

Policy brief on Grading Alternative Schools

State Profile

In 2004, there were 258 schools that were previously identified as alternative schools.

59 schools (in 21 districts) that were previously typed as an alternative school were large enough to receive a school grade in 2004.

- 12 of these schools received a school letter grade because they had received a school letter grade in prior years.

2004 Grade	Number of Schools
A	3
B	0
C	5
D	1
F	3
Total	12

- 47 schools received a “points only” calculation; a school letter grade was not assigned. These points translated into a school letter grade would result in the following distribution.

2004 Grade “Points Only”	Number of Schools
A	2
B	1
C	5
D	3
F	36
Total	47

199 schools were too small to receive a school letter grade. These schools had fewer than 30 full year students with assessment results.

Student Performance in Alternative Schools

Student performance in Florida's alternative high schools are not significantly different from the performance of the lowest performing high schools. In fact, there are regular high schools that are performing below alternative schools.

The chart below compares student achievement levels of regular high schools, the lowest performing high schools and alternative high schools.

READING AL 2004	Regular Number	Regular Percent	Alternative Number	Alternative Percent	Low Regular Number	Low Regular Percent	Total
AL 1	80343	29.4	1745	67.1	3612	64.3	85700
AL 2	86622	31.7	546	21.0	1445	25.7	88613
AL 3	57257	21.0	201	7.7	408	7.3	57866
AL 4	24903	9.1	66	2.5	100	1.8	25069
AL 5	23915	8.8	41	1.6	56	1.0	24012
Total	273040	100.0	2599	100.0	5621	100.0	281260

MATH AL 2004	Regular Number	Regular Percent	Alternative Number	Alternative Percent	Low Regular Number	Low Regular Percent	Total
AL 1	31564	11.6	1134	44.5	2083	37.4	34781
AL 2	57369	21.1	718	28.1	1742	31.3	59829
AL 3	80191	29.5	435	17.1	1250	22.4	81876
AL 4	73861	27.1	217	8.5	435	7.8	74513
AL 5	29143	10.7	47	1.8	64	1.1	29254
Total	272128	100.0	2551	100.0	5574	100.0	280253

Many of Florida's alternative high schools have a higher percentage of students at a higher achievement levels than regular public schools. In fact the lowest performing students in our lowest performing high schools are more likely to make learning gains in a regular high school than an alternative high school setting.

Of the 30 lowest performing high schools in reading (13 percent or less proficient):

- 15 are regular public high schools
- 15 are alternative schools (59 are large enough to be graded)

In the 30 lowest performing high schools in 2004:

- In 9th grade, 19.6% of level 1 readers made gains in the regular school
- In 9th grade, 12.7% of level 1 readers made gains in the alternative school
- In 10th grade, 40.3% of level 1 readers made gains in the regular school
- In 10th grade, 32.6% of level 1 readers made gains in the alternative school

In the 30 lowest performing high schools in 2004:

- In 9th grade, 32.6% of students in math level 1 made gains in the regular school

- In 9th grade, 20.2% of students in math level 1 made gains in the alternative school
- In 10th grade, 38.8% of students in math level 1 made gains in the regular school
- In 10th grade, 26.4% of students in math level 1 made gains in the alternative school

In 2004, 14,526 students in grades 3-10 were enrolled in a school previously typed as alternative.

2005 Accountability for Alternative School Students

The Department of Education understands and appreciates alternative schools as viable outlets designed for children at risk of dropping out of school. The Department's goal is to work with districts to ensure the alternative school options are provided to students who are not achieving within traditional schools. We agree that we must continue to empower these students with the skills required for a productive adult life and gainful employment.

The Department has thoroughly reviewed several policy options for grading alternative schools. The Department will be moving forward on grading all schools as announced last year.

Below is a summary of each policy option and the rationale behind each decision.

Policy Option 1: Do not grade alternative schools.

There is no statutory or rule designation of alternative schools. There are no rules on eligibility, thus allowing schools to place any child in a self designated alternative school. There is no basis of exemption of such schools. If the legislature wants to define them, set lower standards for them or exempt them, they will have to take action to do so. It will be difficult to defend such action as it will give a green light to hiding the performance of our most struggling students.

Accountability systems should include as many students as possible. If we are including ESE and LEP students, for whom rigorous qualifications exist, we should include alternative school students for whom no eligibility rules exist.

Policy recommendations regarding alternative schools must measure the performance of all students using high standards that reflect our belief that all children can succeed in school. Recognizing that our alternative schools serve the academically neediest students, we expect these students' educational needs to be more successfully served

in the alternative school setting than the traditional public school. The alternative school has to be more successful in reaching proficiency with these students; otherwise the students should remain in their home school. This is why the alternative schools need to be graded, to ensure there is an accountability system for all students without lowering standards or expectations for success.

Policy Option 2: Use FCAT level 2 as proficient in alternative schools.

If we expect Level 2 performance we will get level 2 performance, if we expect Level 3 performance, we will get level 3 performance. Creating a different proficiency level for some standard curriculum students is lowering expectations for some standard curriculum students.

In addition, the Department would not want to see the unintended outcome of having different standards at the alternative schools which would result in a higher transfer rate to a school with lower standards. There are lower performing regular public and charter schools that are graded.

Policy Option 3: Allow alternative schools to be graded using learning gains only.

Students with disabilities and limited English proficient students are included in learning gains calculations only because they are not in a standard curriculum.

There is a rigorous process for identifying students with disabilities. There are established criteria that must be demonstrated in order for a student to be identified as having a disability and be eligible to receive services.

That is not the case with students who are low performing or struggling readers. Any student may be moved to alternative school since admittance criteria do not exist for these schools. In addition, the students are standard curriculum and are expected to meet the same high standards as other standard curriculum students.

Policy Option 4: Allow alternative schools to accrue 'bonus points' toward their school grade.

Other factors were once included in the school grading legislation. Because these factors were either found to be untimely, subjective or not clearly related to a policy of school improvement, the legislature removed them. Subsequently, on December 18, 2001, the Governor and Cabinet unanimously voted to change the school grading system to remove these measures because they did not measure student achievement; this would be a step back in Florida's accountability system. The current system highlights strengths, weaknesses and improvement to facilitate improvement and reflect performance of the whole school.

Future direction:

While there may be certain students who may be dangerous to themselves or others and for whom behavioral modification may be more of a pressing goal than improving student achievement, there is not a current classification of programs other than juvenile justice programs designed to serve them exclusively. The Legislature and State Board of Education may wish to pursue a more definitive classification of such programs with corresponding eligibility criteria. Until then, we should proceed with including as many students as possible into the accountability system by holding all schools, including alternative schools accountable for their performance. Such action will not only lead to improvement in alternative schools, as it has so dramatically for other public schools, but will ensure placement decisions are made for the primary purpose of improving student learning.

History of School Types for School Grading

On November 18, 2004, the State Board of Education revised Rule 6A-1.09981, FAC, Implementation of Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability. The revision included a provision that would grade all new schools will be graded in their first year as long as the school has at least 30 eligible students with valid FCAT scores in both Reading and Mathematics for both the current and previous years. The rule revision also gives the Commissioner of Education to type school so more schools will receive a school letter grade. The Commissioner issued guidelines regarding which school types will receive school performance grades.

On February 18, 2004, the Department sent a memo and school types report to the districts. The Department typed all schools based on number of students enrolled, grades of student enrolled and grades of students tested. The district's accountability contact worked within their district to verify that each school is appropriately typed before school grades were issued. In prior years, districts self reported school type.

All schools with at least 30 eligible students (enrolled in the same school for October and February FTE counts) with valid FCAT scores in both Reading and Mathematics for both the current year and previous year will receive a school letter grade. Only school types 1, 2, 3, and 4 will receive a school letter grade.

School Type	Description
1	Elementary School
2	Middle School
3	High School
4	Combination School
6*	ESE Center
8*	Vocational and Technical School - Instruction not provided and FCAT NOT administered in any grade 3-10
9**	Other - Instruction provided in PreK, K, 1, 2, 11, and/or 12 and FCAT NOT administered in any grade 3-10
10*	Department of Juvenile Justice School
99	Closed or Inactive School

*These school types do not receive a school letter grade but will receive an AYP designation if assessment results are available for more than 10 students.

**These schools do not receive a school grade but may receive an AYP designation.

The Department reviewed the school types designation and wants to ensure that as many students as possible are included in the school accountability system. The Department decided on students attending most stand alone, full time alternative schools should be eligible to be included in the school accountability system. However, school districts asked for more time before the policy was implemented. The Department agreed that at least a full year of notice was needed and postponed the grading of alternative schools until the 2004-2005 school year. In prior years, some schools that self reported an alternative type wanted to be included in school grading and the School Recognition Program and were allowed to. This is why some schools previously typed alternative were graded in 2004.

Schools that were previously typed as “alternative education” schools or “other” schools that are now typed as elementary, middle, high, or combination schools for accountability purposes had school grade points calculated but did not have a school letter grade assigned. Beginning in the 2004-05 school year, these schools will be assigned a school letter grade. These schools will still receive an Adequate Yearly Progress designation in 2003-04.

The Department is now working with school districts to assign all schools serving grades 3-10 (excluding Department of Juvenile Justice facilities) a school type of elementary school, middle school, high school, or combination school for purposes of school grading.