The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 00-33 *September 1999*

Committee on Education Senator Anna Cowin, Chairman

HIGH SCHOOL GRADING POLICY

SUMMARY

Florida is one of two states that establish in law a percentage equivalent of letter grades. When changes are made to the percentages, evidence shows that districts and teachers make valiant attempts to comply with the legislative intent. Yet a close analysis reveals that grading is subjective and inconsistent. Using comparisons among grades in various types of courses and schools, as well as between grades on standardized tests versus teacher assessments, the report concludes that it is impossible to generalize about grades in Florida high schools. Grade inflation certainly exists -- in one Florida school district, over 40 percent of the grades are "A." Statewide, the average grade is not "C" but "B." However, grade inflation appears prevalent mostly for the top students in each high school. The best descriptor of Florida's high school grading policy is one used by assessment researchers -- *hodgepodge*. The report recommends that the Legislature abandon its efforts to control the mechanics of grades. Rather the state should encourage a broad policy in which academic achievement levels are measured independently of other factors and used to identify students and groups who need attention.

BACKGROUND

In 1987, the Legislature established a statewide grading scale for all public high schools (s. 232.2463, F.S.). The legislation was motivated by a perception of unfairness -- if Broward school district set the grade of "A" as equivalent to 90 percent to 100 percent, while Palm Beach set it at 94 percent to 100 percent, some people believed that students in Broward County had an unfair advantage in seeking awards and participating in sports.

The 1998 Legislature adopted two laws affecting the "weighting" of grades by adding points to grades in courses deemed to be more difficult than others.

- In an amendment to the laws authorizing the Bright Futures Scholarship program, the Legislature authorized the Department of Education to assign weights to certain courses when evaluating high school transcripts for scholarship eligibility. The legislation originated from reports that students were motivated to take "easy" courses to earn the grades required for a scholarship, rather than challenging courses that would better prepare them for college.
- In an amendment to s. 240.1163, F.S., the Legislature required school districts to assign the same weights to grades in academic Dual Enrollment courses and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The legislation originated from reports that school districts had a financial motive behind their grading policy -- they wanted students to take more AP courses because of the funds generated for the district when students pass the AP exam.

Several Legislatures have considered amendments to these laws. The 1995 Legislature adopted a different set of percentage equivalents to letter grades in s. 232.2463, F.S., raising the minimum for a "C" grade from 75 percent to 77 percent and raising the minimum for a "D" from 65 percent to 70 percent. The 1999 Legislature considered but did not adopt amendments to the laws regulating both the grade equivalents and the grade weighting schemes.

The 1999 Legislature also required the Department of Education to assign "grades" to schools. Initially, these grades are based only on Florida's standardized test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in reading, writing, and mathematics. In 1998-1999, high schools received grades based on one test administration to their tenth graders. In the future, students will be tested each year so that student progress may be part of the grading scheme. Important features of the first year include:

- For a school to earn a grade higher than "C," no subgroup of its students may score lower than the school's average on FCAT. Subgroups are students who are economically disadvantaged, American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White.

Because of this requirement, almost 80 percent of high schools received a grade of "C."[1]

- Of the five high schools graded "A," only one -- Winter Park High School -- has a regular school zone and accepts all students within it. The rest are specialized schools that accept only high achieving students.

METHODOLOGY

I. A survey of the 67 district superintendents.
II. A review of the literature.
III. An analysis of data on grades contained in the student data base maintained by the Department of Education.

FINDINGS

I. District Survey

Forty-five of the 67 school districts responded to the survey. Most want the law left alone. A substantial majority do **not** want the Legislature to change the percentage equivalents of letter grades, and a slim majority do **not** want more local control over grade weighting. Only four want the Legislature to eliminate the percentage equivalents.

However, many respondents also indicated that they do not like the percentages in law, even some who do not want them changed. Many who do recommend a change want to return to the simpler scale used by schools in other states when they receive transfer students with grades expressed as percentages -- "A"=90-100, "B"=80-89, "C"=70-79, "D"=60-69. Several simply want to return to a minimum grade of 65 to pass.

Only 10 districts supported adding pluses to grades to enable students to earn an extra half a grade point if they are in the high range of a letter grade.

Several administrators indicated that Advanced Placement courses are generally more rigorous than academic Dual Enrollment courses. This observation does not necessarily mean they want local control over grade weighting schemes. A frequently expressed opinion is that no system of grade weighting will satisfy everyone, and they prefer to keep the decision at the state level.

The survey provided considerable evidence that school districts take state policy seriously. All of them instructed teachers specifically about the 1997 change in the percentage equivalent of letter grades, and some used as many as three different techniques to emphasize its importance.

A remarkable contradiction occurred in the responses about grade consistency. Thirty-seven school districts indicated that statewide consistency is a benefit of the legislated grading scale, but 17 of those also said that it is not reasonable to expect statewide consistency in grading policy. Some additional observations about consistency are:

- School administrators who believed in the possibility of statewide consistency often qualified that belief. Consistency is a future possibility and will result only when teacher grades are carefully correlated to FCAT grades.
- Others warned that too much consistency would defy tradition and is politically unfeasible. In addition to measuring final achievement, grades are affected by perceived student ability, effort, attitude, conduct, and improvement.
- Some respondents said that the percentage grades inform parents of how much of the assigned material their children mastered, even though they recognized that some teachers assign much more difficult material than others.
- Some pointed out that many teachers do not use percentage grades, so the law is irrelevant to them.

One Superintendent offered the following observation: "'A grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment, by a biased and variable judge, of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite amount of material.' . . . As long as individual teachers assign grades, we'll have variability. When we use standards [for grading] as we do with everything else from the International Baccalaureate to how we judge hogs at the county fair, we'll be able to standardize across the state and nation."[2]

II. Literature Review

A. Grade Inflation

The literature is consistent in its finding that grades are inconsistent. A preponderance of national research indicates that grade *inflation* is a serious problem for admissions officers of colleges and universities. Some report "very good" school districts having 40 percent to 45 percent of their students with "A" averages. The result is that prestigious colleges must pay more attention to the level of courses taken and to standardized test scores.

---

[1]The number of high schools with each grade: A=5, B=13, C=251, D=47, F=4, I=46.

[2]Bruce Harter, Superintendent, Lee County School District, Survey for Senate Interim Project 00-33.

Grade inflation appears to be most prevalent among the top achieving students at each high school. Students in lower level classes may have the opposite problem -- grade deflation. Some hypothesize that large numbers of very low grades in low-level academic courses reflects an attempt to use grades to influence behavior -- hodgepodge grading -- rather than the application of high standards.

B. Hodgepodge Grades

For student grading in general -- not just for the college-bound -- researchers have adopted the term *hodgepodge* because the grades have so little relationship to current achievement. Correlations conducted using the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), the American College Testing Program (ACT), and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) demonstrate that students with the same classroom grade in the tested subject can score among the highest and the lowest levels on standardized tests.

Research over the past 40 years has supported a general conclusion that grading policies are confused and conflicted. When researchers interviewed teachers and students about grades for a 1999 edition of *Applied Measurement in Education*, they found that both groups actually endorsed a hodgepodge of both academic and social achievement factors.

Although the measurement community endorses "valid grading practices" in which grades in academic subjects reflect only current achievement, the education community has a different tradition and much confusion. Even teachers who endorsed the ideal of validity in grading often said that they actually consider other factors. Some teachers who said that they do not consider other factors also said that, ideally, other factors should be considered.

The other factors considered most often are ability, growth or improvement, effort, and conduct or attitude. Almost all teachers interviewed (80 percent) said that they raised grades based on their perception of student growth or improvement, and 72 percent indicated that they raised the grades for students who they thought were low in ability. A fourth of the teachers said they fairly often raised grades for high effort, and 39 percent acknowledged taking conduct and attitude into consideration when they determine report card grades.

C. Percentage Scales are Arbitrary

Most teachers agree that percentage grading scales on teacher-made tests are usually arbitrary. At best they provide a basis for ranking students, since 90 percent on an easy test may represent performance comparable to 80 percent on a more difficult test of the same topic. A large majority of teachers indicate that they can make grades come out as they like by adjusting the difficulty of the test questions.[3]

D. Grades and Poverty

A 1994 report by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) analyzed the relationship of grades to the standardized tests administered for the National Education Longitudinal Study and to the percentage of students who received free- or reduced-priced lunch. Students in high poverty schools with school grades of "A" in reading got about the same score on the NAEP standardized test as did the "C" and "D" students in the most affluent schools. In math, "A" students in high poverty schools most closely resembled the "D" students in the most affluent schools.

E. Florida Research

Grade Inflation: In one Florida school district, 41.6 of the grades earned in high school were "A" (in 1997-1998). In 16 districts, more than a third of the grades were "A." In only one district were there more grades of "F" than "A."

Miami-Dade Community College regularly compares failure rates on the College Placement Test with student standing in high school. Over 20 percent of entering freshmen who are in the top tier of their high school graduating class fail one or more of the placement tests. These tests measure math, reading, and writing skills at the tenth grade-level.

Hodgepodge Grading: Data compiled for the assessment unit in the Department of Education compared FCAT test scores with grades for a sample of students tested in 1998. This analysis revealed hodgepodge grading because some very high achieving students got very low class grades, and students who scored in the middle of the achievement level got class grades in all range, from "A" to "F." Thirteen percent of students who made an "A" in Algebra II or Geometry scored as low or lower on the math portion of FCAT as 17 percent of students who earned math class grades of "F." One "F" student scored 360 on FCAT math. Only about a quarter of the "A" students did as well.

III. Data Analysis

The analysis of grades included four components:

---

[3]Lawrence Cross and Robert Frary, "Hodgepodge Grading," *Applied Measurement in Education*, 1999.

(1) A comparison of grades in all courses for the years 1996-1997 and 1997-1998.

The purpose was to see if the new percentage equivalents had an effect on actual grades. Perhaps they did, because all course categories had proportionally fewer students graded "D" and "C" than in the previous year, and more graded "F," "A," and "B." That was the year when the percentage required to pass was raised from 65 to 70 and the range for a "C" was narrowed by 2 percentage points, from 75-84 to 77-84. These changes support a conclusion that teachers complied with the idea that the Legislature wanted more students to earn "F" and fewer to earn "C," not that they were adhering to the new scale. Strict adherence would produce the same proportion of grades of "D," "A," and "B" as the previous year because the number of points in those ranges did not change. Instead, more students earned "A" and "B" and fewer earned "D."

(2) A comparison of grades in dual enrollment, advanced placement, and honors courses.

The purpose was to see which courses tended to generate higher grades. Statewide, students tend to earn more grades of "A" and "B" in dual enrollment (78 percent) than in Advanced Placement (76 percent) or Honors (65 percent). Dual enrollment is the only category in which more students earn "A" than "B" (42 percent "A" and 36 percent "B").

(3) A comparison of grades in two "lower level" courses -- general math and Algebra I.

Students in the ninth grade in 1997-1998 are required by law to complete Algebra I to graduate, so those grades need to be closely monitored. The grades are alarmingly low in Algebra I, where 43 percent of students earned "D" or "F" in 1997-1998. They are low in general mathematics as well, but fewer students are taking that course, probably because of the pressure from the state to raise the course levels.

(4) An analysis of grades in a sample of schools graded "A" through "F."

Staff used a selected sample of five schools in each category because only five or fewer were designated "A" or "F." Not surprisingly, schools with grades above "C" had fewer failures in general (7.4 percent), and schools with grades below "C" had more (15.7 percent). Students in advanced courses at low-graded schools did about as well as advanced students in better schools, but almost half the students in the two low-level math courses at low-graded schools made a "D" or an "F." Still, about half the grades in all courses at low-graded schools were "A" or "B," an indication of grade inflation.

Below are tables that display more detail of these findings. Table 1 displays by school grade designation the percent of students who earned each letter grade in selected course categories compared to all courses. Table 2 compares 1996-1997 grades with 1997-1998 grades in the selected types of course and all courses. In both tables, the school sample includes all public high schools with grade "A" and "F" and a sample of five schools each with designation "B," "C," and "D."

Table 1: Rate of Student Grades by School Grades: 1997-1998

Course Type	Student Grades					
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**F**	**Total**
			"A" Schools			
Algebra I	16.3%	40.7%	37.4%	0.0%	5.7%	1409
General Math	11.2%	32.2%	40.9%	0.0%	15.7%	832
Dual Enrollment	28.6%	45.0%	22.6%	1.8%	1.9%	925
AP	27.1%	42.9%	21.0%	5.1%	3.9%	3633
Honors	27.6%	40.2%	23.2%	6.4%	2.7%	17562
All Grades	36.5%	34.7%	22.2%	1.0%	5.6%	82943

Course Type	Student Grades					
	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**F**	**Total**
			“B” Schools			
Algebra I	11.0%	26.2%	28.7%	18.4%	15.8%	3873
General Math	8.5%	22.9%	27.7%	22.9%	17.9%	1752
Dual Enrollment	42.1%	34.6%	16.7%	4.1%	2.5%	3110
AP	45.5%	40.2%	11.5%	2.1%	0.7%	3524
Honors	27.3%	42.4%	22.2%	5.4%	2.8%	23443
All Grades	29.5%	32.0%	21.1%	8.9%	8.4%	154668
			“C” Schools			
Algebra I	7.2%	24.5%	26.9%	20.3%	21.1%	1510
General Math	6.0%	22.4%	26.7%	17.9%	26.9%	2714
Dual Enrollment	44.1%	33.8%	15.4%	3.8%	2.9%	866
AP	36.5%	42.4%	15.9%	4.0%	1.3%	1322
Honors Grades	30.2%	36.9%	20.5%	6.8%	5.6%	10411
All Grades	28.8%	27.1%	20.5%	10.1%	13.4%	121519
			“D” Schools			
Algebra I	9.9%	18.7%	24.4%	16.7%	30.4%	2918
General Math	8.4%	19.6%	23.5%	19.5%	29.0%	2124
Dual Enrollment	39.7%	30.1%	23.5%	4.0%	2.8%	575
AP	42.0%	36.2%	16.1%	4.3%	1.4%	789
Honors	26.3%	45.7%	18.7%	6.2%	3.5%	9821
All Grades	25.0%	26.3%	20.8%	11.6%	16.3%	86747
			“F” Schools			
Algebra I	7.6%	17.4%	36.35%	18.3%	20.4%	1524
General Math	4.7%	17.5%	29.4%	18.0%	30.3%	1916
Dual Enrollment	42.3%	32.4%	20.7%	4.5%	0.0%	111
AP	29.0%	33.0%	28.8%	6.7%	2.5%	403
Honors	21.7%	37.8%	28.1%	7.4%	5.0%	5129
All Grades	22.0%	28.3%	30.5%	13.2%	16.7%	70575

Table 2: Grades Earned by Students in Florida Public High Schools: 1996-1997/1997-1998

	A		B		C		D		F		
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	Total
Algebra 1 Courses											
All: 1996/97	14754	8.5%	33522	19.3%	49789	28.7%	37687	21.7%	37593	21.7%	173345
All: 1997/98	14982	8.2%	37340	20.5%	51744	28.4%	35408	19.4%	42919	23.5%	182393
"A" Schools	229	16.3%	573	40.7%	527	37.4%	0	0.0%	80	5.7%	1409
"B" Schools	425	11.0%	1016	26.2%	1110	28.7%	712	18.4%	610	15.8%	3873
"C" Schools	109	7.2%	370	24.5%	406	26.9%	307	20.3%	318	21.1%	1510
"D" Schools	288	9.9%	546	18.7%	712	24.4%	486	16.7%	886	30.4%	2918
"F" Schools	116	7.6%	265	17.4%	553	36.3%	279	18.3%	311	20.4%	1524
General Mathematics Courses											
All: 1996/97	15958	8.4%	39731	20.8%	53738	28.1%	36924	19.3%	44725	23.4%	191076
All: 1997/98	14276	8.8%	36086	22.4%	43348	26.9%	28152	17.5%	39467	24.5%	161329
"A" Schools	93	11.2%	268	32.2%	340	40.9%	0	0.0%	131	15.7%	832
"B" Schools	149	8.5%	402	22.9%	486	27.7%	401	22.9%	314	17.9%	1752
"C" Schools	164	6.0%	609	22.4%	724	26.7%	487	17.9%	730	26.9%	2714
"D" Schools	178	8.4%	417	19.6%	499	23.5%	415	19.5%	615	29.0%	2124
"F" Schools	91	4.7%	336	17.5%	564	29.4%	344	18.0%	581	30.3%	1916
Dual Enrollment Courses											
All: 1996/97	22011	41.2%	18893	35.4%	9021	16.9%	2097	3.9%	1384	2.6%	53406
All: 1997/98	22133	41.7%	19051	35.9%	8530	16.1%	2006	3.8%	1325	2.5%	53045
"A" Schools	265	28.6%	416	45.0%	209	22.6%	17	1.8%	18	1.9%	925
"B" Schools	1309	42.1%	1077	34.6%	519	16.7%	127	4.1%	78	2.5%	3110
"C" Schools	382	44.1%	293	33.8%	133	15.4%	33	3.8%	25	2.9%	866
"D" Schools	228	39.7%	173	30.1%	135	23.5%	23	4.0%	16	2.8%	575
"F" Schools	47	42.3%	36	32.4%	23	20.7%	5	4.5%	0	0.0%	111
Advanced Placement											
All: 1996/97	31081	37.3%	31591	37.9%	15965	19.2%	3367	4.0%	1306	1.6%	83310
All: 1997/98	32880	37.5%	33870	38.6%	15534	17.7%	3632	4.1%	1759	2.0%	87675
"A" Schools	985	27.1%	1557	42.9%	764	21.0%	186	5.1%	141	3.9%	3633
"B" Schools	1604	45.5%	1416	40.2%	406	11.5%	74	2.1%	24	0.7%	3524
"C" Schools	482	36.5%	560	42.4%	210	15.9%	53	4.0%	17	1.3%	1322
"D" Schools	331	42.0%	286	36.2%	127	16.1%	34	4.3%	11	1.4%	789
"F" Schools	117	29.0%	133	33.0%	116	28.8%	27	6.7%	10	2.5%	403

	A		B		C		D		F		
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	Total
Honors Courses											
All: 1996/97	169627	25.8%	247125	37.6%	166155	25.3%	51993	7.9%	23101	3.5%	658001
All: 1997/98	179860	25.9%	267658	38.5%	165533	23.8%	51665	7.4%	29777	4.3%	694493
"A" Schools	4843	27.6%	7054	40.2%	4079	23.2%	1117	6.4%	469	2.7%	17562
"B" Schools	6404	27.3%	9935	42.4%	5198	22.2%	1261	5.4%	645	2.8%	23443
"C" Schools	3141	30.2%	3843	36.9%	2134	20.5%	707	6.8%	586	5.6%	10411
"D" Schools	2583	26.3%	4484	45.7%	1807	18.4%	608	6.2%	339	3.5%	9821
"F" Schools	1113	21.7%	1941	37.8%	1443	28.1%	377	7.4%	255	5.0%	5129
All Courses											
All: 1996/97	1731141	25.2%	1847219	26.9%	1634974	23.8%	831762	12.1%	821460	12.0%	6866556
All: 1997/98	1883724	25.6%	2038589	27.7%	1667146	22.7%	803290	10.9%	953850	13.0%	7346599
"A" Schools	30267	36.5%	28805	34.7%	18401	22.2%	853	1.0%	4617	5.6%	82943
"B" Schools	45614	29.5%	49530	32.0%	32700	21.1%	13784	8.9%	13040	8.4%	154668
"C" Schools	35053	28.8%	32985	27.1%	24895	20.5%	12312	10.1%	16274	13.4%	121519
"D" Schools	22458	25.0%	23568	26.3%	18692	20.8%	10367	11.6%	14662	16.3%	89747
"F" Schools	15512	19.9%	19953	25.5%	21510	27.5%	9349	12.0%	11783	15.1%	78107

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The Legislature should not amend the law that establishes a percentage equivalent to letter grades.*

This law should be repealed or left alone. Tinkering with the grading scale lends too much importance to a calculation whose result is arbitrary. The Legislature should encourage school districts to consider percentages on teacher-made tests only as a class-ranking strategy and recommend that, if percentages are used, the scale should be as simple and easy to remember as possible.

2. *The Legislature should repeal the mandate that grades must be weighed the same for Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement courses.*

Even though many school districts prefer to have the Legislature make this difficult decision for them, they are in a better position to judge the academic rigor of these courses. College admissions offices receive both weighted and unweighted grade point averages and are free to use an entirely different weighting scheme if they wish.

3. *State policy should encourage the use of grades in academic subjects to reflect current achievement.*

School districts should not adopt policies that raise or lower academic grades based on student effort, ability, growth, or attitude. Teachers, districts, and schools should try to reward or influence these attributes, but not through grades in academic subjects. The only exception should be in the Bright Futures Scholarship program, where systematic grade weighting encourages students to attempt higher level courses.

4. *The Legislature should continue to require schools to succeed with all student subgroups to earn high grades under the "A-plus" plan.*

A frequent complaint about the school-grading process is that high performing schools cannot earn a high grade if students in a subgroup are low achievers. The purpose of that requirement is to cause schools to focus on the subgroups and make sure they are taught. The rate of failure in low-level academic subjects is too high to indicate improvement with all subgroups.

COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT ***(Contact first committee for more information.)***
Committee on Education, 404 South Monroe Street, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100, (850) 487-5213 SunCom 277-5213

MEMBER OVERSIGHT
Senators Cowin and Jones