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## Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

# State could learn a thing or two from Florida's school grading system

## Walker called for similar method during campaign

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I heard Jeb Bush give a talk a few months ago in Milwaukee about education policies that he promoted while he was governor of Florida from 1999 to 2007. I should have taken notes, because I think I was listening to at least a few of the pages from the playbook that will be used by Scott Walker when he becomes governor of Wisconsin in about five weeks.

I'm betting that is particularly true for the system of giving every school in the state a grade - A to F - each year. It's a centerpiece of the "A+ Schools" program that Bush championed in Florida. He credits the grading system with being a key driver of rising test scores over the last decade.

In his campaign platform, Walker called for launching a grading system for Wisconsin schools. He hasn't spelled out details, but Florida is the primary example of such a system, and Walker is an admirer of Bush. Walker also will have strong Republican majorities in both houses of the Legislature, and I can't think of any reason he won't succeed in turning what he said he would do into reality in the not-at-all-distant future.

So let's look at [Florida's grading system](#) on the assumption it is a lot like what will be used here.

In the 11 years since its creation, the Florida system has evolved and the number of factors that go into each school's grade has grown. But at heart, it's a really simple notion: Every public school is given an A, B, C, D or F.

For elementary and middle schools, there are three keys to the grades: The percentage of students who are at grade level or better, based on scores on Florida's state test, known as the FCAT; the learning gains from year to year of all students, based on the test scores; and the learning gains particularly of the bottom 25% of students.

For high schools, the test scores and learning gains count for half the grade, and - in a formula being

revised this year - factors such as graduation rates, the number of students succeeding in AP courses and SAT and ACT scores are also taken into account.

There is a benefit to a school if it gets an A or gets a grade that is at least one letter higher than the previous year, namely that each school gets \$85 per student from the state for the school to use as it chooses. Most of the money goes to bonuses for staff members.

And there are consequences for getting a low grade: The school doesn't lose any money, but the state takes extra steps to intervene in the school's academic program. And if the school gets Fs in two years out of four, students are allowed to transfer to high-performing public schools in that district. (Originally, they were allowed to transfer to private schools at public expense, but the Florida Supreme Court found that in violation of the state constitution in 2005.)

But the biggest consequence of the grades seems to be public perception. A grade is just so easy to understand, and no one likes a bad one.

"Everyone knows what an A is," said Jaryn Emhof, spokeswoman for the Foundation for Florida's Future, which is headed by Bush and which is a champion of the system. "Everyone knows what a C is. Everyone knows what an F is."

Emhof said the grades had energized school communities across the state. Indeed, the number of schools getting Ds or Fs has fallen sharply since the first years of the system. This year, 1,625 elementary schools got As or Bs, while only 97 got Ds or Fs.

"It seems almost too simple, but it's powerful," Emhof said.

Juan Copa, bureau chief of research and evaluation for the Florida Department of Education, said, "It's really part of the culture of high accountability in our state that has led to increases in our student performance."

Michael Monroe, education policy specialist for the Florida Education Association, the state's teachers union, said teachers have learned to live with the grades, and the scoring system has gotten better as it has gotten less dependent simply on scores on the state test. He said the system had brought more attention to improving the performance of low-scoring students. And for teachers in schools that earn the high-grade bonuses, the grades can mean \$500 to \$1,000 extra a year, which they like, he said.

His advice for Wisconsin? Be very deliberate in the structure of the grading system. "The devil's in the details," he said.

Jean Hovey, president of the Florida PTA, said in an e-mail, "Have our schools made progress? Yes. Have there been controversy, worry and upheaval? Yes! .&ensp.&ensp;. There is a lot of teaching to the test, test anxiety and in high school the grading system is unfair."

She said the factor that often makes or breaks a school's grade is the performance of its bottom 25% of students, which puts a lot of pressure on those students and their teachers, both for better and worse.

As for Wisconsin, she said, "Our advice: Work with your legislature to ensure that parents and teachers are at the table when the discussions take place regarding the test."

Although school grades were a clear part of Walker's platform, the idea got approximately zero attention

during the campaign. I suspect a lot of people are going to be surprised when the idea becomes reality here - and hits with force.

*For more information on the Florida school grading system, go to [schoolgrades.fldoe.org](http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org)*

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