Florida's EDUCATION REVOLUTION

A Summary

Foundation for Excellence in Education

FLORIDA'S EDUCATION REVOLUTION

OVERVIEW
“Together, let’s send an unmistakable message for our children—in Florida, failure is no longer an option. Education will remain my top priority until we can honestly say that our system no longer leaves any child behind. I will never waver in my dedication to transforming our public schools into centers of excellence.”

—FLORIDA GOVERNOR JEB BUSH, 1999 STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS

Florida’s education transformation ranks as perhaps the greatest public policy success story of the past decade. Once near the bottom of the pack on national tests, Florida’s students are racing to the top, proving that all children can learn when given the right opportunity. In 1998, Florida students scored near the bottom of the nation in student achievement. Forty-seven percent of Florida’s fourth-grade students were functionally illiterate.¹ That year, Jeb Bush campaigned for governor, pledging to fundamentally transform Florida’s schools. His reform platform was premised on simple but powerful principles—holding schools accountable for results, setting high expectations, rewarding success, giving families real school choice and attracting talent into the classroom. Once in office, Governor Bush kept his promise, and ushered in a series of bold education reforms to, in his words, “organize schools around the singular goal of learning.”

![Fourth Grade Hispanic Students Reading Comparison](image)

Florida vs Other States

Hispanic students in Florida read as well or better than the statewide reading average of all students in 21 states and the District of Columbia.
Florida students have achieved dramatic and sustained academic improvement. From 1998 to 2011, Sunshine State students’ test score gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have risen well above the national average. Florida’s students with disabilities lead the nation in gains in fourth-grade reading. Florida’s minority students have made the most progress in narrowing the achievement gap. Florida’s Hispanic students are now reading as well or better than the statewide average of all students in 21 states on the NAEP fourth-grade reading examination. The map above shades those states with statewide averages below or tied with that of Florida’s Hispanics.

Governor Bush’s education reforms faced intense opposition, but by the end of his second term, once-controversial elements of his reform agenda earned bipartisan support. Florida’s common sense approach and proven reforms can work in other states to give all children the opportunity to receive a high-quality education in order to pursue the American dream.

Florida’s Education Reform Strategy

Florida was the first state to implement comprehensive reforms. In recent years, a number of other states have followed Florida’s lead. Florida’s policymakers designed these reforms to strengthen the traditional public school system, offering parents the widest range of choice options to spur competition and innovation. The result has been a systematic transformation and dramatic improvement in students’ academic achievement.
Holding Schools Accountable for Results

The A-F School Grading System, enacted in 1999, underlies the entire Florida K–12 reform strategy. State officials grade schools using an objective and transparent A through F grading scale based upon the proficiency and learning gains of students as measured by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

In 2001, Florida expanded the FCAT to grades 3 through 10 in reading and mathematics (Florida previously offered FCAT writing tests at the elementary, middle and high school level and later incorporated science exams to the FCAT system also at each school level).

Schools earn grades based on FCAT scores, which are an objective and unbiased measure of student learning. The Florida Department of Education bases half of the school’s grade on students’ achievement levels—that is, the percentage of students scoring proficient (on or above grade-level) in reading, writing, math, and science. State officials base the remaining half of the school’s grade upon individual student learning gains—that is, the percentage of students who made progress in reading and math from his or her previous achievement level the prior year. By making progress equally important as proficiency, a school is required to help all of its students make at least a year’s worth of progress in a year’s time, regardless of whether the student is on grade level.

To help the most struggling students, the school grade calculation emphasizes the progress of the lowest 25th percentile of students by doubling their impact on a school’s grade. State tracking of the gains of the lowest performing students provides a powerful incentive for schools to get even the most disadvantaged students moving in the right direction. And because all schools—regardless of whether or not they are high performing—have a lowest performing 25 percent of students, this provision ensures that every school works to meet the needs of all students.

In 2010, in an effort to include 11th and 12th grades in the high school calculation, the state began including graduation rates for
all students, graduation rates for at-risk students, acceleration rates (AP/IB/dual enrollment and industry certification) and college readiness rates as half of the high school grading formula.

Florida’s accountability system provides transparent, objective, and easily understood data to parents, educators and the public to spur improvement among all schools.

Since 1999, Florida’s schools have made incredible progress. When Florida started grading schools, only 21 percent of schools earned an A or B. In fact, Florida had more D and F schools than A and B schools. Today, 72 percent of schools earn an A or B, and the bar for good grades has been raised five times.

Under the A–F grading system, the state gives cash awards to schools that earn an A grade or improve a letter grade, such as going from a C to a B. The state awards these bonuses, which, average $100 per student, directly to schools and the majority of funds are used to provide bonuses to teachers and staff.

The state offered children at schools that earned two “F” grades in a four year period the opportunity to transfer to a better performing school. Through the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, students could leave their low-performing public school to attend another public school or a private school. The private school option of this program ended in 2006 when the Florida Supreme Court ruled the program violated an “exclusivity” provision in the state constitution.

Even though the program was cut short, research concluded that the competition combined with the threat of vouchers improved student performance in public schools. The Manhattan Institute reported that, “Florida’s low-performing schools are improving in direct proportion to the challenge they face from voucher competition. These improvements are real, not the result of test gaming, demographic shifts, or the statistical phenomenon of ‘regression to the mean.’”
Setting High Expectations

In 2002, the state ended social promotion for third grade students in a tough-love strategy to improve literacy. To proceed to fourth grade, students must attain a minimally acceptable score on the FCAT reading test. Students who fail the FCAT reading tests are given other test-based opportunities to demonstrate reading proficiency. Students who still cannot demonstrate reading skills are retained and provided with aggressive intervention and the opportunity to learn fundamental skills necessary for future success. Parents of struggling readers are kept informed of their child’s progress from the first month of Kindergarten through the end of third grade.

Reformers designed this policy to ensure students are taught to read in the critical grades—kindergarten through third—because students transition from learning to read to reading to learn in fourth grade and beyond.

Florida supported this policy by enacting a statewide reading initiative, *Just Read, Florida!* which provided professional development to all K–3 teachers and reading coaches to elementary schools throughout the state.

An evaluation by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research revealed that, after one year, students who were retained under the social promotion ban outperformed their peers who had been promoted through an exemption and, that the gap grew larger after two years. The recent follow-up study found that retained students were still outperforming promoted students in reading and math as late as seventh grade. Better still, the percentage of Florida third graders scoring high enough to avoid retention has soared.

Florida also set a higher bar for high school students. In 2002, the state raised the academic level of its longstanding high school exit exam from an eighth-grade test to the 10th-grade level on the FCAT examination. Between 1999 and 2010, Florida’s high school graduation rate increased by 21 percent (after decreasing by seven percent from 1990 to 1998).
Fostering and Rewarding Success

Florida’s systemic reform strategy also created incentives and provided greater flexibility to enable schools to meet these higher expectations. Reformers restructured existing funds that formerly were only available for use after students failed—programs such as dropout prevention or summer school. Schools were expected to use the funds throughout the school year to improve student literacy or assist those struggling to pass their high school exit exam.

Florida education reformers also made high school more rigorous to better prepare students for college and careers. As the first step, Florida lawmakers provided state funding for all Florida 10th graders to take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) or the equivalent PLAN exam for the ACT. Officials forged a partnership with the College Board to use this data to identify students with the potential to be successful in Advanced Placement (AP) coursework and exams. Under this partnership, the state also provided professional development to train teachers, primarily those in C, D and F schools, how to teach AP courses.

In 2000, Florida lawmakers created a merit pay system that provides teacher bonuses for teachers whose students earn passing grades on AP exams. In the early ’90s Florida began providing a $700 bonus to schools for every student who passed an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate (IB) exam as a way to fund these programs. From these funds, teachers now earn awards of $50 for each student passing an AP or IB test up to a total award of $2,000. To incentivize high expectations in low-performing schools, teachers in D and F schools earn an additional bonus of $500 for the first student who passes an AP test.

Since 1999, the number of students taking AP exams in Florida has increased by 404 percent. The number of students passing AP tests has grown by almost 316 percent. Since the advent of the program, the number of African-American and Hispanic students passing Advanced Placement exams has more than quadrupled. Through redirecting existing revenue, Florida reformers were able

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>AP Exams</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>16,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>32,775</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>136,265</td>
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2010 gains from 1st year AP takers were added to high school grade.
to fund the system of school-wide and teacher bonuses with very little new monies.

**Giving Families the Power to Choose**

Florida empowers families with the financial freedom to choose the best school for their children. The state has one of the broadest arrays of public, private and virtual school options in the nation.

**Private School Choice**

Florida created two private school choice programs—the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

According to the most recent 2013 numbers, over 26,000 students with disabilities took advantage of scholarships offered through the McKay program. These state-funded scholarships allow special education students to attend a private or public school of their parents’ choice. An evaluation by University of Arkansas researchers found that the competition created by offering choice to the families of special education students spurred improvement by students with special needs in traditional public schools.\(^3\) The NAEP scores of Florida’s children with disabilities have substantially improved statewide since the 1990s, due to the combination of the McKay program and other reforms.

In the 2012–13 school year, over 50,000 low-income students received scholarships funded by the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. This program allows businesses to receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits for contributions made to non-profit organizations that provide tuition scholarships to low-income children. Businesses are eligible to donate as much as $140 million through the tax credit program.\(^4\) A study by Northwestern University researchers found that the competition created by offering low-income kids scholarships spurred academic improvement in the traditional public school system.\(^5\)
Public School Choice
Florida also offers families choice within the traditional public school system. Almost 340,000 families take advantage of open enrollment in public schools. The state also has one of the strongest charter school laws in the nation. In 2013, more than 200,000 children attended charter schools in Florida. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that agree to meet certain performance standards set by the government, but are otherwise free from the majority of the bureaucratic rules and regulations that encumber traditional public schools. Charter schools allow teachers and school leaders the chance to create high quality learning environments, providing families with a new option besides their child’s traditional public school.

Virtual Education
Florida is also recognized as the leading state in offering families virtual schooling options. The Florida Virtual School is widely considered the most innovative statewide virtual school in the nation, offering all—public, private or home educated—students access to a wide range of online courses. Funding follows the child down to the course level and providers of virtual courses earn payment after students complete the course. In recent years, Florida has expanded access by allowing private providers to enter the marketplace. Florida’s growing number of virtual learners show larger learning gains and higher course completion rates. In 2013 almost 9,000 students participated in full-time virtual instruction.

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten
In 2002, Floridians passed a constitutional amendment requiring the state to provide pre-kindergarten to all four-year-olds by 2005. A voucher program was implemented, and all four year olds in Florida are eligible. For the 2011–12 school year, over 184,000 students participated, making VPK the largest voucher program in the state and in the country.
Opening up Access to Effective Teachers

Researchers identify teacher effectiveness as the main in-school factor affecting students’ academic achievement. Previous law required teachers to earn a teaching certificate from a school of education before they could enter the classroom.

In 1999, Florida created new pathways for people to become teachers—offering alternative routes to certification. For example, aspiring teachers who have a college degree in a field other than teaching can work at any public school district and receive on-the-job training and mentoring while they are teaching.

Other aspiring teachers can enter the teaching workforce by completing programs at Educator Preparation Institutes offered by Florida’s College System. Florida also accepts teaching certifications through reciprocity from any other state in the country. Half of Florida’s new teachers now enter the workforce through these pathways, which are helping to bring highly talented professionals into the classroom where they can begin a fulfilling career making a difference in children’s lives.

Results of Reform

After implementing these reforms, Florida’s students began a dramatic climb in academic achievement that continues today. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or Naep—the so-called “Nation’s Report Card”—Florida students, who were well behind in the 1990s, are now outperforming the national average on the critical fourth- and eighth-grade reading examinations. It is important to note that Florida is a majority minority state with a higher percentage of students designated as low-income (eligible for free and reduced lunch) than the nation. Additionally, Florida’s per-student spending is less than the national average. The chart to the right shows that Florida’s fourth grade students went from reading a full grade level behind the national average to moving above the national average.
The chart on the next page shows the results of Florida’s A+ plan to grade schools A–F. The dotted lines indicate times when the standard for achieving a grade was raised.

Next Generation Reforms
But success is never final, and reform is never finished. In 2011, Florida lawmakers passed Senate Bill 736 which created a pay-for-performance system for teachers. It also ended the antiquated practices of teacher tenure and LIFO (last in first out) by banning the use of seniority as the determinant of retention in the event of layoffs. SB 736 ensures that students will have the most effective teachers in their classrooms because principals will only be able to offer/extend an annual contract to a teacher who has demonstrated effectiveness on her evaluation.

Florida also pursued customized learning in the form of digital and blended learning options for students. Florida launched the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) over a decade ago, and it was the first statewide public virtual school in the country. Today, FLVS has over 300,000 course enrollments, and any Florida student in kindergarten through 12th grade can enroll in the school.
In 2011, Florida required districts to offer at least three options for full-time virtual programs in grades K–12, and part-time virtual programs to grades 9–12. These courses are offered at no cost to students, and the state pays based on completion of the course, not seat-time. Florida high school students are also required to take at least one virtual course to graduate.

Like other states, Florida still has far to go to ensure that all children receive a high quality education. Florida’s experience shows, however, that these common sense and now proven reforms can spur real improvement in student learning. State and federal leaders now have the opportunity to learn from Florida’s success and pursue even bolder and innovative ways to transform American education and provide every student the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and their careers.

ENDNOTES


ALL KIDS CAN LEARN!

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