



TEA Time: A-F Accountability with Commissioner Mike Morath

Narrator: Welcome to TEA Time... A podcast about all things about public education from the Texas Education Agency.

Host: Welcome to the inaugural edition of TEA Time. On August 15, accountability ratings for districts, charters and campuses will be issued statewide and for the first time, schools districts will receive the rating under the new A-F system. On this first episode of TEA Time, we visit with Commissioner of Education Mike Morath to learn more about A-F beginning with the Commissioner providing us a general overview of the new system.

Commissioner of Education Mike Morath: As we transition to A through F, one of the things that we need to realize is there are five letters in there, A, B, C, D and F, which is a big change from our current system which is just Met Standard and Improvement Required, sort of a pass/fail system. With the tiering that you get the differentiation between A through F, you can actually begin to distinguished sort of average from good from great and it sets up a system of continuous improvement to support improvement for all of our kids as opposed to the current pass/fail system.

It also allows us to change our focus and conversation from just the campuses that are Improvement Required to campuses at that are excellent or A campuses. It is generally beneficial for us to focus on our highest performing campus and highest performing teacher teams and asked ourselves, what are they doing' and how can we replicate their work. How can we expand their work to get that level of excellence to as many kids as possible.

Host: The system of made up of three areas that are look at – Student Achievement, School Progress, Closing the Gaps. Let's look at each one of them individually. What is in the Student Achievement domain?

Commissioner Morath: Sure, A through F has been designed to look at campuses three different ways. One based upon Student Achievement. One based upon School Progress. One based upon Closing the Gaps. In this way, we celebrate high levels of student achievement, while also celebrating the impact of highly effective educator teams while maintaining focus on the students that are perhaps in most need of our support. It is a very balanced, fair way to look at performance of campuses.

Student achievement, if we think about that first domain or the first way of looking at performance is about what students know and what they can do at the end of the school year. We look at it in a variety of different ways. We can look at it in terms of what they have achieved? Have they graduated from high school? Are they ready for college as you might see on an AP exam or by taking the SAT. Are they ready for a career? Do they have industry based credentials or welding certification, that sort of thing. Are they ready for the military? Did they actually enlist? In the earlier grades, we can also look at whether they are meeting grade level standards in reading or math or other subject areas as found on the STAAR test.

Host: On school progress?

Commissioner Morath: School progress is about comparing students, about determining how much better they are . In some cases, it is about how much better they are than they were last year. In that way, you look at the amount of academic growth that a student had. So you can have a student that is significantly below grade level from the prior year but due to the tenacious work of our educators, grows more in the one academic year. That student still might not meet grade level by the end of the second year but you can see that growth. School progress looks at the growth of our students but also looks at how much better our schools are performing that look similar to them. So if you are a school that has – as an example – a very high level of student poverty, what we do with school progress is we compare you to

similar schools. So if you are the highest performing school with that level of poverty, than clearly you are an A campus and worthy of being celebrated.

Host: And finally, closing the gaps. That may be the one that people may not fully understand.

Commissioner Morath: Sure, the first two domains look at all students in the aggregate. The closing the gaps domain looks at different groups of students. So it's going to look at different groups of students by race or by income. For example, special education students. We want to find out whether individual groups of students need more focused support and how well we are doing in closing the gaps between the different groups of students. So, the closing the gaps domain is really about that kind of specific focus on specific groups.

Host: You touched on it briefly in the beginning, but how is A through F a system that better informs a parent or school board member or superintendent as opposed to what we had been using of the Met Standard or Improvement Required.

Commissioner Morath: Sure, the transition from our passed/failed designation that we have now with Met Standard or Improvement Required to a tiered designation of A, B, C, D or F, sets up different levels of performance. Right now, if you go from Improvement Required to Met Standard, that is definitely worthy of celebration but that is the end of the celebration. But what we want to do for all of our kids, regardless of where we are today, we want to be better next week. And even better than that the week after so the idea of A through F sets up a continuous improvement conversation. So that wherever we are, we can strive to be better and stronger in our academic support for our kids.

If I put my old school board hat on – it is really hard for me not to have that hat on, I served as a school board member for four and a half years – one of the key questions that I needed to be able to answer in governing my school system was – are we better than we were last year or are we about the same as we were last year or are we worse. Because that really informs the actions that we need to take as a school board. It is very difficult to do that in a pass/fail evaluation environment. I can look and say that we have fewer failing campuses that we had last year but that doesn't inspire a system to work towards greatness for kids. With A through F, school board members now have the ability to look at the rating to see if it was higher than last year, did we get stronger. Both on an overall basis and in each of those three domains.

Now for parents, parents are interested in how the schools supports their own children. For example, before a parent might enroll in a school, they are going to look at different options for their kids. I can actually reflect on my own experience. I have four young kids with my oldest is school aged. When I was trying to find a school for my little girl, it took me hours and hours of spreadsheets and specific performance information that I had access to as Commissioner of Education to determine what was the sort of best fit school. That is not tenable for the typical parent in the State of Texas. So the idea that you can go and find very clear and easy to understand performance information on campuses would greatly help parents finding a best fit school for their kids. Because you might not know what precisely goes into the definition of an A but you do know that an A is better than a B. And that kind of simplicity in the terms of communication should help parents dramatically. It should also help parents with kids currently in school because regardless of where your school is performing now, that summative of information that you get about the school's performance will help you advocate so that the school to get stronger and stronger for both your kids and all the other kids in the school.

Host: We will have more questions about the A through F System in our next visit with Commissioner Morath in our next edition of TEA Time.

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