This bill substantially amends the following section of the Florida Statutes: 232.2463.

II. Present Situation:

Section 232.2463, F.S., requires all school districts to use the same range of percentage grades that equate to letter grades and grade points. Only one other state has such a law.¹ The 1997 Legislature slightly altered the range for grades C and D. The grade scale history is displayed below:

	A	B	C	D	F	I
1987-1997	94-100	85-93	75-84	65-74	0-64	Incomplete
1997- present	94-100	85-93	77-84	70-76	0-69	Incomplete
SB 636	90-100	80-89	70-79	60-69	0-59	Incomplete

¹ According to research conducted in 1999 by the Education Commission of the States, Arkansas had a law requiring all districts to adopt the same range: 90-100=A, etc. Some other states use a standard conversion scale to assign letter grades when student transcripts include only percentages.

The Senate Education Committee conducted an interim project in 1999 (Project #00-33) and found that the 1997 change in percentages had no effect on grade distributions. Despite the law that requires an unusually high percentage to earn a good grade, most grades (53 percent) are A or B.

A literature review and survey of teachers and administrators found that:

- Many teachers do not use percentages to calculate grades. They grade tests not by counting the number of correct answers but by judging the quality of the responses. Examples include essay tests, short answer tests, or math and science tests in which a value is assigned to each step in solving a problem.
- Many teachers say that grades are subjective even with specified percentages. They arrive at the grades they believe students deserve by giving easier or harder tests. On an easy test, 80 percent might not mean good work, while on a hard test it might mean excellent work.
- When scores on standardized tests are compared with grades assigned by teachers, wide disparities are almost always found.

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The legislation under consideration will change the grading scale of percentages to letter grades and grade points so that 90-100=A; 80-89=B; 70-79=C; 60-69=D; and 59 and below is failing.

In the past, changing the grade equivalents had no effect on statewide grade distribution or grade inflation. However, if individual teachers perceive that they are meant to give better grades, they might do so. The bill widens the range more for grade D than for other grades, so borderline students would be more likely to benefit from this perception.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

V. Economic Impact and Fiscal Note:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

This bill is anticipated to increase the cost of Bright Futures primarily by lowering the percent required to get a grade of “B” from 85 to 80.

The actual impact is unknown; however, by using the following assumptions, the Department of Education estimated a possible impact of \$6.3 million:

- Since the current range for a B covers 9 units (85-93), four-ninths of all Bs would become As and five eighths of all Cs would become Bs.
- From the frequency with which these letter grades were encountered in the coursework used to calculate GPAs for students awarded the Florida Merit Scholarship, GPAs would rise about .35 grade points.
- By reviewing the GPAs of students who did not receive the Florida Academic Scholarship, 309 more would qualify with the higher GPA. Another 3,245 students would qualify for the Florida Merit Scholarship.

The actual effect will depend on the extent to which teachers use percentage grades to determine their letter grades.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

The debate over grades has traditionally been about fairness and perception, not about academic standards. Most parties to the debate recognize that a teacher who wants to inflate grades can do so despite state requirements.

The sponsor of the 1987 bill that created the grading scale, then state-Senator Karen Thurman, was concerned about the fact that districts adopted different grading scales. Residents of Palm Beach County, which had a narrow range, believed that it was harder for their students to make good grades than for students in Broward County, which had the more traditional range of 90-100=A, etc. Fans of high school athletics complained that Broward County had an unfair advantage because it was easier for their athletes to make the required GPA to play sports.

Now, Florida residents are concerned that our public school students have more trouble getting into prestigious out-of-state colleges because our grading scale is comparatively high. They also point out that private schools do not require such high percentages for good grades.

In 2000, Governor Bush vetoed SB 990, which eliminated the state-required percentage ranges and suggested, but did not require, the ranges established in SB 636. The Governor's concern was twofold: (1) that suggesting a lower range would be perceived as lowering academic standards and (2) that districts would adopt different ranges and cause a further perception of inequity. Senate Bill 636 will not allow districts to adopt different ranges.

VIII. Amendments:

#1 by the Appropriations Subcommittee on Education

Specifies that the school board is to report academic achievement of high school students as measured by all statewide assessments, by national assessment, and by grades in high school courses. Grade reports on high school courses must specify the number and percentage of students who received each letter grade in all courses and in each type of course, organized by level and category. In addition, certain report cards must include grade-point averages calculated for Bright Futures, for class ranking, and for unweighted grades.

#2 by the Appropriations Subcommittee on Education

Expands the definition of school-within-a-school. Increases the student population limits of "small school." Allows the Commissioner to approve an exemption to the small-school requirement under certain conditions.