

GRADING ON A
CURVE

THE ILLUSION OF
EXCELLENCE
IN OHIO'S SCHOOLS

A+

By Ann E. Sheldon
& Colleen D. Grady

Ohio Association for Gifted Children
www.oagc.com • November 2011

GRADING ON A CURVE

The Illusion of Excellence in Ohio's Schools

Released by the Ohio Association for Gifted Children
November 2011

About the Ohio Association for Gifted Children

Since 1952, the Ohio Association for Gifted Children has been working with families and educators to promote the best interest of gifted children. The OAGC advances understanding of the needs of the gifted, promotes establishment of programs and services for gifted students, and encourages the exchange of information on the national, state, and local level. The OAGC is an affiliate organization of the National Association for Gifted Children.

About the Authors

ANN E. SHELDON is the executive director of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children. Her breadth of experience includes financial analysis, project management, and gifted policy development. She has led multiple grant projects, conducted two gifted cost studies, and authored three amicus briefs on behalf of the association. Ms. Sheldon has authored or coauthored numerous articles and given dozens of presentations on gifted advocacy and policy at the local, state, and national levels. She has deep knowledge of state gifted education funding and policy laws. Ms. Sheldon received the 2010 National Association for Gifted Children Community Service Award.

COLLEEN D. GRADY is the founder and president of Grady and Associates LLC. Grady and Associates specializes in fiscal and education policy analysis. Colleen's more than fifteen years of public policy experience includes service as a member of the Ohio House of Representatives from District 18, representing seven counties in north central and northeastern Ohio as an elected member of the Ohio Board of Education, and election for three terms to the Strongsville City Schools' Board of Education.

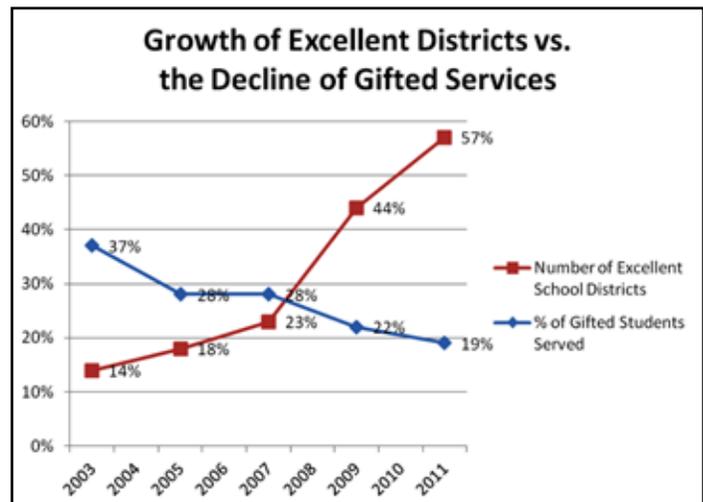
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) evaluates every school district on a set of performance measures that add up to a final grade on a district report card. In the 2002–2003 school year, ODE rated 85 districts as excellent. Today, 352—almost 60% of all districts—are rated as excellent or excellent with distinction. Do the levels of student performance growth in Ohio warrant a quadrupling of the number of districts in the excellent category over the past decade?

Why are there so many excellent school districts in Ohio? There are many factors contributing to the increase in the ranks of excellent districts in Ohio, including the addition of the performance index and value-added measures to the accountability system, as well as low cut scores on Ohio’s assessment tests. The cut scores for proficiency in reading on the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAAs) range, as a percentage of total items, from 35% (6th grade) to 57% (3rd grade) in reading and from 32% (7th grade) to 58% (3rd grade) in math. The proficiency cut scores as a percentage of total items in math and reading are 43% on the Ohio Graduation Test. Even accelerated and advanced cut scores are surprisingly low at some grade levels.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report shows that Ohio’s cut scores and performance levels are below national standards. This year, 42.8% of Ohio’s 4th-graders scored at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 44.6% in math. The NAEP report indicates that 9% of Ohio’s students scored at the advanced level in reading, and 8% in math. In the 8th grade, 51.6% of Ohio’s students scored at the accelerated or advanced level in reading, and 33.7% in math. NAEP scores show only 3% of Ohio’s 8th-grade students scoring at advanced levels in reading, and 8% in math.

Is there a negative impact if all districts are considered to be excellent? Policymakers frequently are asked to waive categorical spending constraints and educational requirements for excellent districts. But what if these districts are not truly high performing? The current accountability system has had a particularly negative impact on the services to and performance by Ohio’s gifted students. In 1999, 41% of Ohio’s gifted students were receiving gifted services. Last year, that figure dropped to 19%.



So what makes a district truly excellent? While it is important that minimum standards be met, it also can be useful to evaluate excellent school districts by other measures:

Advanced Placement Examinations

- ✓ 67 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had zero students take AP exams.

ACT Scores

- ✓ 109 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had average ACT scores below the state average.

Diplomas with Honors

- ✓ 160 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction had fewer than 20% of their graduating class receive diplomas with honors.

College Remediation Rates

- ✓ 136 districts rated excellent had college remediation rates above the state average.

Services to Gifted Students

- ✓ 220 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction serve fewer than 20% of their identified gifted population.
- ✓ 85 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction reported serving *zero* gifted students.
- ✓ 205 districts rated excellent or excellent with distinction have decreased services to gifted students since 2008.

A Tale of Two Districts. While some of Ohio’s districts rated excellent do fall short, other districts truly deserve the designation. It is useful to compare the extremes of excellence in Ohio:

<i>District A</i>	<i>District B</i>
26 of 26 performance indicators met	17 of 26 performance indicators met
Mean ACT score of 24	Mean ACT score of 18
65% of gifted student population served	0% of gifted student population served
81% of students taking AP exams scored 3 or better	No students took AP exams
34% college remediation rate	81% college remediation rate
Per-pupil expenditure: \$11,814	Per-pupil expenditure: \$11,493

Recommendations. Ohio policymakers should consider the following:

- ✓ *Incorporate high-quality metrics in the accountability system.* Ohio’s accountability system should include measures such as college remediation rates, performance on Advanced Placement tests, numbers of students who are successfully accelerated, student performance on ACT/SAT exams, services to gifted students, and numbers of students who qualify for diplomas with honors.
- ✓ *Move to nationally normed benchmarked high school assessments.* Ohio should move to a national assessment test such as the ACT or SAT. In addition, Ohio policymakers should remove the high stakes aspect of student performance on the new assessments.
- ✓ *Eliminate the labeling of districts until a meaningful system can be developed.* Districts should concentrate on constant improvement toward high-level standards rather than achieving an arbitrary rating based on low-level metrics.
- ✓ *Incorporate an automatic trigger to increase cut scores.* Ohio should increase cut scores on achievement tests as more districts receive higher ratings to encourage improvement.
- ✓ *Reevaluate how the value-added growth measure is used.* Any change to this area should include more public transparency, including the ability to view student growth by quintile.
- ✓ *Eliminate multiple pathways to ratings in favor of a single pathway with multiple components.* For any rating to be meaningful and understandable to the general public, districts need to be evaluated in the same way.