

## GuestViewPoint

# Experts find flaws in school grading system

In Raton, Columbian Elementary School slipped from grace — an A in the 2010-2011 school year — to a C in the 2011-2012 school year. Parkview Elementary in Socorro plummeted from a B to an F, and Yucca Elementary in Artesia sank from a B to a D.

And yet Socorro High School, Española's San Juan Elementary Schools, Navajo Middle School, and Farmington's Country Club Elementary maintained their Bs. Raton Middle School and Socorro's Midway Elementary rose from a D to a B.

If you're a parent trying to understand how your child's school is doing, chances are you haven't gotten far since the state Public Education Department issued its second set of grades. And you're in the same boat as principals, superintendents and elected officials.

Educators and politicians have weighed in. Now we're starting to hear from parties that don't have a political agenda, and it's official: The state's grading system of schools is too complicated, and the methodology is questionable.

The nonpartisan Coalition for Excellence in Science and Math Education says the state's A-F school grading system is hard to understand, and the system combines elements that are not only apples and oranges but tofu and cheeseburgers. As a result, the results can swing dramatically from year to year.

The coalition's only agenda is to improve math and science education in the state; its membership is weighted with scientists and engineers, many with national lab backgrounds. I've always found them reliable.



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Next comes retired economist Stephen M. Barro, who crunched numbers and found that of 821 schools graded in both years, 510 saw a change – 232 for the better, 278 for the worse.

Oñate Elementary in Gallup, which dropped from a C to an F, and 111 other schools changed by two levels or more. Of the 73 that received an A last year, only 17, including Sidney Gutierrez Middle School in Roswell, maintained them this year, but 39, like Goddard High in Roswell, dropped to a B; and 15 sank to a C. Roswell High School was one of two that plunged from an A to a D.

Of the 264 schools graded A or B last year, only 140 made an A or B this year; 88 were reduced to a C, 31 to a D, and 5 to an F.

Forty-five of the schools graded B, C or D before got an F this year, including Northeast Elementary in Farmington and Gallup's Churchrock Elementary.

Schools just don't go from a B to F, or vice versa, in a year, said M. Kim Johnson, a retired physicist and an author of the coalition report. The big swings are a function of clumping different measures together that just don't fit, which is mathematically inappropriate.

In an op ed, Barro wrote that this kind of movement simply means the grades are unstable and therefore unreliable, which "raises doubts about the soundness of the underlying methodology and points to the need for a full, independent review."

Barro is also annoyed that the department is keeping data close to the vest, the implication being that nobody else can understand its system.

Here's the gaping hole: The department bases grades partly on a proficiency indicator but doesn't adjust for student demographics – ethnicity, language, disabilities, poverty.

A school with a lot of low-income kids, for example, may appear to be under-performing, when it's actually doing pretty well for its demographic.

Education Secretary-designate Hanna Skandera has said the system must be complicated to measure all the elements of school performance. That may be so, but why is it not available for scrutiny? What kind of transparency is that?

Everyone can agree on the need to measure school performance.

We also need to evaluate the evaluation, measure the measurement.

Too much hangs in the balance not to.

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