

# School Letter Grades and Ratings

What they really represent and the challenge of overcoming them.

For years, one of the greatest attributes of Quality of Life for a homebuyer has been the school system. Even buyers without children want to know that their home is located in a good school district.

But what makes a good school district? If we asked 20 different people, we'd get 20 different answers: diversity, teacher qualification, technology, ongoing training, building maintenance, a caring and nurturing staff, emotional and mental health support systems, experienced administrators, district leadership, afterschool programming, an active parent organization, high ability programming, special education programming, athletic programs, music opportunities, student leadership opportunities, availability to college courses, hands-on career training, internships, volunteer opportunities, the list is endless.

And yet, the tools available to realtors and potential homebuyers are limited to a letter grade and a GreatSchools rating.

So, what exactly do these ratings represent? Simply put: a snapshot of test scores. I could speak at length to Indiana's flawed standardized testing that is required by the state. The ISTEP test has faced major overhauls not once, but twice in the past few years, and is facing more major changes as the state has changed vendors. Our children are challenged to go back and forth between 'paper and pencil' and 'electronic' testing on the vendor's system that sometimes fails in the middle of testing. These constant changes, inconsistencies, and unreliable state vendors make it incredibly difficult for our teachers to prepare students for testing.

Furthermore, while testing is an important gauge of how our students are doing, it only gives a snapshot of where a student currently is. A recent article by the New York Times highlighted a study by Stanford that tracked student growth over a five year period of time. It found Elkhart Community Schools as a shining star in the area. **Over a five year period of time, our students experience 5.8 years worth of growth - putting the Elkhart Community Schools district in the 95% nationwide in terms of growth, above every other district in our area.**

At Elkhart Community Schools, the overall growth and success of a child is far more important than a snapshot in time by an ever-changing test. As demonstrated by Stanford's research, our focus is working with students where they are, and helping them grow to become more. This growth is demonstrated not only by studies like this, but in data points like our graduation rate - 91.7% - higher than the Indiana average and most neighboring school districts. From the earliest days of Pre-K to the walk across the graduation stage, the staff at Elkhart Community Schools - every teacher, custodian, food service, bus driver, paraprofessional, and counselor - is dedicated to the successful growth of students.

If I were asked what makes a good school district...? I'd say our amazing staff. The level of care each staff member gives to every child who walks through our doors is simply unmatched. It's also immeasurable. We can't give stars, a letter grade, or award points to the 1,800 people dedicated to creating the best educational experience for ALL. And in a time where teachers are monetarily rewarded by the state for students performing highly on standardized tests, I'd say that our teachers are here for the right reasons - to make a difference in the lives of children.

Beyond our staff, I credit our community to the great success and growth of our students. At Elkhart Community Schools, we partner with over 400 businesses and organizations in the community who provide opportunities for our students. Our students learn from an early age about the importance of giving back to our community and annually log over 20,000 hours of service.

*Studies have shown that the single most contributing factor to choosing a school is word of mouth. We're certain that if a potential homebuyer has no trusted source for word of mouth that an online search of a letter grade or rating is the next stop. We'd ask that you become the trusted source when a homebuyer asks about a school. While we may never overcome the challenge of testing, letter grades, and ratings, I am confident that we can work together to help homebuyers see the true heart of our great school district.*



**Dr. Robert Haworth**  
Superintendent of Schools  
Elkhart Community Schools