



October 24, 2013

Dear Parents and Guardians:

School districts across Oklahoma continue to have issues with the **A-F school report cards** being issued by the state. What was intended to provide parents with an accurate snapshot of school performance has resulted in a system that is seriously flawed, in spite of tinkering by the state legislature.

Never in my career have I seen this level of dysfunction and ineptitude coming out of the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Last week, school grades began to trickle out, but they were not ready for prime time. As school principals logged into the OSDE website, many of them watched in horror as grades that were initially posted as A's, B's and C's began to morph into C's, D's and F's. A feeble apology was issued by the OSDE for serious miscalculations that should have been caught before any grades were posted. **At last count, grades were changed five or six times by the State Department of Education.**

To say we have **no trust in this system** is an understatement. The incompetence in the roll-out of these grades is rivaled only by the testing debacle that took place in April when computer servers of the state's new testing vendor crashed, interrupting test-taking throughout the state. This was a maddening experience for students and teachers across Oklahoma.

It's important to note that the problems with the A-F grading system are not just a TPS problem. School districts across the state have seen their grades plummet. Independent researchers at the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University analyzed the latest version of the A-F school grading system. Their comments:

- **As few as three correct responses** on Oklahoma state tests can **separate those schools receiving an "A" grade from an "F,"** many of which were likely due to chance, which means the grade distinctions are not statistically significant.
- The current A-F scores **mask the results for disadvantaged children** and don't provide useful information to parents or educators.
- When letter grades were put to the test with actual student achievement data, it turns out they did more to **hide student achievement differences** than provide a clear understanding of school effectiveness.

Robert Linn at the University of Colorado, a measurement and accountability expert, said the OU/OSU research provides **a strong rationale for scrapping the current A-F system in Oklahoma.**

The State Dept will soon be releasing new scores for this year. To my amazement, some schools that showed improvement over last year will have a lower grade than they had last year. That alone is a clear indication that these grades are simply flawed. Frankly, TPS does not focus on these A-F scores because they do not provide meaningful information to us as we work to improve student learning. We are more interested in data that guides teaching in the classroom and addresses specific student needs. While state test scores are a meaningful measure that guides instruction, we also look at Lexile (reading level) scores, value-added measures that show student growth, climate/culture surveys and other data. A simplistic grade for schools tells us nothing.

At TPS, we are acutely aware of our student achievement scores. Teachers and administrators are working diligently to improve those scores. We have a very strong program to insure there is a great teacher in every classroom and a great leader in every building.

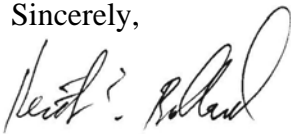
As a TPS parent, you've been inside our schools. You know your child's teacher, and you know how hard your child works. Many of our children come from backgrounds of poverty, but that has never been an excuse we use to cover poor performance. If anything, we redouble our efforts in the classroom. **We believe all children can learn!** Rest assured that our teachers, principals and administrators are committed to improving academic performance, and will do anything in their power to ensure students reach their full potential. We ask you to also do your part. A chronic problem in TPS is lack of student attendance. Please make sure your children are in school and ready to learn.

Tulsa Public Schools has a long-term strategy in place to improve student achievement for all students. One of the key things we are focused on is a district-wide reading program to ensure that every student reading below grade level receives special attention. In addition, we have implemented a balanced literacy initiative across the district, where there is an expectation that every child will have a block of time dedicated to literacy in their school day.

I hope you will join me in remaining committed to our children. We have an exceptional school board that is in tune with the work being done in our district, and we have great teachers and leaders.

Educators are not opposed to school accountability; however, the information shared must be based on meaningful, valid and accurate measures. To date, that is not the case, with the State Department of Education grading system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keith Ballard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Dr. Keith Ballard
Tulsa Public Schools Superintendent