

# *Hillsborough has more D and F schools than any district in Florida*

*Superintendent Van Ayres called the situation “unacceptable” but said he expects grades to gradually improve*

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The Hillsborough County school district, known a few years ago for a large group of low-performing schools, is once again saddled with an unwelcome distinction. The district has more D- and F-graded schools than any other in the state, according to data released last week by the Florida Department of Education.

Even Miami-Dade and Broward counties, which are larger, do not have as many under this year’s unusual grading system. Changes to both the testing system and standards that students were required to learn made year-to-year comparisons unreliable. So the state graded only on achievement, and did not give students the usual credit for learning growth. Hillsborough received D’s or F’s for 32 of its schools, not including privately managed charters. One of the district schools, Just Elementary, already closed temporarily because of longtime struggles with staffing and student skills. Two more on the list — Adams Middle and Kimbell Elementary — are scheduled for similar shutdowns this June.

Reflecting on the new numbers, Superintendent Van Ayres said in an interview this week he is determined to make every school better than a D and help all students become proficient, especially in reading. It’s a steep climb. Slightly more than half the students at the 32 schools last year tested at Level 1 in English Language Arts, which measures reading skills. That’s the lowest of five levels, defined by the state as needing “substantial support” to succeed in the following year. Districtwide, just under 32% of students tested at Level 1 in English Language Arts.

“Historically, proficiency has always been an area that has been a struggle,” said Ayres, who was named superintendent in June. The state considers students “proficient” when they score at Level 4, meaning they are “likely to excel in the next grade.” At Level 2, students are considered “below satisfactory and “likely to need substantial support” the following year. Those at Level 3 received “satisfactory” scores and are deemed to have passed the state test. Students at Level 5 have achieved “mastery” in the state’s estimation and are “likely to excel.”

Kindergarten readiness, a measure as low as 16% at some of the schools on the list of 32, makes it hard for children to master reading by the third grade, when that skill is needed for future learning. “I’ll take our teachers against any in the state,” Ayres said. “But it’s that starting point.” But other districts also have schools where children lack preparation for kindergarten. Poverty exists throughout Florida. And all 67 districts faced the same hurdles last year of new curriculum, new standards and a change from once-a-year exams to three testing cycles. Pinellas County, for example, had four D schools and none with F’s. And while Pasco County had a slightly greater percentage of schools with D’s and F’s than Hillsborough, the total number — 14 — was far fewer.

Miami-Dade County had five D schools and none received an F, while Broward County had 11 D's and one F.

What went wrong in Hillsborough?

In his remarks, Ayres did not mention his predecessor, Addison Davis, who during his three years on the job took pride in raising school grades. But Ayres said he wonders: "Were we as prepared as other districts across the state? Was our staff prepared enough to teach the standards as needed? Did our curriculum match, were our instructional staff prepared at the level we should have prepared them to be? As you look at the numbers, numbers don't lie. They are what they are." He called the numbers "unacceptable."

Ayres and Deputy Superintendent Shaylia McRae, who oversees the high needs "Transformation Network" of schools, said they have cause for optimism this year. They said students and teachers are responding favorably to the state's new emphasis on phonics to teach letter sounds. McRae and her staff are closely studying data about student performance and how it relates to individual teachers. "We are really trying to isolate opportunities of greatness," McRae said. And nearly half the schools in her group earned C grades on achievement alone. Challenges remain, including staffing shortages. "Am I expecting these grades coming out in July to be the best they'll be? No," Ayres said. "I think over the next two- or three-year period of time, they will continue to grow, and grow at a fast rate." He said he appreciates this opportunity to build stronger schools. "I love accountability," he said. "And we've lost this over the past two or three years because of COVID. Everybody had an excuse. I actually am glad we are at the point where we are talking about all of this."

Times Staff Writer Ian Hodgson contributed to this report.