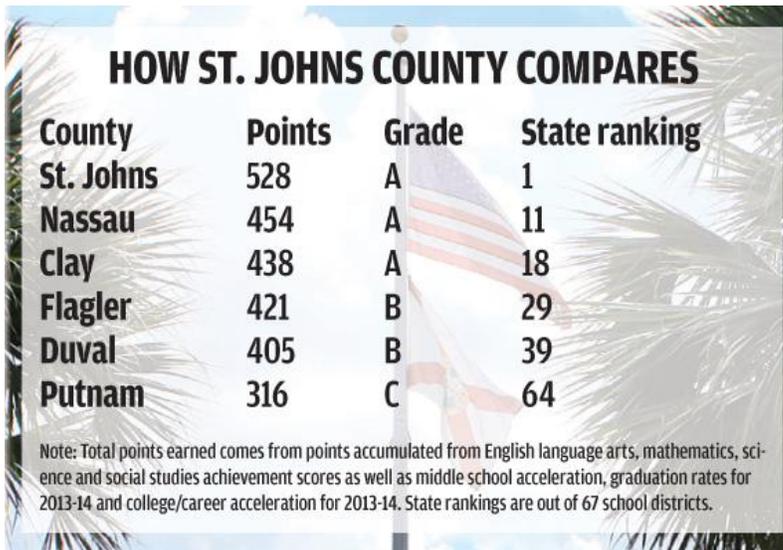


St. Johns Schools #1 in state High marks

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BY JAKE MARTIN



County	Points	Grade	State ranking
St. Johns	528	A	1
Nassau	454	A	11
Clay	438	A	18
Flagler	421	B	29
Duval	405	B	39
Putnam	316	C	64

Note: Total points earned comes from points accumulated from English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies achievement scores as well as middle school acceleration, graduation rates for 2013-14 and college/career acceleration for 2013-14. State rankings are out of 67 school districts.

The school grades for the 2014-15 school year may be about six months tardy, but it's better late than never for the St. Johns County School District.

St. Johns County was one of 22 A-rated school districts but posted the highest total points earned, at 528, boasting the highest scores in English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies of Florida's 67 school districts.

Fourteen elementary schools, five middle schools and all of the School District's K-8 academies and high schools received an A this year.

The grades, released Friday, came out later than usual in part because they are based on the new Florida Standards Assessment, which meant the state needed time to devise a scoring system, and, in part because the Florida Legislature required a study of the new test, delaying the score-setting process.

School grades were released by the Florida Department of Education under the heading: "2014-15 Preliminary Informational Baseline School Grades."

Superintendent Joe Joyner said the grades reflect an appropriate baseline for the FSA, but can only serve as a partial measure of school accountability this year. "Obviously, these grades are an incomplete representation of the success of our schools and they don't include learning gains, which hurts some schools," he said. Joyner said transition to the FSA started more than three years ago and that the latest grades are at least some indication the School District's preparations were adequate. "This has been a strategic effort to implement the new and more rigorous standards, and it is gratifying to see such positive results," he said. "While others were arguing about the standards, we were teaching them. Our teachers embraced it, and our students rose to the occasion."

Schools will not be held to accountability consequences this year, as scores cannot be compared to the 2013-14 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT. For this year only, student growth is not a part of the grade calculations. In the future, however, both student proficiency and growth will be included in the calculations.

Florida school administrators, including Joyner, argued repeatedly that the state should skip issuing the 2014-15 school grades, often citing the glitchy first administration of the FSA marred by technology difficulty that made the scores suspect to parents and educators alike.

Since the school grades are largely based on FSA scores, many superintendents said the state's 2014-15 report card should have been labeled with an "I" for incomplete and just been set aside. A simulation of the 2014-15 school grades released in December showed they'd likely look similar to 2013-14's, but opponents to the issuance of school grades held steady. The projections for St. Johns County proved to be correct.

High marks

With 28 A-rated schools, the School District saw improvement at nine schools since the 2013-14 school year. The Academy for Business and Leadership Education, a charter, saw the biggest gains, improving from a D-rating to a B.

R.J. Murray Middle, St. Augustine High, Allen D. Nease High, Mill Creek Elementary and Otis A. Mason Elementary each improved from a B to an A. Sebastian Middle, Osceola Elementary and Gamble Rogers Middle each improved from a C to a B.

Twenty-one schools repeated their A-rated performance from the previous year while Valley Ridge and Patriot Oaks academies, opening last year, earned their first A grades.

St. Paul School of Excellence, a charter closing at the end of this school year, was the only St. Johns County school to score an F.

Testing the test

Out of 3,219 Florida schools graded, 1,169 schools earned As, 642 received Bs, 859 received Cs, 365 schools received Ds and 184 schools received an F. Schools will have a chance to appeal their grades and seek a waiver if they can demonstrate significant testing problems last spring that affected outcomes.

Although the FSA was a tougher test than its predecessor, the FCAT, and fewer students passed, the 2014-15 grades closely matched the 2013-14 marks across much of Florida because the State Board of Education made it easier for schools to earn As when it revised the grading formula in January. But, many superintendents think learning gains will be harder to come by the next go-around.

Joyner acknowledged the grades were similar to last year's but that, without measurable learning gains, the state had no choice but to make sure it set a bar that was realistic and fair.

"I wouldn't agree it was easy to make an A," he said. "I think they set an appropriate bar, which sets the bar higher for next year."

The higher cut scores will make it more difficult for schools to earn the points necessary for high marks. State officials also removed "safety nets" that protected schools from dropping more than one letter grade in a year regardless of their performance. Bonus points were also nixed.

Round 2 of FSA testing starts Feb. 29 and continues through spring.

Joyner said he had no concerns about the next round of testing as students and teachers have a better idea of what to expect in terms of how to take the computer-based assessments and what kind of content will be included.

The 2015-16 school grades are expected this summer.