
**Educational
Accountability
and Assessment
in Florida: Informing
the Debate**

Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida

FIE Policy Briefs

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FLORIDA INSTITUTE
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Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida or the
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Introduction

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Over the past decade the strong links among education, a well-prepared workforce, and future economic prosperity have been firmly established. These links have pushed education reform to the top of local, state, and national public policy agendas. Florida has assumed a leadership role in tackling the daunting challenge of transforming schools into high-quality centers of learning. In 1999 the Florida Legislature adopted the *A+ Plan*, the educational reform act proposed by the then newly elected governor, Jeb Bush. The Plan has now been in effect for over four years. Three important policy tools being used in this endeavor are *alignment* among standards, instruction, and assessment; *accountability* for results; and the *use of sanctions and rewards* based on levels of performance – for students, for schools, and for educators.

To maximize effectiveness and achieve desired results, education policies must be shaped by examining multiple knowledge bases, perspectives, and evidence and then using the most reliable and valid information to design and refine accountability systems. This ongoing collaborative—and often contentious—process may be strengthened by carefully examining underlying assumptions, improving the technical aspects of the system, using evaluation results of the current system, and drawing on findings from rigorous educational research to guide ongoing improvement efforts.

Educational Accountability and Assessment in Florida: Informing the Debate is a collection of policy briefs designed to inform Florida’s ongoing accountability dialogue and debate by addressing an important and overarching question: How can Florida’s current public school accountability and assessment system be strengthened to (1) increase confidence in the system, (2) improve coherence and alignment across the system, and (3) achieve student outcomes that are consistent with the aspirations and goals of the citizens of Florida?

To address this question, the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida collaborated with Florida State University’s Learning Systems Institute (LSI) to prepare a set of papers addressing issues embedded in the overarching question. LSI identified researchers from Florida and across the country to prepare a set of policy briefs that first describe Florida’s current accountability and assessment system and then examine key aspects related to strengthening that system. The resulting briefs provide practitioners and policy makers with information they can use to inform educational policies, particularly those that affect students who may be at-risk of future academic failure.

“Educational Accountability and Assessment in Florida: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?” provides an overview of Florida’s educational accountability and assessment policies and how the state has worked to incorporate accountability and assessment into the public school system.

The “Continuity and Accountability in a Changing Political Environment” brief

describes the context for major changes in educational governance that have emerged in Florida since 1999 and looks specifically at changes in governance that have affected educational policy making. The brief suggests ways to improve accountability in the face of a constantly shifting political environment.

The "A+ *Plan* and Student Achievement in Florida" brief examines trends in student performance since the adoption of the A+ *Plan* in 1999. It looks at whether the performance of Florida's elementary, middle, and high school students has been improving in reading, writing and mathematics—over time and in comparison to the nation.

The "Closing Florida's Achievement Gaps" brief further examines changes in student achievement with particular attention to how specific groups of students have fared under the A+ *Plan*. This brief concludes with policy recommendations for closing student achievement gaps.

The "Florida Constitutional Amendment to Reduce Class Size: What Can Research Tell Us?" brief examines the research evidence on the effectiveness of class size reduction and compares various approaches to the design and implementation of these policies with Florida's initiative. The brief discusses the potential benefits and challenges that lie ahead as Florida implements the 2002 constitutional amendment.

The "Cost of Accountability: Considerations and Assumptions" brief provides a framework for estimating the cost of educational accountability specifically under Florida's A+ *Plan*. Using testing and assessment as an example, this brief identifies different types of costs incurred and how they may vary at the state, local, and federal levels depending on the existing conditions and the assumptions made. The authors describe the complexity of estimating these costs and the need to view the costs of accountability not alone, but in relation to public benefits.

"Building Capacity for Teaching and Learning in Florida" focuses attention on supporting standards-based reform through building capacity. Capacity is defined as a function of three elements: 1) what teachers know, believe, and are able to do; 2) school structures that support teaching and learning; and 3) the ability of the community to support the work of schools. The brief also provides examples of specific policies that may build capacity to improve student achievement.

The final brief, "Implications and Next Steps," examines the key issues that Florida will need to answer to improve the achievement of all students. This brief also offers possible "next steps" as we seek to strengthen our current accountability and assessment system as a primary policy tool for improving achievement of all of Florida's students regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or the neighborhood in which a student lives.

