

A road map for the schools

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When those big, fat school tax bills begin landing in mailboxes in a few months, they won't go down any easier knowing that Pennsylvania schools are doing a rather poor job, at least according to an organization known as the Network for Public Education.

According to the NPE's latest report, "Valuing Public Education: A 50 State Report Card," schools in the commonwealth earned an overall grade-point average of 1.5 (on a four-point scale). That translates into a solid D, a grade few if any kids want to bring home to mom and dad. The state tied for 27th place among the states, along with Delaware, Michigan and Utah.

The highest score, achieved by Iowa, Nebraska and Vermont, was only 2.5, a C, which tells us that schools everywhere have a lot of room for improvement. Eight states received a grade of F.

Interestingly, in one of the six criteria used to grade each state (and the District of Columbia) — "Spend Taxpayers Resources Wisely" — Pennsylvania received a D. Apparently, financial resources are available in many school districts but are being wasted. The state also received a D for "Resistance to Privatization" (charter schools) and a big one, "Chance for Success." Pennsylvania received a C for "No High Stakes Testing" and "Professionalism of Teaching." The testing grade indicates that, as controversial as mandated tests are, the problem could be much worse.

In coming up with its grades, NPE did not score states against each other but rather ranked them "against the values we hold and research supports."

Mark Miller, a member of the Centennial school board and president-elect of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, is also a member of the NPE's board of directors and the committee that put together the 31-page report. Speaking about the NPE, Miller said, "From our viewpoint, this report is what would be best for every student." That's a welcome change from the government belief that the best way to evaluate schools and teachers is to bury students under a mountain of standardized tests. When that happens, the focus becomes process, not education.

Miller said the NPE report card "is at least setting a standard. We absolutely hope we'll be able to show growth for each state, rather than a grade for each state."

Showing growth is the key, because very often these types of "report cards" quickly wind up forgotten in a file cabinet or gathering dust on a shelf.

The schools have a long way to go. The NPE has provided one road map to get there.