

The Register-Guard

<http://www.registerguard.com/>

EDITORIAL: Grade inflation for schools (<http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/22860633-47/story.csp>) |

New report cards earn ‘needs work’ mark

Posted to Web: **Wednesday, Nov 11, 2009 05:18PM**

Appeared in print: **Wednesday, Nov 11, 2009, page A8**

The state Department of Education apparently doesn't believe in grading on the curve: Its annual report cards rate 34 percent of Oregon public schools as "outstanding." When one in three schools achieves the highest possible mark, it becomes difficult to spot the few that are actually doing an extraordinary job of teaching children. The highest grade has been devalued to mean no more than "above average."

Oregon has had these report cards for 11 years now. Until this latest set, schools could be given one of five marks, ranging from "exceptional" to "unsatisfactory." Now the grades have been reduced to three: "outstanding," "satisfactory" and "in need of improvement."

The state grading system has been altered to bring it into alignment with the assessments performed under the federal No Child Left Behind law. The act requires an evaluation of the academic progress of subsets of students — minorities, the disabled, English language learners and those from low-income families. Schools that succeed in moving all subsets of students forward are deemed to have made "adequate yearly progress." Those that fall short of the AYP standard can face such consequences as a mandate that their students be allowed to transfer to other schools.

By taking into account progress from one year to the next, it's possible that the state grades will eventually provide a means of tracking trends in a school's performance. Yet this type of information is already being made available through the No Child Left Behind evaluations.

The state grades have never meant much, and they mean even less now. How can a school be truly "outstanding" when it's part of such a large crowd? Is it possible that only 5 percent of the schools in the state are "in need of improvement?" The great majority of schools, 61 percent, received a grade of "satisfactory" — an evaluation that invites a statewide shrug of the shoulders.

The report cards are mandated by the state Legislature, so the education department can't just quietly drop the state grading exercise. The Legislature ought to take a second look and ask whether the grades amount to wasted effort. Until then, the report cards deserve a mark of "needs work."

Copyright © 2009 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA