

Officials criticize teacher training report

By [Erica Pippins](#)

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Most local colleges and universities continue to earn high marks for producing qualified teachers to enter Alabama's K-12 classrooms, but many school officials still believe the state's evaluation of individual education degree programs is flawed.

For the fifth year in a row, the Alabama Department of Education has released report cards for the 29 higher education institutions across the state that specialize in teacher training. The annual accountability profiles are based on performance evaluations by principals and other supervisors of first-year teachers straight out of college.

Among central Alabama schools, Faulkner University, Huntingdon College and Troy University Montgomery all received As. Auburn University, Auburn University Montgomery and Troy University got Bs. And Alabama State University raised its grade from an F the last two years to a B.

But Tuskegee University, which has earned an A the previous two years, saw its grade drop to a C. The reason: One of six students in the university's elementary education program failed to meet the state's professional education benchmarks.

"What we are constantly afraid of is one student being the difference between an A and an F," said Benjamin Benford, dean of Tuskegee's college of liberal arts and education.

Benford isn't alone. Educators have long questioned whether the evaluation mechanisms are fair, especially for those schools where the report is based on the performance of a small number of students enrolled in various education degree programs. Some say the scores don't accurately reflect the overall quality of teachers who graduate from their schools.

"A school such as Auburn University may have 20 to 30 students enrolled in one program. If one of them fails, then the letter grade for that school may be brought down to a B," Benford said. "But in our case, if one student fails, it magnifies the institution's overall grade. One student under performed. It's as simple as that."

If the institution receives an overall grade of C, D or F, it must develop and submit an improvement plan to the State Superintendent of Education and notify all candidates admitted to the targeted program. Starting in 2006, all education majors will be required to take a subject-matter test to teach in Alabama's public schools. The results of those exams will also be factored into the report card.

"I don't really want to speculate on how that may impact recruitment," Benford said. "All I can say is it would be better if we hadn't gotten a C."

Jayne A. Meyer, director of education and certification for the Alabama Department of Education, said the department has heard concerns expressed by educators about the evaluation standards, called Professional Education Personnel Evaluation or PEPE.

"It is a very difficult issue, but the SDE is concerned about the quality of graduates and the impact they have on children," Meyer said. "The bottom line is that we have quality educators in the public schools."

The department did eliminate a formula on the report cards that rated the official status of institutions programs after three years or when 10 graduates completed the program. That's because some officials were worried that their overall program grade was based on students who graduated two or three years ago.

But even those colleges and universities who received an A, or a B in the case of Alabama State University, say despite those changes, the report cards still need to be tweaked.

For example, six out of eight early childhood students achieved scores that were at or exceeded evaluation benchmarks. Because two students did not meet those standards, the whole program received a failing grade. Likewise in the sciences, two of three ASU students got high scores, while one missed the mark.

"In order for the process to work, it must provide an accurate reflection of the overall quality and effectiveness of our programs, which we believe it does not," said Mona Taylor, ASU's interim director of university relations. "It needs to be improved so the public will not be misled about ASU's or any other institution's program accountability."

Meyer said the preparation of teachers is a very complex process.

"The department feels that the college deans and faculty are fully committed to preparing teachers to go into the classroom," Meyer said. "I just urge people to remember that the report cards reflect data on a small sample of folks. It's not everyone teaching."