

Making the Grade: Number of "A" rated high schools nearly doubles in Collier County

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For Golden Gate High School, it was a success story 10 years in the making.

The number of "A" high schools in Collier County has nearly doubled from four in 2012 to seven in 2013, according to preliminary grades released Wednesday by the Florida Department of Education. When Golden Gate High School earned an A, it was the first in the school's 10-year history, and marked a significant jump from the C grade it earned last year.

Of 579 high schools in the state with a C grade in 2012, Golden Gate was one of only 16 — or just 2.8 percent — made the jump to an A grade in 2013.

"We have a saying, 'Making our way to an A,' and now we made it, on our 10-year-anniversary," said junior Adriana Vega. "It was difficult hearing around Collier County that we're a C school and we're never going to be an A school and now we proved we deserve to be an A school."

Joining Golden Gate were Barron Collier, Lely, Lorenzo Walker Technical and Gulf Coast high schools — all A schools in 2012 — along with Naples and Palmetto Ridge high schools, which were rated B schools in 2012.

Immokalee High School jumped from a C to receiving its first-ever B this year, according to the state data and Superintendent Kamela Patton.

"They missed being an A by just 32 points out of a possible 1,050 needed to earn an A," she said.

High school grades are based on a 1,600 point scale — 800 of which come directly from Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores — and to be named an A school, a school must score at least 1,050 points. Other components specific to high schools, and which make up 50 percent of a school's grade, are acceleration, graduation rate and college readiness.

Collier did have two schools that dropped a letter grade. Everglades City School and Marco Island Academy, both of which are evaluated on a different scale than traditional high schools, each dropped from a C to a D.

The schools are graded on an 800 point scale for FCAT scores, but they're not eligible for the other 800 points for various reasons, which puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to the school grading formula.

Marco Island Academy Principal George Andreozzi could not be reached for comment on Wednesday.

Golden Gate High School Principal Jose Hernandez, who has seen the school go from an F to an A in his tenure, said an A grade is not easy to come by.

"We've been working at it, and chipping away at it. It truly is a team effort. It's everyone in the school, the students commitment and belief in themselves ... the community support, all of those things play a role in any school's success, but certainly in Golden Gate's," said Hernandez, who was off campus in meetings Wednesday but recorded an announcement in advance so that the students would hear the news from him.

Hernandez said the school's philosophy is to address all areas, because students come with a "variety of needs, and they come with a variety of hopes and dreams."

"We have to have the right support in place for all of our kids, not just some," he said.

Those numerous efforts included increasing career certifications, advanced placement classes, dual enrollment classes and taking the reading score, which was 26 percent when Hernandez took the helm at the school, and nearly doubling it.

"We did a lot to try to improve our school grade. We needed to work on work readiness and college preparation," math teacher Derek Harp said. "It's the culmination of all those extra things we did: Saturdays for Success; tutoring; focusing on certifications including Photoshop and child development; dual enrollment — all that led to our significant improvement."

In south Lee County, South Fort Myers and Estero High Schools saw their grades drop from A to B.

Statewide, a record number of Florida high schools and combination schools earned an A this year, with 240 schools — or 48 percent — earning the highest grade.

"I am very pleased with how we performed compared to the rest of the state," Patton said. "While 48 percent of Florida's high schools received an A, 88 percent of our high schools received an A."

Education Commissioner Pam Stewart said legislation passed in 2011 dictates that next year's scores will be evaluated on a stricter scale because more than 75 percent of schools scored an A or B.

"Since 82 percent of high schools have earned As or Bs, it triggers an adjustment. It will become more difficult for high schools to earn an A or B designation," she said. "This is the first time this will have happened since the rule kicked in."

Currently it takes a score of 66 percent to earn an A and that will change to 70 percent. It now takes 62 percent to get a B grade, and that will become 65 percent, said Deputy Commissioner Juan Copa.

This year the state also had a provision referred to as a safety net, that would not allow a school to drop more than one letter grade in a year. Copa said there were only seven high schools in the state that ended up being protected by the safety net, and two of those were Ds that would have been Fs.

None of the high schools protected by the state's safety net were in Collier County.

Stewart also said the grading will need to be overhauled with the changes coming to the assessment tests in conjunction with the Common Core State Standards.

"We will need to totally redo our school grading," Stewart said. "I think we could fairly safely say that we could expect student performance could drop in the first baseline year because these are more rigorous standards, and moving to a new, harder assessment, students would not perform as well. We're raising the bar, it's what's best for our students."

For a complete list of preliminary high school grades, visit <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/>

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