

Introduction

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Introduction and Executive Summary

For nearly a decade, Florida has been a laboratory for school reform unlike any in the nation. While nearly every state has undertaken a variety of programs aimed at improving achievement in public schools, Florida's efforts have been more far-reaching and wide-ranging. The state's FCAT testing program and A+ accountability system have served as *de facto* models for the 2002 federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. Florida Governor Jeb Bush has played an active role in initiating and advocating for a number of Florida's newer education initiatives – particularly those that seek to create market competition as a means of solving the perceived problems of public schools.

Florida's education reform efforts began well before Governor Bush took office in 1999. Under Governor Lawton Chiles, the state took the first steps toward improving the curriculum and expanding the role of testing in the state's accountability system. The state's efforts have not been limited to measuring test outcomes, nor have they been only driven by the state's governors or legislature. Florida voters have passed a series of mandates, in the form of amendments to the state constitution, that seek to reform education by insuring adequate resources are provided and by investing in early education and reduced class size.

Reform Florida is a collection of eleven policy briefs by eight authors who assess the current status of key education reforms in Florida and make recommendations for the future. *Reform Florida* topics range from school funding, to teacher supply, to English language learning. In general the briefs paint a decidedly mixed picture of Florida's efforts to meet its ambitious agenda for improving student achievement. A number of the briefs point to ways in which various of the current state requirements and mandates may

actually undermine student achievement, particularly the achievement of low-income minority students.

Madhabi Chatterji of Columbia University's Teachers College (Good and Bad News About Florida Student Achievement: Performance Trends on Multiple Indicators Since Passage of the A+ Legislation) observes that elementary achievement trends show strong gains in writing and steady improvements over time in reading and mathematics. In upper grades the news is not so good, with continued and in some cases widening achievement gaps along ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

Lisa Abrams of Boston College (Teachers' Views on High-stakes Testing: Implications for the Classroom) reports that the emphasis on test-driven assessment under the state's A-plus accountability program has tended to produce more fear than trust in Florida's classrooms. Florida teachers who took part in a national survey on the impact of high-stakes testing on their teaching practices were more likely than their counterparts in other states to report positive views of state standards and of their compatibility with the state's testing program. However, they report spending more time on tested subject matter, to the detriment of important activities that are not tested. They also report that the pressure to raise test scores has produced widespread anxiety among students and quite possibly encouraged some to drop out of school.

One result of the testing mandated by the A-plus accountability program has been the retention in grade of students who fall below a threshold test score. Mary Lee Smith of Arizona State University (Retaining Students in Grade: Consequences for Florida) examines the research on the impact of retaining students in grade and finds that the practice drives up dropout rates. She concludes that although retaining students in grade

provides no short-term benefits, the policy entails substantial long-term risks for students, and increases costs to taxpayers. Students retained in grade are disproportionately students living in poverty and members of ethnic minorities.

Examining the state's record since the 1998 implementation of the constitutional mandate to provide "adequate provision...for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools," Douglas Harris of Florida State University (Funding Florida's Schools: Adequacy, Costs, and the State Constitution) finds that a strong case can be made that the state has failed to live up to its constitutional obligation and that Florida is at risk of being held legally liable as a consequence. Harris recommends that the legislature empanel a bipartisan commission to study the state's education system and bring its funding into line with terms that would enable the state to meet the constitutional standard voters have approved.

One group of Florida students potentially put at risk both by the state's accountability regime and the requirements of *No Child Left Behind* are those with limited English proficiency (LEP). Victoria-Maria Macdonald of Florida State University (The Status of English Language Learners in Florida: Trends and Prospects) finds that while Florida remains under a 1990 consent decree requiring "equal and comprehensible instruction" to the state's LEP students, efforts to meet the decree's standards have been hampered by the requirements of the state's A-plus accountability system, the *No Child Left Behind* act, and the too-hasty movement of LEP students away from bilingual instruction and into inclusion programs. Macdonald notes, however, that Florida has avoided the wholesale hostility to bilingualism that has harmed LEP education programs elsewhere.

Briefs by Douglas Harris of FSU (Putting a High Quality Teacher in Every Florida Classroom) and Gene Glass of ASU (Teacher Evaluation) examine the challenges of recruiting high quality teachers for every classroom and appropriately assessing them once they have been hired. Harris warns of a serious challenge in finding qualified teachers to fill every classroom in Florida, and concludes that while the state has taken some steps toward filling that need, its overall effort has been more symbolic than meaningful. Glass, meanwhile, reviews research on teacher evaluation. Policy makers have increasingly turned to two forms of test-driven evaluations of teachers: paper-and-pencil tests of teachers themselves, and student test scores, where student performance is used to assess teachers' competence. While both are increasingly popular, these approaches to assessing teachers, Glass points out, are far less accurate and valid predictors of student achievement than their proponents claim. The questionable validity of paper-and-pencil tests of teachers and of value-added teacher evaluation methods means, Glass reasons, that they cannot be used as substitutes for college degree requirements in the teacher certification process.

Reform Florida concludes with briefs that examine those aspects of the accountability regime that focus on market-based solutions to public education problems, i.e., the state's voucher, charter school, business tax credit, and "virtual" education initiatives. Tim Hacsí of the University of Massachusetts at Boston (Innovations and Accountability: Vouchers, Charters, and the Florida Virtual School) observes that Florida has been one of the most active states in the nation in creating and expanding such market-based educational options. To date, however, there is no reliable evidence that such measures have improved student achievement in the state. Hacsí and the University

of South Florida's Sherman Dorn, in a separate brief (Reforming the Structure of Florida's Accountability System), both make the point that Florida's publicly funded choice options are not subject to the same accountability standards as are traditional public schools. This unequal standard for accountability, they contend, deprives Florida residents of the means to assess comprehensively whether the results of these experiments are worth the tax dollars they cost.

In a separate analysis (Alternatives for Florida's Assessment and Accountability System), Dorn analyzes the state's accountability regime for public schools. He finds that the system of awarding letter grades to schools and then responding by providing a monetary reward (for desired improvements) or sanctions such as losing students to vouchers (for undesired failure to improve) is a misuse of test result data and violates the standards set by testing experts. Additionally, Dorn argues that the system as currently structured fails to adequately aid struggling schools to improve.

Finally, Douglas Harris's brief (Class Size, Pre-kindergarten, and Educational Adequacy: Costs and Funding Options for Florida) reviews Florida's efforts to respond to voter approved constitutional amendments mandating smaller classes and universal pre-kindergarten. He finds that Florida's efforts so far have been inadequate and makes the case that the state can adequately fund both amendments without giving up its position as a low-tax state.

The people of Florida have high expectations of their publicly funded schools, as reflected by the reforms implemented over the last 10 years. As the *Reform Florida* briefs demonstrate, while some of these reforms show promising signs of making a positive impact on student achievement, others do not. In some cases the reforms

implemented are not sufficiently grounded in research evidence to warrant their having been adopted. Other reforms have the potential to make important contributions to improving the achievement of Florida's children, but lack sufficient infrastructure or state investment to accomplish their purposes.

The school reform debate frequently takes place in an environment that is long on emotion and short on hard data. By grounding its examination of Florida's reforms in data, the *Reform Florida* briefs offer guidance on how successful reforms can be made better, which promising initiatives need more support, and which efforts should be significantly modified or abandoned altogether. The *Reform Florida* briefs thus provide Florida's public and policy makers with an assessment of how effectively their money is currently being spent and a roadmap to how it might be better invested in the years to come.