

Pennsylvania scores low on national report card

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 3, 2016 6:00 am

If Pennsylvania was a student, it would be held over for summer school.

The commonwealth received an overall grade of D in a report released Tuesday by the Network for Public Education titled "Valuing Public Education: A 50 State Report Card."

With a grade-point average of 1.5, Pennsylvania tied for 27th place with Delaware, Michigan and Utah in the bottom half of the rankings.

"We think the report is very comprehensive," said Mark Miller, a member of NPE's board of directors and the committee that put together the 31-page report. "The government is always looking to evaluate school teachers and everyone else. From our viewpoint, this report is what would be best for every student."

Iowa, Nebraska and Vermont had the highest GPA of 2.5, a solid C. Mississippi, with a 0.50, scored lowest, though seven other states also received an F.

The NPE, which has campaigned against high-stakes testing, the privatization of public education and charter schools, was started in 2013 by its president, Diane Ravitch.

Miller, who's also president-elect of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and a Centennial school board member, said if it was up to him the state would be receiving a lower grade.

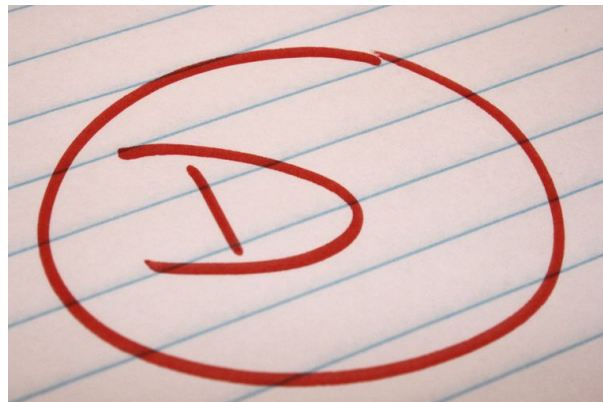
"We only looked at certain categories that apply nationally," he said. "We have more grandfathered debt than any other state in the nation. We give away \$150 million in taxpayer money to the (earned income tax credit). That would have lowered the state's grade. As it is, we're still below the midpoint."

David Weitzel, superintendent of the Central Bucks School District, said the report's title alone was encouraging.

"Using the word 'valuing' is a step in the right direction," he said. "These days the public discourse that public schools across the country are failing, that kind of rhetoric is hurting our profession. It's dissuading people from going into public education. ... We have to be more careful of how we describe teachers in such broad brushes."

The report uses six criteria to grade each state and Washington, D.C. The categories, followed by Pennsylvania's grades, are:

No High Stakes Testing: C



Professionalism of Teaching: C

Resistance to Privatization: D

School Finance: C

Spend Taxpayer Resources Wisely: D

Chance for Success: D

Curtis Dietrich, superintendent of the North Penn School District, hopes the report is taken seriously. "It's student-focused, which is where it should be," he said. "We need to not only have conversations about these important topics but get beyond the conversations to solutions."

He said Pennsylvania deserves a D for the topic Resistance to Privatization. "The charter school effort has not succeeded," he said, "and is siphoning money away from public schools."

Dietrich has also been concerned with high-stakes testing. "I do believe in accountability, but more so through local control, locally elected school boards and, of course, taxpayers in the community," he said. "Much more money leaves the area than comes back from the state."

In the report, NPE admits to being a tough grader. Additionally, states weren't scored against each other but rather "against the values we hold and research supports."

"If states are willing to invest time and money guided by the right values, we will see steady progress for our public schools and our nation's children."

Miller said the 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."

Under bright spots, the report gives Alabama, Montana and Nebraska an A for rejecting high-stakes testing. No state, however, received high grades across the board.

That includes Pennsylvania and its 1.5 GPA. "We're certainly not Mississippi, but we're a D," Miller said. "We're barely passing."