# 10-Point Grading Scale: A Trojan Horse

It’s now official: Beginning with the 2015-16 school year, all North Carolina public high schools will be on a 10-point grading scale. Last week the State Board of Education approved the plan to have schools throw out the standard A-B-C-D-F system in favor of a new scale that widens the grade distinctions to 10-point intervals. The changes will affect the way grade-point averages are calculated as well as class rank.

Educators and administrators believe the change is an improvement and seem pleased with actions by the State Board of Education. Don’t count me among the supporters.

Much of the impetus for the change came from college-bound students and administrators who thought the old grading scale put North Carolina students applying for college at a disadvantage with students from states that had a 10-point grading system. Under the old system, students who received a 92 from a North Carolina school would get a B; students who received a 92 from states with 10-point grading scales would receive an A on their transcripts. Obviously the changes would impact GPAs and college applications.

Of course, this may not seem fair. But is this charge accurate? It assumes the colleges making those decisions are unaware of differences in the grading system or unable to make those distinctions.  History suggests that colleges have been making those distinctions for years.

Proponents say North Carolina students are at a disadvantage under the current system. Still we should ask: Can proponents point out a college or university that actually denied admission to a North Carolina student because of a lower grade-point average?

If the primary impetus for adopting the 10-point grading system is correcting these problems and standardizing the grading process, why is it necessary to tinker with the entire grading scale? Why change the failing grades from 70 to 60? If students in the 90-92 are elevated from a B to an A, why is it necessary to change passing scores, from 70 to 60? For that matter, why are changes on one end of the grading scale (i.e. the lower end) more generous than those on the other? Why aren’t the changes uniform across grades?

Could it be something else is really going on here? I believe the 10-point grading scale is merely a vehicle to push students through school and improve North Carolina’s high school graduation rate, without doing enough to make sure graduates have a good education.

While North Carolina’s graduation rate is 82 percent and has improved significantly in recent years, more improvement is needed. Schools are under pressure to improve graduation rates from parents, policymakers and businessmen. In recent years considerable resources have been expended to reduce the dropout rate. Credit recovery programs have been developed to allow students to complete their education.

Let’s not mistake a higher graduation rate with better-educated graduates, however. Terry Stoops of the John Locke Foundation [reported in October 2013](http://www.carolinajournal.com/daily_journal/display.html?id=10596) that 63 percent of students who enrolled in North Carolina Community Colleges needed remediation work in math or reading.

If the percentage of remediated students is a proxy indicator for the quality of a high school education, our efforts to move students quickly in and out of high school to facilitate graduation is misplaced.

Does the 10-point grading scale lower academic standards? That’s a legitimate concern of critics.

In an October 2014 interview in the *Charlotte Observer,* one State Board of Education member, John Tate, acknowledged the concerns but didn’t think the problem would come to pass:

*There’s an ongoing concern that any time we’re fiddling with standards, anytime we’re fiddling with accountability, that we’re not tweaking it to lower standards . . . I think if we build sufficient rigor in the curriculum, that moving to the 10-point sale, if done right, will not relax standards.*

Tate’s statement denies logic, however. How do you implement controversial new Common Core standards that many experts assert lack rigor, and also re-define a passing grade from 70 to 60, then say you aren’t lowering standards?

What are the compelling reasons to drive North Carolina to adopt a 10-point grading scale? All we hear is North Carolina needs a new scale so college-bound students aren’t at a disadvantage. What about students on the other end of the spectrum?

When asked his thoughts about the 10-point grading scale, former Charlotte-Mecklenburg Superintendent Heath Morrison said the 10-point scale would lead to more students on the honor roll, higher graduation rates and more students taking Advanced Placement classes.

And if you dropped the passing rate another ten points you’d probably have even more students at least passing. But Morrison ignores the perilous trade-offs of his proposed actions.

Let’s face it, the 10-point scale cheapens excellence and lowers the bar for success. What do those messages say to struggling or academically gifted students?

To students on the low-end of the academic spectrum, the 10- point grading scale offers unearned assistance and an inflated view of one’s own abilities. Over time the 10-point grading takes a low view of competency, contributes to grade inflation, and would serve to diminish student motivation. Why would students – of any ability — strive to achieve when they see standards being lowered?

*“Every public school student will graduate ready for post-secondary education and work, prepared to be a globally engaged and productive citizen.”*

That’s the stated [vision](http://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/) of the North Carolina State Board of Education. The 10-point grading scale, however, does little to reach those goals, and may even undermine them. While the 10-point grading scale may remedy supposed grievances of college-bound students in North Carolina, it also lowers standards and redefines academic failure downward – with the hope of getting more students to graduation. Such a plan does not prepare our students for college or the workforce.

**Wake County may try to change high school grading scale**

There’s an effort underway by some of the state’s largest school districts, including Wake County, to get state permission to create a 10-point grading scale for high schools.

Wake County high schools use a seven-point grading scale where an A is 93 to 100, B is 85 to 92, C is 77 to 84, D is 70 to 76 and F is less than 70. But some school leaders want a 10-point scale where an A is 90 to 100, B is 80 to 89, C is 70 to 79, D is 60 to 69 and F is below 60.

Wake school officials have blamed the state’s efforts to mandate a standardized high school transcript with preventing the district from changing the grading scale. But there are signs that things could be changing.

At last week’s school board policy committee meeting, board members reviewed the current high school grading scale. School board member Jim Martin, the chair of the committee, repeated his desire to change the grading scale.

“I’d love to move to the 10-point scale, but we can’t do that right now,” Martin said. “I think it’s ironic that you can take an AP (Advanced Placement) course and get six points, let’s say, AP Calculus. But if you take Calculus at N.C. State or Wake Tech, you only get five points. But that’s the logic that we have to work with.”

“I will say that there are some other large districts that are in the state that are trying to generate some momentum around the 10-point scale, and I am in collaboration with those discussions,” replied Todd Wirt, Wake’s assistant superintendent for academics.

“Great,” Martin responded. “I’d love to see motion on that.”

If you go online, you’ll see plenty of talk pro and con about the 10-point scale.

Supporters give reasons such as how a 10-point scale might cause more students to get As and Bs and could result in an increase in student self-esteem and confidence. Critics say a 10-point scale might diminish student motivation to achieve higher standards.