

We need a different score card for schools

School grades just came out, and the news was not so good for many local schools.

About a third of Leon County schools saw their grades drop,

which mirrored the trend around the state. The superintendents' association demanded an audit of the FCAT results, insisting that there must be something wrong with the test to produce such dramatic declines. However, two audits later, the results stand. Education Commissioner Eric Smith proclaimed that students may simply have "hit a wall," or the proverbial bump in the road.

Commissioner Smith has put his finger on the problem with grad-



Sally
Butzin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sarah M. "Sally" Butzin is president and executive director of the Institute for School Innovation (www.ifs.org), and author of "Joyful Classrooms in an Age of Accountability." Contact her at sbutzin@ifs.org.

ing schools. It's called the law of averages. In statistics, this is known as "regression to the mean." Even a football team cannot win every game, year after year after year (sorry, Seminole fans).

School grades were designed to inform the public about the quality of their local schools, and to incentivize schools with rewards and punishments to assure that no child is left behind. Home buyers look at school grades to determine which neighborhood

See BUTZIN, PAGE 5 / OPINION

BUTZIN

From Page 1 / OPINION

to move into. Everyone assumes that an "A" school means top quality in every way. But let's take a closer look.

A key indicator to predict a child's future school success is third-grade reading achievement. In fact, the state of Florida mandates that any child who does not pass the FCAT reading test at the end of third grade must be held back for another year. So one would assume that schools receiving A or B grades are successfully preparing their third-graders. That assumption would be wrong.

At one Leon County "A" graded school, only 51 percent of the third-graders were proficient in reading. At another "B" school, fewer than half (41 percent) were proficient. However, five schools graded "C" had more third-graders proficient at reading (one with 74 percent) than the aforementioned schools.

To be fair, the state has come up with a com-

plicated formula that bases school grades on multiple factors, including showing improvement for the lowest-performing students. But how is this helpful to the general public, and especially to the schools that take a hit in the public's eye if they receive a low grade?

Last year, I bemoaned the questionable grade of "F" given to the brand new Imagine Charter School at Evening Rose, which implements my Project CHILD instructional model. This year, the school received an "A." Of course everyone is celebrating, but there is still room for improvement (81 percent of the Imagine third-graders were proficient in reading). And my heart goes out to Nims Middle School for getting slammed with an "F" despite all the extra effort and dedication from a dynamic leader and committed faculty.

We need a better system for grading schools. Better yet, ditch the grades and just report the data, including customer satisfaction surveys. School consumers

should pay special attention to teacher attrition rates and student attendance. And of course test scores need to show that academic standards are being met. This type of score card tells much more than a letter grade.

It is easy to determine what makes a great school. Great schools radiate joy, excitement and love. Children are respected and allowed to make choices. Classrooms are designed to accommodate all learning styles. Instruction provides challenge and encouragement, not frustration and embarrassment. Teachers provide constant feedback, basing instructional decisions on achievement data as well as student interest.

When I visit a school, I am not that impressed when they brag about small class sizes, uniforms, laptop computers or extra tutoring. What impresses me is when they can honestly report that nearly all students and teachers love coming to school each day. That's what makes an "A" school.