

Summary and Implications for Florida Policy Makers

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Introduction

The policy briefs in *Educational Accountability and Assessment in Florida: Informing the Debate* cover a range of issues, including descriptions of the accountability and assessment system (Herrington); the political environment in Florida (MacManus & Herrington); assessments of how well Florida's children are learning relative to the state's standards and as compared to other states (Chatterji; Johnson); identification of the strengths and limitations of Florida policy for reform (Brewer; Kasten & McDavis); and a model for identifying the inevitable costs of accountability (Nakib & Iatarola). What generalizations about the improvement of public elementary and secondary education in Florida can be drawn from the seven policy briefs in this series?

Summary Generalizations

First, Florida policy makers have approached educational reform through a persistent, singular focus on accountability. As described by Herrington, reform has relied on a combination of standards, assessments, public reporting, and consequences. Though the specifics of each of these elements have changed over the 35 years of accountability tracked by Herrington, the elements themselves have remained constant.

Second, Florida policy makers need to invest more consistently in capacity building, building on recent successes. Recent initiatives such as *Just Read, Florida!*, extensive professional development offerings in literacy for teachers, and establishment of reading centers at Florida State University and the University of Central Florida are examples of state efforts to build capacity to support literacy. And they appear to have led to significant achievement gains for students. In fact, the most impressive gains in student achievement have occurred in literacy, where the state has balanced pressure through accountability with support through capacity building. However, similar efforts have not occurred in other areas in such a systematic fashion. When they have occurred, the efforts have been inconsistent and short-lived. Good examples of this are capacity-building initiatives such as the seven-period day and teacher professional development, which have been implemented sporadically (as in the case of teacher professional development) or established and then dropped without careful evaluation (such as the seven-period day). Overall, Florida's school improvement efforts have lacked a comprehensive approach to capacity building. The *A+ Plan* has not gone far enough in that it has not taken the next step in helping school districts, teachers, and communities find solutions for addressing persistent educational problems.

Third, the environment for educational policy making in Florida is fluid and sometimes chaotic. Herrington and MacManus note the tensions between local and state control and the conflicting constituent groups that various elected public officials represent. Assumptions of local control are counterbalanced by the influence associated

with the funding source. That is, as long as 45% of funding for schools in Florida comes from the state, state policy makers will wish to exert some control over how the money is spent. While many might contend that educational policy should be apolitical and point to the nonpartisan nature of school board elections as support, educational policy is often politically or ideologically based (see Herrington). For example, concerns with reelection and term limits often make it difficult for politicians to focus on long-term improvements. Changes in elected officials make it difficult to sustain efforts over time. Identification of particular reform initiatives with partisan groups puts reforms at risk of abandonment when another group assumes control.

Fourth, given the nature and kinds of educational policy making, the resulting system would benefit from increased coherence. The educational system is becoming increasingly complex. It is difficult to calibrate for alignment among desired outcomes, standards, tests, curriculum, and instruction.

At the same time, Florida's extensive reporting and accountability requirements have been overlaid with the federal requirements articulated in the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation of 2001, which expanded the role of the federal government in public elementary and secondary education. The mechanisms for identifying low-performing schools in A+ and NCLB are not aligned, making it difficult for educators, parents, and policy makers to know when schools are performing well.

Policy coherence has also not been supported by consistently grounding policy in research and best practice or incorporating research into policy implementation. The seven-period day, the cornerstone of the Florida reform legislation in the early 1980s, has been largely abandoned because of cost. Did it improve student learning? Did it allow more students to take more demanding high school courses such as physics and foreign languages? Did it increase the dropout rate? We don't know the answers to these questions. We don't know the direct or indirect costs or the costs of foregone opportunities, the impacts on student and community satisfaction, or the impacts on student achievement.

Fifth, the briefs make it clear that student outcomes to date are mixed. Recent signs of improvement in Florida are evident in measures of student achievement. However, much work remains to be done. When student achievement is measured against the Florida Sunshine State Standards, the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level and above has increased from 1999 to 2003, but sizeable groups of students still score below proficient (Chatterji; Johnson). The educational achievement of Florida's public elementary and secondary students still lags behind the national averages and has not yet reached the levels believed desirable by citizens and policy makers.

Sixth, Florida policy makers have historically attended to issues of equity but have been less successful at addressing issues of adequacy. Florida has an

admirable record in equitable student funding. The Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) was carefully designed to ensure that students who live in property-poor districts are not disadvantaged. Florida's policies here stand in stark contrast to many states where huge disparities in school funding reflect the differential impact of property-poor and property-rich school districts. Recent changes to the state assessment system, such as the shift to annual learning gains and the requirement that the performance of the lower performing students be part of the formula, also try to ensure that school grades are not just a reflection of the economic status of students' families. In Florida much work remains to be done in this area, as the gaps in achievement for students of different races, genders, and family income levels are larger than the national average (see Chatterji; Johnson). Student performance is still tied too closely to family income. The state public school system cannot be considered a success until it breaks that link.

Finally, given the complexity of the issues, policy makers and citizens have difficulty understanding the strengths and weaknesses of public education in Florida. Much of the crisis rhetoric that accompanied the national and state reforms in the early 1980s, in *A Nation at Risk*, and in the Florida RAISE legislation described a country and a state at risk of economic failure. However, reading scores of American students have remained virtually flat for three decades, and mathematics scores have improved. At the same time, schools have incorporated students with special needs, students whose primary language is not English, and students from poor families that historically have not completed high school. Given these concurrent changes, some argue that American schooling is a remarkable success, as student achievement has been maintained while the student population has shifted. Despite these accomplishments, the system still fails large numbers of children at all levels (Chatterji; Johnson).

Together, these conclusions describe an educational system that is improving but still must be strengthened in order for Florida students to compare favorably with students nationally, let alone reach the achievement levels of students in high-performing states, and for students of differing races, genders, abilities, and privilege to demonstrate comparable learning gains. The Florida educational system has not yet attained the goal set forth in the 1998 revisions to the Constitution "for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education..."

Implications for Strengthening Florida's Education System

These policy briefs describe Florida's current approaches to school improvement and reforms with reference to the attributes of the system itself and outcomes such as student achievement, equity, adequacy, capacity building, alignment, and ongoing research and evaluation. These are also the elements that are keys to strengthening the system.

The implications that follow are intended to provide guidance for Florida educational policy in the next decade. None is a silver bullet, and together they do not capture all that must be done to ensure that public elementary and secondary education in Florida meets the constitutional standard articulated above. However, we believe that attention to these implications as a whole would increase the rate of improvement in an already improving system and bring us closer to ensuring that Florida students have access to the high-quality education that they deserve.

First, Florida policy makers and educators should expand and intensify their focus on the use of data. Florida's long-standing efforts in accountability have produced extensive data on student performance in school, college-going, and post-education employment. State data collection efforts are now used largely for accountability, as in school report cards, and to measure individual student and school performance rather than as information for school, classroom, and system improvement. As Chatterji notes, ability to use data is empowering and develops capacity.

Accountability data need to be used strategically to shape learning and teaching. School leaders and teachers need the capacity to study and reflect systematically on why some students in particular classrooms achieve more than others. Educators need the tools and support systems to assess, quantify, isolate, diagnose, and take action. Teacher and administrator preparation programs and ongoing professional development can and should address using data to make decisions about curriculum and instruction. Citizens need accurate and extensive information about the status and performance of public schools. If educators and other informed citizens know the data about Florida school performance, policy is less likely to be made in a data vacuum, and policy makers and educators are more likely to be held accountable for their decisions. Policies both inside and outside of the classroom must support the use of data to inform decisions.

At the same time, data should also be used to assess the system. We need data about the effectiveness of the system itself and more data about the effects of specific initiatives and programs. Without research and evaluation, we will not know the effects of current initiatives such as professional development in literacy, reduced class sizes, vouchers for students in failing schools, participation in prekindergarten classes, or increased standards for child care providers. Without data, we risk making policy decisions on ideological or political grounds rather than on empirical knowledge of intended and unintended effects.

Second, invest in alignment. Now that some critical elements of the system for educational improvement are in place, such as standards and testing, we need to test the

system for alignment. Do the standards match what high school graduates need to be successful in the workplace and in postsecondary education? Do the tests and the curricula match the standards? Is instruction aligned with intended outcomes? Are teacher preparation programs, recruitment and hiring strategies, and professional development opportunities designed to support the kinds of instruction needed? Do students, parents, teachers, and policy makers (including school board members) understand the system? Without answers to these and similar questions we cannot be sure that the system is coherent and comprehensive enough to attain the desired results.

Getting the alignment between state and local reform efforts right is always difficult. However, state policies only matter to the degree that they stimulate the desired changes in student learning, effects that happen only at the local level. To date we have paid insufficient attention to how policies and directives are perceived and acted upon by educators. Effects at the classroom level require policy making that is sensitive to local context and responsive to local needs. The kinds of change required call for simultaneous top-down and bottom-up efforts, new kinds of partnerships, and new roles and responsibilities. Educators will be unable to make the kinds of classroom changes required without sufficient understanding of what those are and without tools and support from the state level. Policy making and policy implementation should be respectful of and useful to local educators, teachers in particular. This kind of alignment will require the joint efforts of policy makers, the State Department of Education, and local educators.

Third, ratchet the system to another level by matching ambitious goals with similarly ambitious capacity building. The goals set for Florida schools are lofty and ambitious. Both Florida's *A+ Plan* and NCLB are premised on the assumption that all subgroups of students should achieve at the same levels within a set time period. In 2004, as Johnson reported, 77% of Florida's schools failed to meet all of the criteria for annual yearly progress. Moreover, in order for 100% of all subgroups to meet or exceed proficiency on state assessment of reading, mathematics, and science by 2014, large and sustained gains would have to be obtained in each of the intervening years, gains that far exceed the average increases in recent years. Consequences have been built into the reforms, as Florida's experience in previous decades indicates that data alone will not produce results. However, without capacity building, consequences are punitive and demoralizing, and the legitimacy and fairness of the system are compromised.

Ambitious goals must be matched by equally ambitious moves to strengthen the system. For Florida's school improvement efforts to be effective, they must penetrate into classrooms and communities. As Kasten and McDavis pointed out, success requires developing the capacity of teachers through recruitment, preparation, support, recognition, and long-term professional development. Success also depends on the

capacity of schools, families, and communities to support educational programs and enhanced student learning. The capacity required for developing and sustaining a high-quality system of education includes facilities, human resources, teacher support, and public support.

Four, strategically increase funding for education while maintaining equity.

Most people would agree that throwing money at problems, including education, is not wise. On the other hand, pressure without support is also inadequate. Capacity building requires strategic financial investment. The state must ensure that school districts receive enough resources to enable them to meet the requirements of the new standards and accountability system. During most of the 1970s and 1980s, interstate rankings placed Florida public school funding in the middle of other states. However, Florida lost ground in the 1990s. Florida's teachers are lured by higher teaching salaries in bordering states. Prospective teachers are attracted to more financially and professionally rewarding careers in other professions requiring similar preparation.

It is difficult to know what level of resources is adequate for the level of performance required to match the demands for a high-quality system. However, state comparisons indicate that Florida has underfunded education compared with other states. Floridians must set reasonable goals for absolute levels of funding and for fiscal effort.

Alternatives to general revenue increases can be used. Increased financial resources can be targeted, for example, to continue and expand safety net programs to support students at risk of retention and failure, enrichment programs that extend school learning into the community, competitive teachers' salaries, professional development, and salary schedules that are tied to performance. Additional resources will be required to build research and development into reform initiatives, to address the achievement gap, and to ensure that the assessment system is technically sound, that useful results are widely available, and that the system is generally understood.

Finally, establish mechanisms to ensure nonpartisan, sustained attention to the improvement of education in Florida. Several other states have turned to policy forums and business, government, and educator partnerships to raise public awareness of education issues and to sustain concern through changes in key advocates and elected officials. Examples include the Public School Forum of North Carolina, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky, the Georgia Partnership, and Alabama's A+ Education Foundation. Floridians should consider whether a similar organization would be of benefit.

Five-point Plan for Strengthening Florida Education Reform
• Focus on the useful data that can inform instructional and policy decisions
• Invest in alignment
• Strive for ambitious capacity building
• Make strategic financial investments
• Establish mechanisms to sustain nonpartisan support for education reform

Conclusions

The *A+ Plan* of 1999 extended accountability initiatives developed over the previous 30 years while introducing new components, including vouchers and monetary awards. The system includes prescribed standards, assessments, public reporting, and consequences. What will ultimately determine the success of this most recent iteration in Florida's persistent quest for educational improvement is the attention given to design, implementation, and capacity building.

For educational reform to be successful, efforts must incorporate sound design and must gain and maintain the support of educators and the public. As demonstrated in the briefs included in *Educational Accountability and Assessment in Florida: Informing the Debate*, this is no easy task. The authors argue that concern with equity, adequacy, capacity, alignment, and research and evaluation must undergird Florida's reform efforts. Pressure without support is inadequate, and support without standards is irresponsible public policy. Thus, a two-pronged strategy is needed: continuation of Florida's accountability system with modifications to make it more fair and technically sound combined with capacity building that develops the abilities of educators, families, and communities to support and enhance the system.