

Senate Bill 186: School Report Cards Doing It Right

February 29, 2000

Issue Background

By [Pamela Benigno](#)

What the Bill Does:

Senate Bill 186 mandates state report cards for the public schools. Each school will be given a letter grade for academic achievement and a letter grade for school safety. Other information such as teacher qualifications and use of taxpayer funds will be included on the report card.

Synopsis: To grade schools on safety when it is difficult to ensure fair measurement, may do more harm than good. Grading schools student academic performance is a positive step towards greater accountability, resulting in higher levels of student achievement. Unfortunately, SB 186 requires some fine-tuning because it requires grading the schools on a curve rather than assigning the grade based on the percentage of students who have met the state standards.

I. PROBLEM WITH REPORT CARD ON SAFETY

Schools take on their own personality in academic standards as well as standards for student behavior. Just as one parent has a different definition and tolerance level for a misbehaving child than another parent, so do principals and teachers. It is difficult to grade school safety in an objective manner as outlined in SB186. There can never be a standard measure for such behavior such as a habitually disruptive student. [Note: after this paper was delivered to the state legislature, the provision for safety grades was removed.]

This system pressures principals and teachers not to report incidents that they might have otherwise reported. Teachers who have higher expectations for student behavior than the other teachers in the school, or than the principal, could be pressured by peers and superiors to lower their standards, to not report incidents, and not to seek the principals help with disruptive students. A school staff with higher standards for student behavior may report more incidents than a school that employs a staff that is more lenient. How will anyone know if all incidents are reported? The degree of accuracy will vary from school to school. We have seen recent news reports around the country that shows students penalized for sharing cough drops, carrying nail clippers, and even first-graders kissing. These incidents fall under zero tolerance definitions of drugs, weapons and sexual harassment. It also proves that school administrators need some leeway.

The report card on safety requires a burdensome amount of record keeping that will not only be inaccurate, but will also add to the stress of a classroom teacher. Even having to make the decision whether the incident should be

reported will be stressful for some teachers.

An alternative to the report card on school safety would be to develop a reporting system which would include major incidents as defined in SB186. These incidents should be on record at the school and made available to the public upon request. This information should also be reported to the district school board and the State Board of Education. Because a standard measure for student behavior is unrealistic, a letter grade should not be assigned a school for safety.

II. PROBLEM WITH ACADEMIC GRADING PROCEDURE

SB186 details the grading procedure for the report card. Surprisingly a curve is used. When the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) was introduced, Colorado officials boasted that instead of using a norm-referenced test that compares where a student is in relation to every other student taking the test, they would use a standards-referenced assessment, designed to give a snapshot of where students stand, not in relation to each other, but in relation to their ability to reach the educational standards that Coloradans expect of them.

The formula contained in SB186 requires that an academic performance grade of F shall be assigned to public schools whose standardized, weighted scores are in the lowest two percent of schools received by public schools in the state. Grades of A shall be assigned to the highest eight percent. The grades of B, C, and D are also applied to a scale that falls between A and F. This is known as grading on a curve. The bill provides for adjustments as performance improves. How then can the general public follow a schools performance over time?

Grading on a curve is a contradiction. This formula requires that some schools fail. It also requires that some will be assigned an A. Returning to the idea that the Colorado assessments are a snapshot where a student or school stands in relationship to Colorados standards, it would make more sense to draw a line and say every school that crosses this line receives an A. Another line for B, etc. According to SB186 only the top eight percent receive an A. To be called proficient, students have to attain a score at a level deemed proficient. There is a line that must be crossed for each performance level. For example: for a school to receive an A they should be required to have a certain percent of its students proficient in the subject areas assessed. Furthermore, neither student nor school CSAP results are reported to parents in percentiles. Why confuse the public by grading the schools based on percentiles?

III. SOMETHING IS MISSING

The report card proposed in SB186 contains more detail than the majority of parents want. Most parents are interested only in the letter grade assigned to the school. Other than the grade, many parents want to know what is the philosophy of the school. This is why you can find waiting lists of over a thousand students for successful programs such as Core Knowledge. This report card does not refer to the type of program the school offers.

IV. LESSONS FROM THE PARENT INFORMATION REPORT CARD

The Parent Information Center at the Independence Institute has been providing report cards to the public on the public schools in Colorado since 1995. Since September of 1999 the report cards have been available on the Internet at <http://www.ParentInfoCenter.org>. Between September and January the site recorded 33,000 visits by concerned parents comparing schools. The extraordinary number of visits to the web site expresses the interest parents have in school performance.

The grades for the Parent Information Center Report Card are based on a standardized nationally norm-referenced test. When available, three years of national student percentile ranks are used to calculate the grade. The scale is centered near the fiftieth percentile, the national average. If the students at a school perform at or near the national average the school is assigned the grade of C. The grades of A and B are assigned for higher scores and D and F for lower scores. Other statistics are included on the report card such as CSAP results, and for the high schools, ACT scores, graduation and dropout rates. A comment section provides information about the schools program and/or awards received.

The Parent Information Centers staff has diligently worked to gather individual school national testing results from each of the 176 districts in Colorado. In the past, districts were required by the Public School Finance Act of 1988 to administer a standardized nationally norm-referenced achievement test battery. The State Board of Education adopted a set of Standard Reporting Procedures in 1989. The Colorado Department of Education collected only district results, not individual school results, via district accountability reports. The Independence Institute has been collecting individual school data since 1993.

Collecting this information may sound like a simple task and should be. Though it is required by law to report achievement data to the public, many districts have refused to answer our request. It takes a constant effort to gather the test results and other information contained on our school report cards.

The next obstacle after receiving the information is to interpret it. Since beginning the report card, standard school district reporting procedures have not been used across the state. A number of districts have reported their achievement results in formats that are deceptive to the public. Some present a graph showing performance, but no actual scores. Some present results for gender or ethnicity, but no grade level total, and others use national percentile ranks for schools rather than for pupils. Still others report only grade equivalents or the percentage of students scoring within quartiles. This confusion has added to a lack of accountability among our public schools. A mandated report card grading a schools student academic performance, based on valid data will increase accountability within the public school system.

Parents will find it to be a helpful tool in making decisions about their child's education.