



A Better Way to Rank Schools

By Ben DeGrow

Summary

The Legislature is right to expect results from schools that government runs. But the state's current ranking system does not do enough to recognize schools that beat their peers in working with the most challenging children.

Main text word count: 722

As Michigan faces increased pressure to fix its lowest-rated schools, the state's approach to identifying and addressing poor academic performance itself needs some repair.

On Jan. 20, Michigan's School Reform Office released the names of 38 schools that have been stuck in the bottom 5 percent for three straight years. The three charter schools on the list have been closed or will be closed by the summer. For the first time, conventional district schools could face the same sanction for poor academic performance, or at least be subject to a state intervention that leads to a staff turnover or new management.

Most of those 38 schools have exhibited chronic failure that merits intervention or stronger sanctions. Officials should talk with parents as part of their deliberations on which schools to close or shake up with a turnaround effort. But a few schools are being unfairly judged, even while beating the odds of student poverty they face. The clearest example is Detroit's Thirkell Elementary, which looks significantly better when compared with its highest-poverty peers.

Phil Pavlov, the Senate Education Committee chair, has opened up a conversation about how the state addresses its lowest-performing schools. His announcement that he intends to rewrite the law on failing schools was met by applause from diverse quarters. But school reformers will have a harder time seeing eye to eye on a proposed replacement.

If the government funded education but did not run schools, the state would have no role dictating a single standard for quality. But since schools are directly funded by tax dollars, mostly from the state, the Legislature should require results from them. This begins with setting achievement standards and then assessing students' skills and knowledge.

As the state considers what to do with the 38 schools set for closure, it's important to figure out what a good approach should look like. Unfortunately, the current Top-to-Bottom rankings need an upgrade. The current system relies too heavily on raw state test scores. This approach essentially rates schools on student socioeconomic status. High poverty and low achievement tend to go hand in hand, because poor students bring extra challenges with them. Judging school quality only on raw achievement scores is like penalizing runners who started a race well behind their competitors.

The Mackinac Center's Context and Performance Report Cards add an important perspective to the debate. They compare the test scores of

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Thirkell Elementary scores poorly on the state's ranking system, but much better than expected.

schools based on the number of students from low-income families. While the comparison is not perfect, it is better than the state's method of calculating a school's effectiveness.

Mackinac's CAP scores should not replace the state's rankings, but they should guide decisions about schools. Elementary schools are the most appropriate places to use demographic-based comparisons, since students who are behind there have more time to catch up.

The case for such comparisons is somewhat weaker at secondary schools, for the world which awaits students after graduation will not compare their performance strictly to peers from the same economic background.

We should expect much from all schools and students. That means recognizing that student progress toward fixed standards is as least as important as raw test scores. Though growth for all students matters, schools must pay special attention to the lowest performers, who need the most help, and the highest performers. Both groups are easily overlooked in a system that looks only at the big picture results. An improved rating system should give extra weight to progress attained by these groups.

Achievement and progress on state tests are the most objective indicators available for assessing school quality. Still, other factors, like graduation rates, course completions and school safety, should account for a small percentage of a school's overall grade.

Many parents base their enrollment decisions on non-academic factors, which means that an overall school grade, especially one calculated in Lansing, is an incomplete tool for ensuring a good education for a student. Despite its limitations, though, a clear, accurate and fair system for grading schools would effectively shape public and parent discussions that expand choice and drive improvements.

The state has a long way to go to make sure that all students learn. One way to give the neediest children better odds of success is to do something about schools that consistently fail to meet basic standards. The first step is to accurately identify those schools.

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