



January 5, 2017

Dear Parent/Guardian/Community Member,

Imagine getting onto an airplane for a trip. You take your seat, and the plane lifts off into the sky, climbing up to the clouds. Cities are visible far below as the pilot makes a shocking announcement: The plane isn't quite finished being built, but the crew hopes to complete it soon. It is capable of take-off, but the navigation and communication systems aren't finished, and the controls are not completely installed. I'm sure that any of us sitting in that situation wouldn't have much confidence in the plane or the crew's ability to land it safely and successfully.

On Friday, the Texas Education Agency will release preliminary ratings under its new accountability system for public school districts. Official ratings under the new system won't be released until August 2018. Friday's release of early, incomplete ratings is unusual, particularly when the state itself calls the system a "work-in-progress."

In other words, the airplane is already flying, but TEA hasn't finished building it yet.

A-F was created by TEA in response to a law passed in 2015 by the 84th Legislature. The new system is called A-F because it assigns familiar letter grades to districts and schools based on five domains: Student Achievement, Student Progress, Closing Performance Gaps, Postsecondary Readiness, and Community & Student Engagement.

Schools across the state will receive preliminary ratings based on an incomplete system, and those ratings will essentially be in place for the next year and a half until the first official ratings are released in August 2018.

Anytime a new accountability system is created, the early results are rarely positive, and there is typically an adjustment period during which the system is fine-tuned and schools become more familiar with the rules. The difference this time is that the state is making the adjustment period much more public by assigning ratings to schools and districts before the problems with the system are resolved. Again, the system itself isn't complete.

It appears that districts and schools across the state, including Deer Park ISD, will receive preliminary ratings that are not consistent with their expectations and students' achievements. The ratings are not a fair indicator of the work our students and staff are doing, and some of the reasons include the following:

- It is nearly impossible to know what each letter grade means. While people are certainly aware that a "B" is better than a "C," the actual difference between those grades is mostly a mystery. The ratings are based on pages of complicated rules and calculations. If a school receives an "A," its staff members will have just as much difficulty telling someone why they received that grade as a school receiving a "D." The only difference is that the "A" school does not have to give an explanation because no one questions an "A."

- The ratings, particularly in Domain IV (Postsecondary Readiness) as it relates to the lower grade levels, are based largely on factors that the schools cannot control. For both elementary and junior high campuses, this domain is based on “Chronic Absenteeism.” If a student is absent for at least 10 percent of the instructional days, the school and district are significantly penalized. Schools have almost no control over student absences. Also, the system assumes that students who are chronically absent are academic low-performers, but that’s not always the case.
- As expected, the preliminary ratings in our district and across the state align with wealth and poverty. Poverty has an undeniable connection with low academic performance. Schools with a higher number of children from low-income families receive lower ratings, and schools in wealthier areas receive higher ratings. The poor schools are judged as bad, and the wealthy schools are judged as good when neither statement is entirely true.
- The A-F system isn't fair to our neighborhoods. Communities across the state identify closely with their schools, and when a school receives a bad rating, that label is also assigned to the community. This can impact property values, which affects funding for roads, emergency and municipal services, schools, and more. But more importantly, it impacts the community's identity and sense of pride. If there were no other reason to question the wisdom of the release of these preliminary ratings, then this concern certainly provides one. Many of the rating calculations are based on a single day of standardized test scores. They don't include the considerable impact of programs that are treasured by most communities, such as fine arts, bilingual and dual language programs, technology integration into daily classroom instruction, community service and character development, and athletics, to name a few. These elements will be considered in the August 2018 official ratings, but they are not part of the preliminary ratings being released this week. (For the record, they will count for only 10 percent of the official rating next year.)

I believe strongly in the value of accountability, and I think our schools should be held accountable for our community’s expectations; however, this work-in-progress A-F system is not an accurate representation of the accomplishments of our students and staff. It’s simply another attempt to categorize our public schools in a negative---and inaccurate---light.

The good news is that, assuming the state will eventually establish consistent rules for the new system, we have several months to learn to play the game and succeed. In the meantime, I want to assure you that our schools are the same outstanding learning communities that they have been for the last 86 years.

School district administrators and board members throughout the state have expressed their concern with this new proposed system with many, including Deer Park ISD, unanimously passing resolutions calling for the upcoming legislature to repeal the A-F system.

If you believe that our students and our schools deserve a fair system of accountability, I hope you'll take a few minutes to contact your state representative and senator. If you’re not sure how to contact them, go to www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/Home.aspx and enter your home address.

Thanks, as always, for your continuing support for our students, teachers, and support employees, and if you'd like more information about the state accountability system, click the following links (Please note that DPISD is not responsible for content appearing on non-District websites):

<http://www.tasanet.org/site/Default.aspx?PageID=925>

<http://www.raiseyourhandtexas.org/advocacy/key-issues/state-accountability-interventions/>

<http://blog.chron.com/chronopinion/2015/05/another-voice-rating-performance-or-punishing-poverty/>

<http://tea.texas.gov/2804implementation.aspx>

Sincerely,

Victor E. White, Jr.
Superintendent of Schools