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TSPRA A-F Background and Talking Points

- August 2018 marks the first official A-F rating label received by Texas school districts, though preliminary “What If...?” grades that were assigned in January of 2017.
- The new ratings will use a different set of criteria than the preliminary ratings issued in January 2017 due to changes passed by the 85th Legislature, so be careful what resources you cite regarding the ratings. [Here’s a list from TASA of some of the changes made by HB 22 in 2017:](#)
 - Did not delay A-F ratings for districts, but did delay A-F ratings for campuses until 2019.
 - Requires an overall rating as well as a rating for each domain
 - Reduces the system from five to three domains: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps
 - Differentiates between D (needs improvement) and F (unacceptable) ratings
- Those three domains are still heavily reliant on standardized test scores. Elementary and middle school ratings will be based entirely on performance on the STAAR tests. For high schools, the ratings also consider college, career and military readiness and graduation rates for the Student Achievement and School Progress domains (STAAR + CCMRs are included in the School Progress Domain, but graduation rates are NOT included in the School Progress domain.) [Click here to see explanations from TEA for how the ratings will be calculated.](#)
- The college, career and military readiness indicators include: students who meet TSI criteria in Reading and Mathematics, meet criteria on AP or IB exams or earn dual course credits or associate’s degrees while in high school, enlist in the armed forces, earn an industry-based certification, graduate with completed IEP and Workforce Readiness, or complete at least one CTE course aligned with an industry-based certification.
- There are still doubts about the effectiveness of “Research on implementation of A-F accountability ratings Florida, North Carolina and Maine found that campus grades are highly correlated not to performance, but to poverty,” according to [David Anthony, former CEO of Raise Your Hand Texas](#). In North Carolina, to take one example, nearly 90 percent of schools rated “A” had fewer than 50 percent of their students living in poverty, while 98 percent of “D”-rated campuses and 100 percent of those who received an “F” had poverty levels greater than 50 percent.
- That trend continued with the release of the preliminary “What If...?” ratings in 2017, according to the Austin American-Stateman. [Schools with the poorest student populations in the state were up to 30 percent more likely than wealthier peers to earn a failing letter grade under the old system.](#)

Texas School Public Relations Association
406 East 11th Street, Suites 101-105, Austin, Texas 78701-2617
Phone (512) 474-9107 or (800) 880-9107 • Fax (512) 477-0906 • www.tspira.org

Tips for Talking to the Media

- **Key message:** Pick in advance two or three key messages to focus on. Don't be afraid to repeat them to ensure they make it into the story/sound bite.
- **Speak to what you know:** Don't respond to hypothetical situations or speak to how other districts performed. "I can't speak to what ____ISD is doing, but our district plans are to..."
- **I don't know:** "It is OK to say, "let me take a moment to think about that," If you need to gather your thoughts. If you don't know an answer, don't make up a response and never give reporters a, "no comment." Instead say, "While I don't have that information on-hand, I'd be happy to ask our Curriculum and Instruction director to follow up with you after we are done here."
- **Concrete examples:** Use as many specific examples and statistics specific to your district as possible. "Ninety-nine percent of our students at Linsae Snider High School received perfect scores on their AP Calculus exams."

Avoid

- Emphasis on ratings (if your district or campuses receive the Improvement Required designation). Instead focus on increases in test scores and graduation/completion rates.
- Talking about the performance of one or more groups of students. Instead highlight the composite scores of all students.
- Negative comments about changes in the state accountability procedures.

Do

- Make all comments positive.
- Include a quote from the superintendent.
- Use charts and graphs to show the difference in 2017 and 2018 scores.
- Focus on high-performing areas, be they post-secondary readiness or improvement in closing performance gaps.
- Share strategies for future efforts to address test scores (You'll need to get this information from your C&I department).

Additional Resources

- [Click here to see talking points from TASA on the 2018 A-F Ratings.](#)
- [Click here to see a letter from Northside ISD superintendent Brian Woods on A-F ratings.](#)

TSPRA would like to thank Moak, Casey & Associates for reviewing these talking points.