

STATE RESEARCH

Lessons for Ohio from Florida's K-12 Education Revolution

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Executive Summary

Jeb Bush campaigned for governor on a clear and bracing set of education reforms in 1998. Having won office, he immediately pursued a dual-track strategy for reforming Florida's K-12 education system: standards and accountability for public schools, choice and options for parents. Florida lawmakers followed those reforms with additional measures. They enacted instructional-based reforms, curtailed social promotion, introduced performance pay for teachers, and expanded school choice for families.¹

Ten years after Gov. Bush's election and subsequent work to improve K-12 education, this study lays out the cumulative impact of his reforms, using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

NAEP is the nation's most reliable and respected source for data on K-12 education, testing representative samples of students in every state on a variety of subjects, including mathematics and reading.

Looking particularly at NAEP's reading test, 53 percent of Florida's fourth-grade students scored "Basic or better" in 1998, meaning they were able to master "fundamental skills." By 2009, however, 73 percent of Florida's fourth graders scored basic or above—a remarkable improvement. What's more, after a decade of strong improvement, Florida's Hispanic students now have the second-highest reading scores in the nation when compared to their peers; Florida's African Americans rank fourth-highest.

Comparing students by subgroups reveals that Florida's African American, Hispanic, low-income and disabled children all outscore their Ohio peers in fourth-grade reading. Florida's Hispanic students outscored or tied the statewide averages for all students in 31 states, and only narrowly missed the statewide average in Ohio.

The pages that follow lay out Florida's reforms, and suggest how Ohio policymakers could emulate the Sunshine State's success. Florida's work wasn't easy, but the academic success that has occurred should make it easier for other states to follow.



Introduction: Florida’s Revolutionary Reforms & Results

In education reform, no state has been a more aggressive “laboratory of democracy” during the past decade than Florida. Florida has implemented reforms designed to foster accountability and improvement in its K-12 education system, including establishing high academic standards, implementing innovative student-centered testing policies, ending social promotion and increasing early intervention, creating new pathways for hiring and compensating quality teachers, and offering parents greater school choice options.

A revolution is defined as a large change occurring in a relatively short period of time. Progress in Florida’s public schools certainly qualifies. After 10 years of reforms, higher test scores show those reforms collectively are having a positive impact on student learning and growth. The gains of Florida’s fourth- and eighth-grade students on the NAEP examination far exceed the progress of students across the nation. Importantly, the so-called “achievement gap” is narrowing in Florida, with African American and Hispanic children making even greater progress than their White peers on the NAEP test.

Policymakers across the country should look to Florida’s experience as a model demonstrating that education reforms can lead to substantial outcomes for students. Given the strong gains, especially among those considered disadvantaged, other states’ policymakers have a duty to examine the success of Florida’s reforms.

This paper does just that by looking at the relative academic achievement gains in Florida and Ohio.

Education Reform in Ohio and Florida

Both Ohio and Florida have been active in education reform, and both states have realized learning gains in recent years. Ohio lawmakers took especially important steps toward reform during the 2011 legislative session by expanding the size of the EdChoice scholarship program and creating the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program. Both of these Ohio programs drew upon initiatives pioneered in Florida – Opportunity Scholarships and the McKay Scholarship Program, respectively.

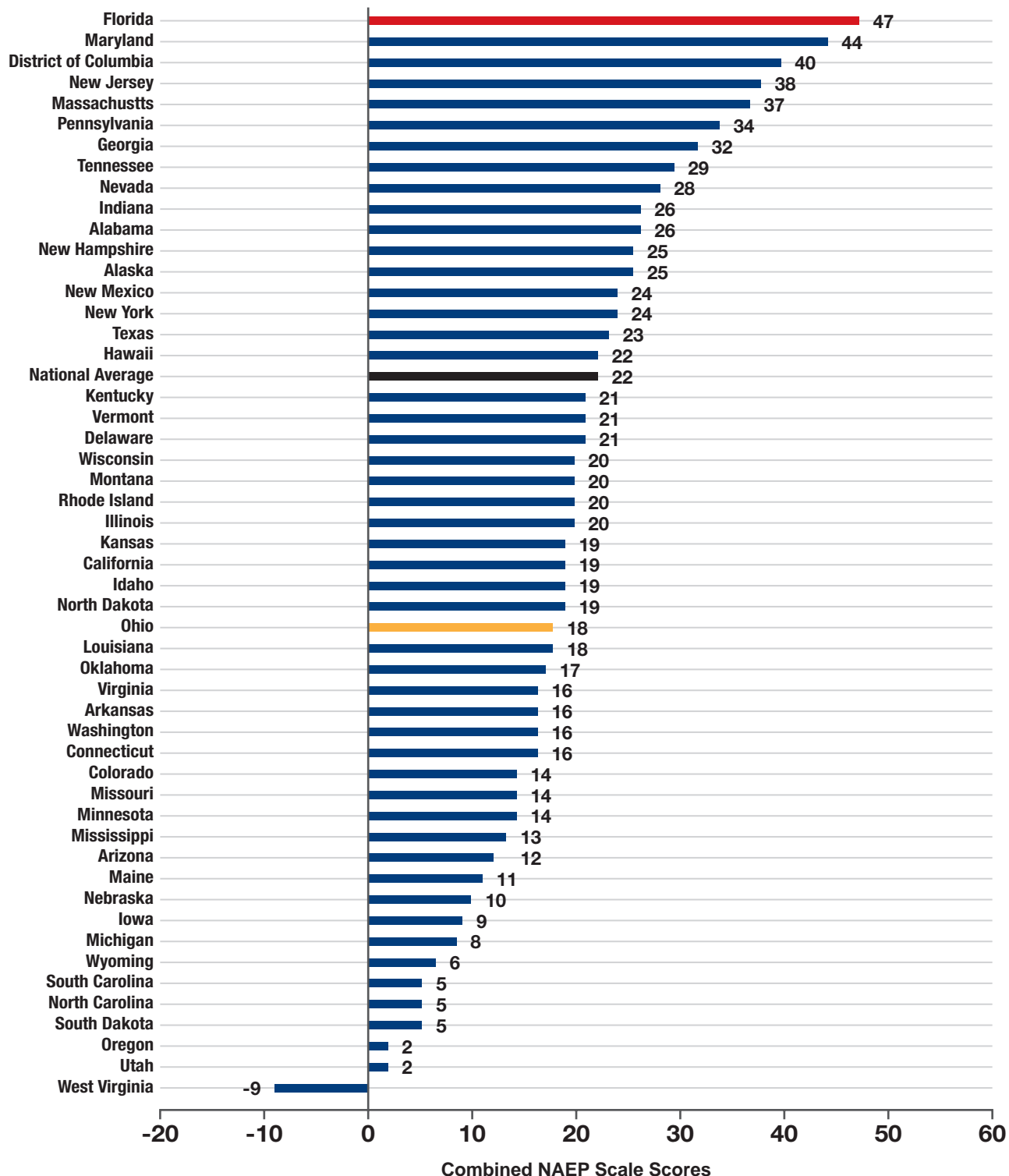
In the years ahead, these programs will have the opportunity to contribute in accelerating the pace of academic improvement in Ohio. Florida lawmakers enacted a deep level of reform beginning in 1999, and have enjoyed larger learning gains. National and state test results show that Florida students are making considerable progress in reading and mathematics. These results should provide confidence to Ohio lawmakers to pursue further reforms in Ohio.

NAEP—also called the “Nation’s Report Card”—is the best instrument for comparing academic achievement trends of students in different states. NAEP, which education experts widely regard as the nation’s most credible source of education data, is administered regularly to a representative sample of students in each state. Schools and districts do not have their performance evaluated or their schools labeled based on NAEP. And unlike many state exams, it is not possible to teach to the test items on NAEP, as the items are not exposed. Both security measures increase the NAEP test’s reliability.

Florida leads the nation in academic gains for low-income students.

Figure 1

Combined Point Gains, fourth-grade and eighth-grade students, reading and math scores, free and reduced-price lunch eligible students (NAEP, 2003-2009)



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



In years past, states volunteered their participation in NAEP, but the No Child Left Behind Act made state participation mandatory. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have participated in all four main NAEP exams (fourth-grade reading and math, eighth-grade reading and math) beginning in 2003. The NAEP gave all four exams in 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009 (the most recent data available at the time of this writing).

Figure 1 provides the total NAEP learning gains for all 50 states and the District of Columbia on all four NAEP tests for the period in which all jurisdictions took the tests. As a control for substantial family income differences between states, the table takes only the scores of low-income students (eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines) into account. Each state's score therefore represents the combined point difference between the 2009 and 2003 exams for low-income students.

The reader should bear in mind that on NAEP's 0-500 point scale, a change of 10 points roughly approximates a grade level's worth of learning. Accordingly, we would expect a group of fifth graders to score approximately 10 points higher than a group of fourth graders on this exam, all else being equal.

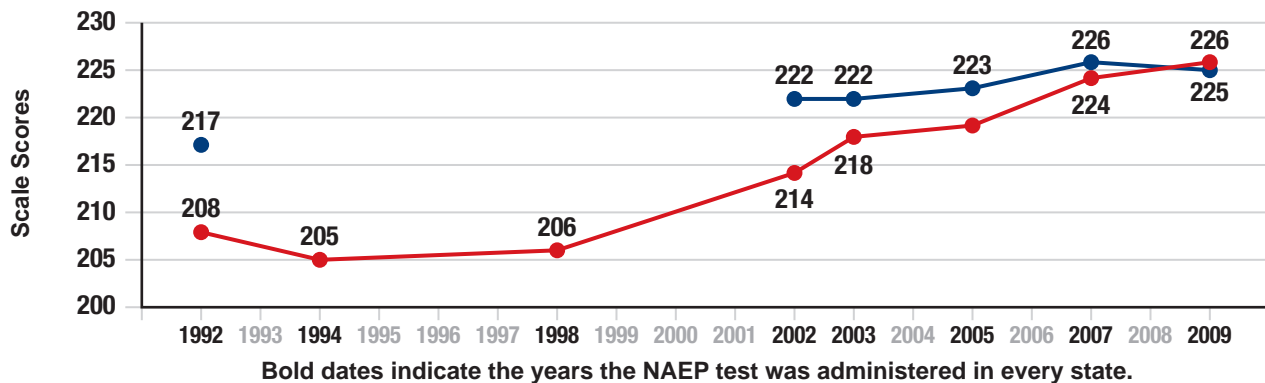
Across subjects and grade levels, Florida has made substantial progress on NAEP. Florida ranks first among gains for low-income students, with a combined point increase of more than 47 points. Ohio, by comparison, ranks 30th out of 50 states with a total point gain just shy of 18 points. Florida's low-income students have made more than 2.5 times the academic progress achieved by their Ohio peers since 2003.

Florida students have made greater progress than Ohio students on all NAEP exams, but this paper, however, will focus specifically on fourth-grade reading scores for one key reason: The development of early literacy skills is crucial to the overall academic success of students in the years that follow. Many students failing to learn reading in the early grades fall further behind grade level with each passing year. Unable to read their textbooks, they often become frustrated, bored, or disruptive. Such students drop out of schools in disproportionate numbers beginning in late middle school. Therefore, reformers have recognized early reading skills as a lynchpin measure of academic success or failure. Improving early literacy skills is necessary, though not sufficient, to education outcomes overall.

Florida moves from well behind to even with Ohio in reading for all students.

Figure 2

Fourth-grade reading scores for all students in Ohio and Florida (NAEP, 1992-2009)



Note: Ohio did not participate in the 1994 or 1998 NAEP testing.
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



In 1992, Ohio’s fourth graders scored 217 on the NAEP exam, ahead of Florida’s meager 208. As seen in Figure 2, however, Florida’s students made far greater *progress* in literacy skills. By 2009, Florida’s students had turned a nine-point deficit into a single-point lead (a statistical dead heat).

But Figure 2 understates the true scale of Florida’s achievement, as it compares all students without making “apples to apples” comparisons regarding student demographics. Florida and Ohio have radically different student demographic profiles. In Ohio, more than 78 percent of students are White, and a little over 36 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines (a standard measure of family income). Florida, on the other hand, has a majority-minority student population. In terms of ethnic composition, 47 percent of Florida students are White, while Black students comprise 24 percent of the Florida student body. Hispanics

make up 26 percent of the Florida statewide student population. In Ohio, only 16.9 percent of students are Black, and 2.8 percent of students are Hispanic. Florida’s percentage of low-income and English language learners also exceeds Ohio’s figure.

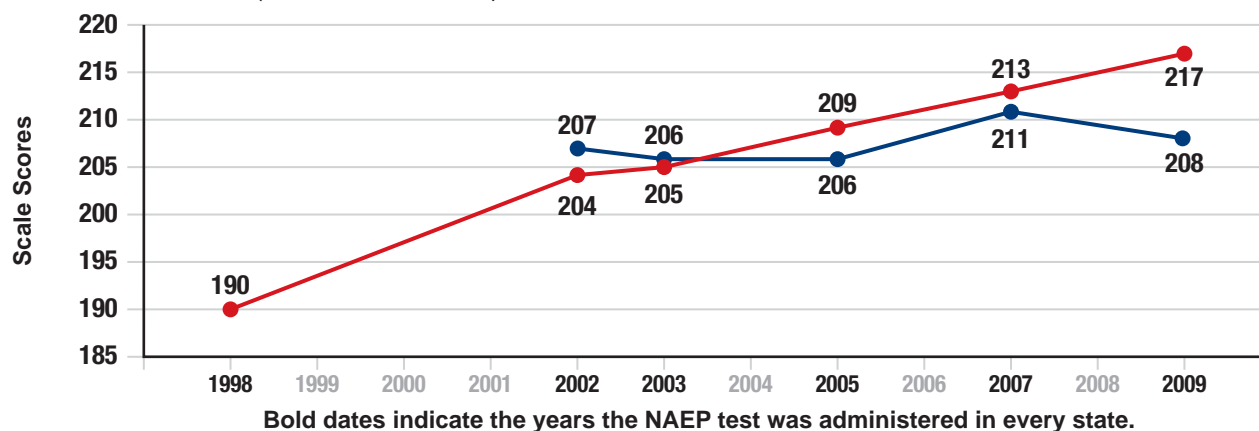
Both states’ demographic profiles make Florida’s achievement victory over Ohio presented in Figure 2 all the more impressive. When comparing student peer groups, Figures 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate that Florida outpaces Ohio by an ever wider margin.

Figure 3 compares the test scores of Ohio and Florida students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. In 2009, a family of four could have a maximum income of approximately \$40,000 to qualify for a reduced-price lunch, but approximately 80 percent of these students nationwide qualify for a free lunch, which had

Florida’s low-income fourth graders score almost a year’s worth of progress ahead of low-income Ohio students.

Figure 3

Fourth-grade reading scores for free and reduced-price lunch eligible students in Ohio and Florida (NAEP, 1998-2009)



Note: First NAEP data available for Florida in 1998, Ohio in 2002.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)





a maximum income of \$28,000.² As the figure shows, Florida students have come from a truly low level in 1998 to open a growing lead on similar Ohio students.

12 points higher than their peers in Florida. The most recent NAEP (2009) found Florida's Black students scoring eight points higher than their peers in Ohio.

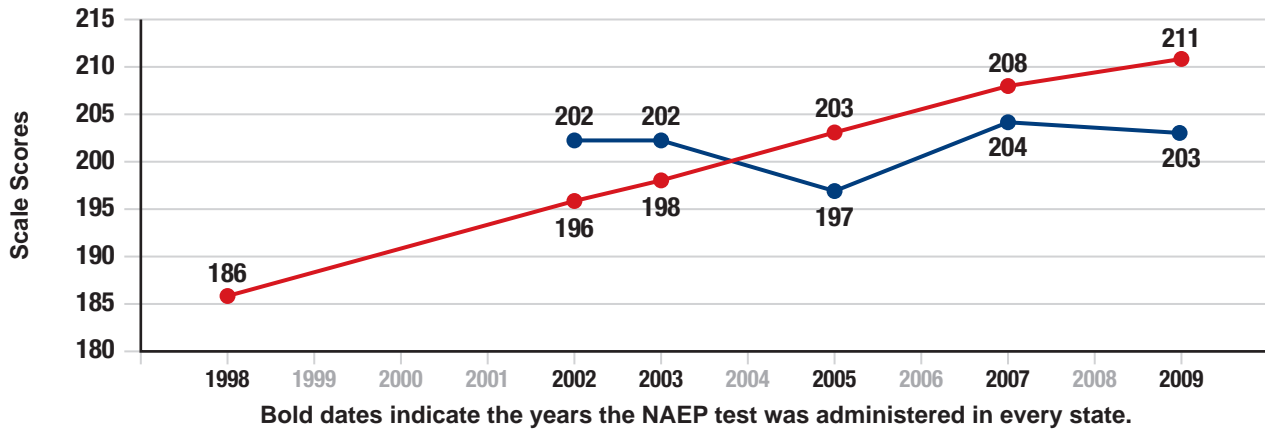
Florida's Black students also have made considerably greater progress than their peers in Ohio. In 1992, Ohio's Black students scored

Florida's improvement in test scores among Hispanic students likewise has been extremely impressive. Florida's Black and Hispanic student

Florida's African American students surge ahead of Ohio's African American students in reading.

Figure 4

Fourth-grade reading scores for African American students in Ohio and Florida (NAEP, 1998-2009)



Note: Ohio data availability begins in 2002.

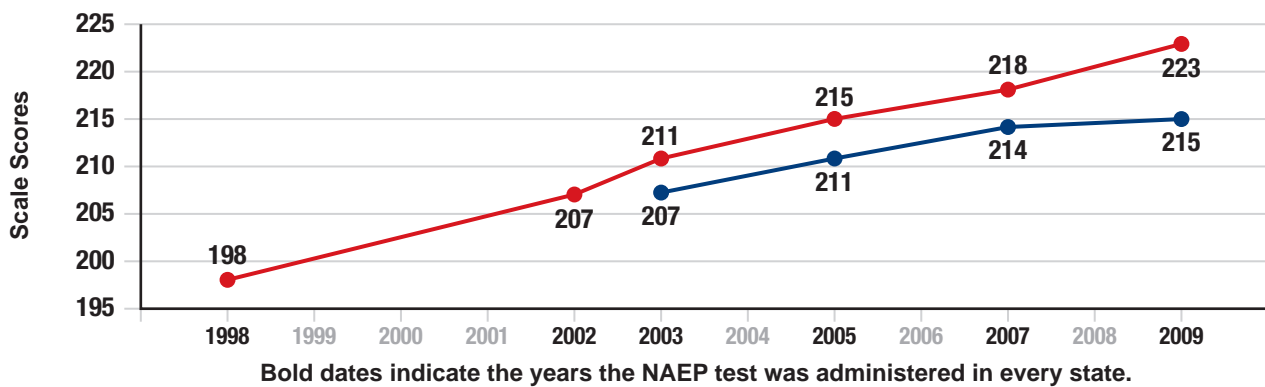
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



Ohio's Hispanic students lag behind their peers in Florida.

Figure 5

Fourth-grade reading scores for Hispanic students in Ohio and Florida (NAEP, 1998-2009)



Note: Ohio data availability begins in 2003.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



groups both scored 25 points higher than their predecessors in 1998, the year before major reforms began. Figure 5 compares the NAEP fourth-grade reading progress for Hispanic students in Florida and Ohio. In 2009, Florida's Hispanic students scored more than a grade level's worth of average progress higher than their peers in Ohio.

In 2009, after a decade of progress, the average Florida Hispanic student's score on NAEP's fourth-grade reading test exceeded or tied the overall average scores in 31 other states (see

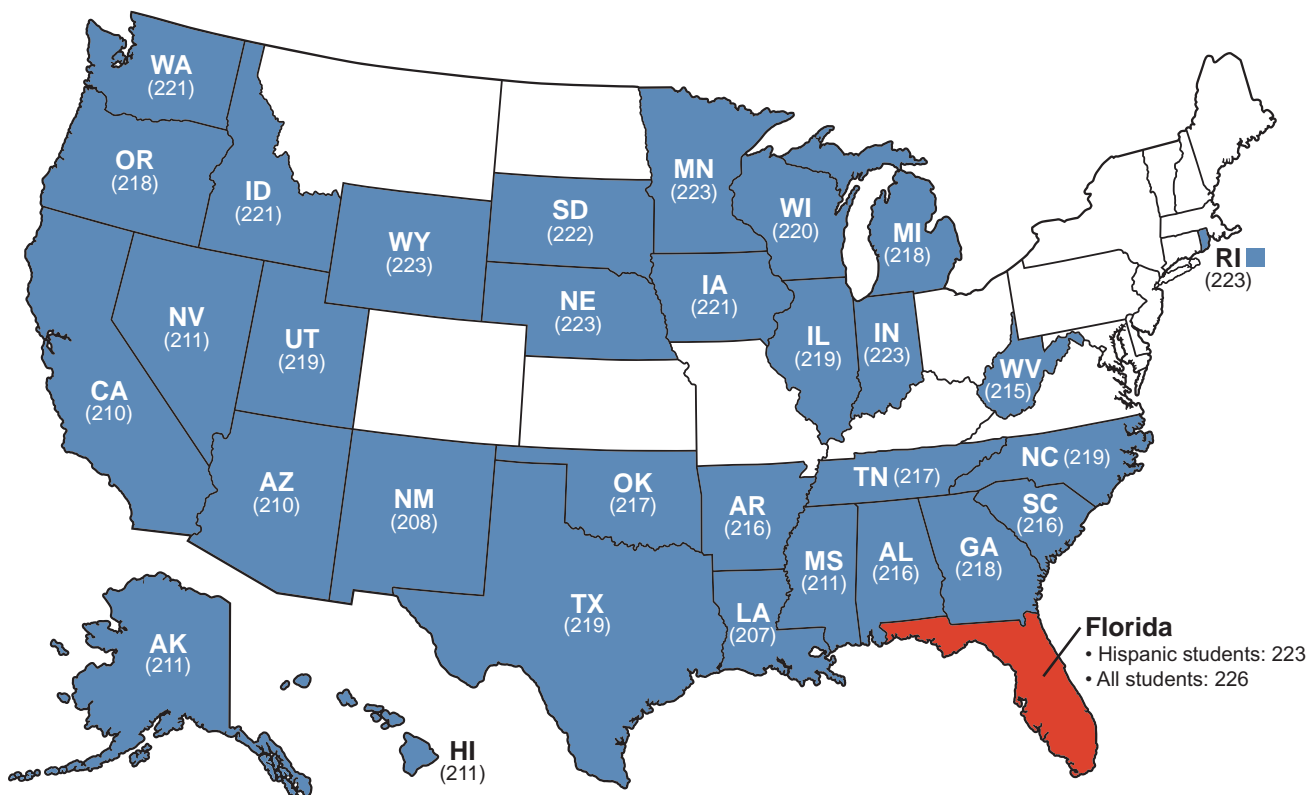
Figure 6). Florida's Hispanics only narrowly missed the statewide average for students in Ohio (225 for the statewide average in Ohio, 223 for the Hispanic average in Florida).

Finally, Figure 7 shows the percent of Florida and Ohio students scoring "Basic or Better" on the fourth-grade NAEP reading test, by student subgroup. Florida's White, Black, Hispanic, low-income children, and children with disabilities all show higher levels of literacy achievement than similar students in Ohio, often by wide margins.

In 2009, Florida's Hispanic students outscored or tied the statewide averages for all students in 31 states.

Figure 6

Florida Hispanic students compared with the statewide averages of all students on NAEP's fourth-grade reading test (NAEP, 2009)



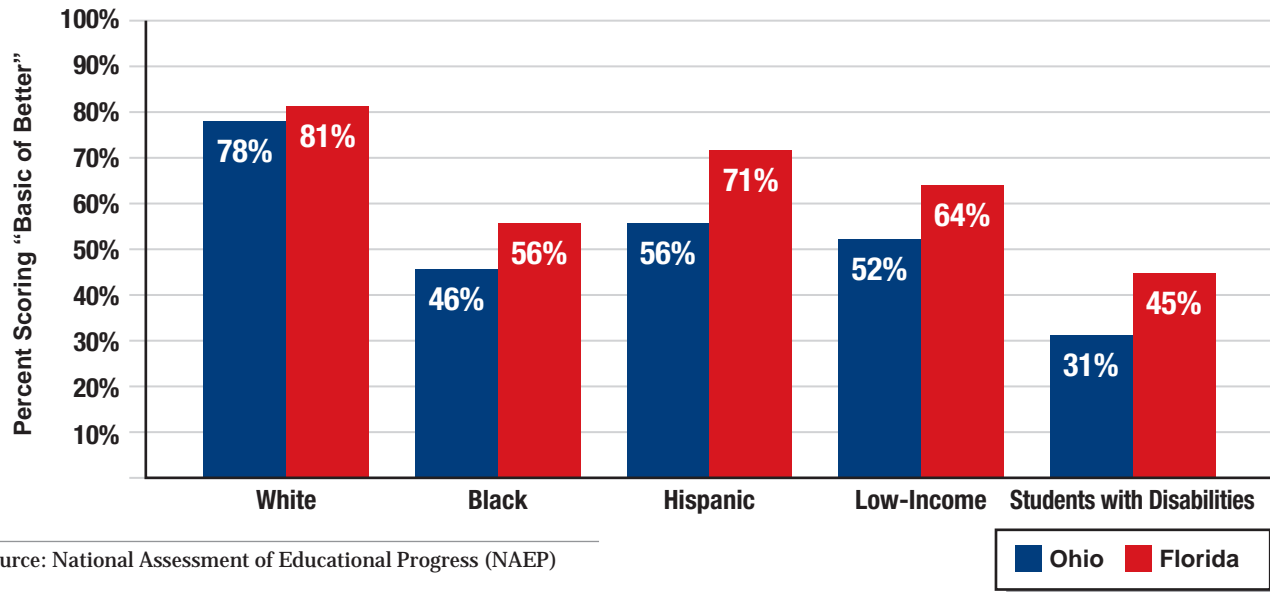
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



Florida’s White, Black, Hispanic, low-income and children with disabilities all show higher levels of literacy achievement than similar students in Ohio.

Figure 7

Florida and Ohio students scoring “Basic or Better” on 2009 NAEP fourth-grade reading, by subgroup



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

Florida did not achieve its impressive academic growth and results with any single reform, but rather with a multifaceted strategy. Reform highlights include:

- Florida grades all district and charter schools based on overall academic performance and student learning gains. Schools earn letter grades of A, B, C, D, or F, which parents easily can interpret.
- The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program assists 23,000 low-income students in attending the school of their parents’ choice—both private (tuition assistance) and public (transportation assistance for district school transferees).
- The McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program stands as the nation’s largest school voucher program, sending more than 20,000 students with special needs to the

public or private school of their parents’ choice.

- Florida has the largest virtual school program in the nation, with more than 80,000 students taking one course or more online.
- Florida has an active charter school program, with 375 charter schools serving more than 131,000 students.
- Florida curtailed the social promotion of students out of the third grade—if a child cannot read, the default becomes that he or she will repeat the grade until he or she demonstrates basic skills.
- Florida created genuine alternative teacher certification paths in which adult professionals can demonstrate content knowledge in order to obtain a teaching license. Half of Florida’s new teachers now come through alternative routes.

Because reformers face challenges in every state, it is important to note that Florida's reformers advanced their agenda despite fierce opposition, primarily from unions. And the reform agenda those unions opposed is precisely what has allowed all student subgroups in Florida to realize such impressive academic gains. But, as noted previously, it is Florida's *disadvantaged students* who have gained the most. Why? A systematic examination of the various reforms makes it clear why Florida's traditionally disadvantaged students made such large gains.

Florida's private school choice programs allow low-income and special-needs children to receive assistance to attend private schools of their parents' choosing. Charter schools, meanwhile, are open to all students; however, students unhappy with their experience in public schools are more likely to transfer into them. Who are the big winners from public and private school choice? Those most poorly served by traditional district schools.

The same goes for Florida's third-grade retention policy, which may seem cruel to some; however, the research demonstrates that it is only cruel to those students exempted from the retention policy.

Consider also alternative teacher certification's importance to disadvantaged children. Allowing more people with degrees to demonstrate content knowledge and join the teaching profession expands the possible pool from which to recruit high-quality teachers. Inner-city children suffer the most from the shortage of high-quality teachers, as the system favors suburban schools in recruiting and retaining effective instructors.

Thus, inner-city children gain the most from reducing the shortage.

In addition, Florida's system of accountability grades schools A, B, C, D, or F, which many complained was harsh on schools with predominantly minority student bodies. A small but vocal group continues to bemoan the grading system, claiming that it is unfair to teachers and students.

It would prove difficult to be any more tragically mistaken. To be sure, rating schools A through F in Florida represents tough medicine: The state called out underperforming schools in a way that everyone could instantly grasp. But tough love is still love. Florida's schools began to improve, both on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and on NAEP (a source of external validation for the state test).

Did Florida's D and F schools wither under the glare of public shame? Quite the opposite: Those schools focused their resources on improving academic achievement. Made aware of the problems in their schools, communities rallied to the aid of low-performing schools. People volunteered their time to tutor struggling students. Improving academic performance and thus the school's grade became a focus.

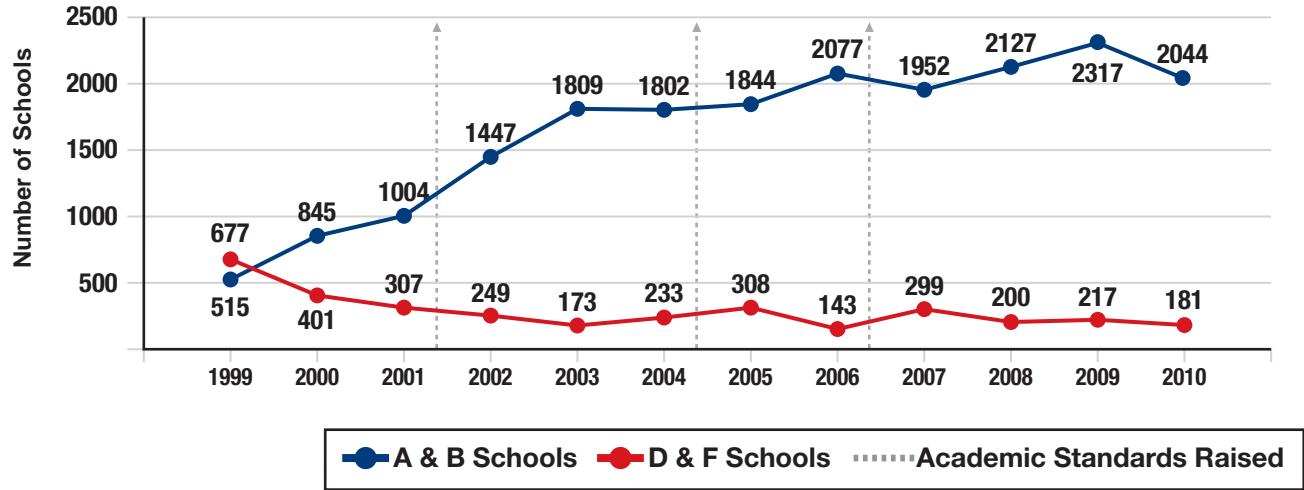
In 1999, 677 Florida public schools received grades of D or F, and only 515 A or B grades. The increase in the number of A and B schools occurred despite the fact that the state raised the standards for earning an A or B grade four times since 1999. In 2009, only 217 schools received D or F grades, whereas 2,317 schools received grades of A or B (see Figure 8).



Florida's schools improved their grade rankings despite the fact that the state raised academic standards three times (see dotted lines).

Figure 8

Trends in Florida's school grades (1999-2010)



With such strong improvement, it is entirely appropriate to ask: Are the gains in Figure 8 real? A number of states around the country have lowered the “cut scores” on their state accountability exams in order to create the appearance of improvement. (The “cut score” being the minimum passing score students can achieve.) Florida did not make the FCAT easier to pass, maintaining a constant standard. Harvard Professor Paul Peterson has demonstrated that Florida indeed has maintained the integrity of the FCAT.³

Florida's schools improved their rankings because their students learned to read at a higher level and became more proficient at math. Those who wanted to continue to coddle underperforming schools, although perhaps well-intentioned, argued in favor of consigning hundreds of thousands of Florida children to illiteracy. They may not have realized it at the time, but one cannot avoid the conclusion now.

In summary, those with the least consistently gained the most from Florida's reforms. This is perhaps clearest of all when one examines the formula for assigning letter grades to schools. Florida determines schools' grades in equal measure between overall scores and gains over time. In addition, the state divides the gain part of the formula equally between the gains for all students, and the gains for the 25 percent of students with the lowest overall scores.

Critically, *the kids in the bottom 25 percent of students play the biggest role in determining the grade of a school.* Those students count in all the categories: the overall scores, the overall gains, and the gains of the lowest-performing students.

Notice the elegance of that system. On the other hand, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) allows schools not to count subgroups depending on the size of the group. NCLB divides

student bodies into various subgroups based on race, ethnicity, income, disability status, etc., and requires an increasing passing threshold from each group. State officials determine the exact size of the groups before they count—and some exempt far larger groups of students than do others.

The Florida system is far more direct. *Every school* has a bottom 25 percent of students. Regardless of why those students have struggled academically, Florida’s grading system will not grant schools a high grade unless those students make progress.

Academic fatalists either directly or indirectly claim that many students simply cannot learn. Florida and the success of others in substantially improving the scores of poor and minority children should put this “soft bigotry of low expectations” into the shameful dustbin of history that it so richly deserves.

Florida’s success in helping poor and minority children to read at higher levels crushes fatalistic arguments. Tough love for schools means big gains for kids, especially disadvantaged kids. The children with the least have gained the most from Florida’s reforms.

The pages below briefly summarize the major elements of Florida’s reform package, and address other possible explanations for the remarkable increase in academic achievement.

True Academic Transparency: Grading Schools A-F

The A-F School Grading System serves as the foundation for Florida’s K-12 reform strategy.

State officials grade schools using an objective and transparent A through F grading scale based on the proficiency and learning gains of students. One can best summarize the system as “truth in advertising.”

In 1999, Florida required public school students in grades three through 10 to take annual tests in reading and mathematics, called the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). The state determines school and district 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.

Department of Education officials based the remaining half of the school’s grade on individual student learning gains—that is, the percentage of students who made progress in reading and math from their previous achievement level the prior year. Making progress as important as proficiency requires a school 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.

Emphasizing the need to help struggling students, the school grade calculation double counts the progress of the lowest 25th percentile of students from last year’s FCAT. 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. The message is clear: Get your bottom students moving if not passing, or else reconcile yourself to a low grade.



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. Parents instantly understand the A, B, C, D and F grades and critically the scale involved (e.g. that a B is better than a C). States using “fuzzy labels” like “Performing” or “Excelling” cannot emulate this level of transparency.

Ohio utilizes a system of school labels that start with “Excellent with Distinction,” “Excellent,” “Effective,” “Continuous Improvement,” “Academic Watch” and “Academic Emergency.” “Excellent with Distinction” and “Academic Emergency” seem self-explanatory, but a label of “Continuous Improvement” could hardly be any more opaque, and the “Academic Watch” label simply lacks the communicative punch of a “D” or “F” letter grade.

Parental Choice—Growing evidence suggests that the combination of Florida’s accountability and expanded school choice policies is contributing to the improved performance in the state’s public schools. A Manhattan Institute study, published in 2003, evaluated Florida’s A-Plus Program and the effect it had on the state’s public education system—specifically, the effects from competition caused by school choice.

The A-Plus Program provided vouchers to students in chronically failing public schools, i.e., public schools that received two F grades in a rolling four-year period. The study found that public schools “facing voucher competition or the prospect of competition made exceptional

gains on both the FCAT and the Stanford-9 test compared to all other Florida public schools and the other subgroups.”⁴

In 2007, the Urban Institute published a similar analysis of the A-Plus Program and its impact on Florida’s public schools. The authors found that student achievement improved in schools labeled F in subsequent years.⁵ Importantly, the authors discovered that reforms undertaken by the low-performing public schools contributed to the improvement: “[W]hen faced with increased accountability pressure, schools appear to focus on low-performing students, lengthen the amount of time devoted to instruction, adopt different ways of organizing the day and learning environment of the students and teachers, increase resources available to teachers, and decrease principal control.”⁶

In 2008, Dr. Greg Forster of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice published a study evaluating the effect of the A-Plus Program on public schools threatened by the possibility of losing children through the school voucher option.⁷ Forster evaluated the performance of public schools from the 2001-02 school year through the 2006-07 school year. The extended time period analyzed in the study allowed Forster to evaluate how the elimination of vouchers impacted public school performance after 2006, when the voucher option was deemed unconstitutional and, thus, removed.

Forster reports that before vouchers were made available, the A-Plus Program spurred modest improvement in public schools. But the program produced dramatic gains in threatened public schools once vouchers were incorporated: “In

2002-03, public schools whose students were offered vouchers outperformed other Florida public schools by 69 points.”⁸ In the years that followed, as voucher participation rates dropped because of procedural obstacles, the positive effect of competition was less significant. Forster’s analysis found that “[t]he removal of vouchers caused the positive impact on public schools to drop well below what it had been even in 2001-02, before vouchers were widely available.”⁹

A 2008 study by Dr. Jay Greene and Dr. Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas found that competition caused by another school choice program spurred positive academic gains in Florida’s threatened public schools.¹⁰ The researchers evaluated the competitive effect of the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program on public schools. They reported that “public school students with relatively mild disabilities made statistically significant test score improvements in both math and reading as more nearby private schools began participating in the McKay program.”¹¹

To date, no study has evaluated the academic achievement of students participating in Florida’s private school choice programs. Multiple testing experiments evaluating the impact of private school voucher programs in other communities have shown that students receiving vouchers improve academically.¹² Moreover, additional evaluations have found that increasing competition through school choice options (both private school choice and charter schools) leads to improvement in traditional public schools threatened by competition.¹³

Ending Social Promotion—Ensuring that third-grade students are able to pass the FCAT reading exam to enter fourth grade is the focus of Florida’s policy curtailing social promotion. In 2001, only 6,500 students were retained in third grade. In 2002, more than 27,000 third-grade students were retained.¹⁴

Evidence suggests that ending social promotion has had a positive impact on students’ performance. Dr. Jay Greene and Dr. Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas evaluated the results of the social promotion policy after two years. They reported that “retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students”¹⁵ with the academic benefit increasing after the second year. “That is, students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking.”¹⁶

Beyond the likely benefit of increased remediation, the threat of being retained also creates a strong incentive for children to improve their studies so they can proceed to the next grade with their peers.

Better still, schools deepened parental involvement for struggling readers by developing home reading plans, and began earlier testing and intervention strategies. Since the year before the retention policy came into effect, the percentage of Florida students scoring low enough to potentially qualify for retention has fallen by 40 percent. In short, more Florida children are learning how to read during the developmentally critical period.



Exploring Other Possible Explanations for Florida’s Gains

Demographic Change or Big Spending?

Several possible explanations for Florida’s success need to be addressed. For instance, could demographic change explain some of Florida’s improvement? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1998, 44.7 percent of Florida children attending public schools were minority students. During the 2008 school year, 53 percent of children were minorities. In 1998, 43.8 percent of Florida students had a family income that qualified them for a free or reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines. In 2009, Florida’s percentage had increased to 49.6 percent.¹⁷

Changes in public school funding are also an unlikely source for improvement. Spending per pupil in Florida expanded at a rate slower than the national average during Gov. Bush’s term in office, and spending per pupil stood 12 percent below the national average and 16 percent below the figure in Ohio during the 2006-07 school year.¹⁸

Some may ask whether Florida’s cellar-dweller performance in the 1990s led to a “regression to the mean” effect whereby improvement came relatively easily. However, most of the states like Florida who ranked near the bottom of NAEP in the late 1990s remained near the bottom in 2009.

Florida does have some unique characteristics – including a Hispanic population comprising a higher percentage of Cubans than most states. Could the marked improvement in Florida’s Hispanic scores be linked to relatively unique

cultural characteristics? Not likely – African Americans and Anglos also made strong gains during this period. Plus, the percentage of Hispanics of Cuban origin actually declined during the period observed – down to 30 percent of Hispanics in 2007.¹⁹

Artifact of Third-Grade Retention?

Could Florida’s third-grade retention policy have created the appearance of gains on NAEP? Walter M. Haney argued that Florida’s progress on fourth-grade NAEP scores represented a “fraud” because of the third-grade retention policy.²⁰ Haney presented evidence that Florida’s retentions increased after the debut of the policy, and ascribed subsequent NAEP score increases to the fact that Florida’s worst performing readers were repeating third-grade and thus were not tested in the fourth-grade NAEP, inflating the fourth-grade scores.

This analysis was later replicated by a “Think Tank Review Project” funded by the National Education Association.²¹ Neither analysis, however, holds up under scrutiny.

First of all, Florida’s NAEP scores improved strongly between 1998 and 2002. The 2002 fourth-grade reading test was not at all impacted by the retention policy.

A good deal of the improvement in fourth-grade reading NAEP scores (the test most likely to have been impacted by the policy) has come from increases in the percentage of children scoring at the “Proficient” and “Advanced” levels. FCAT scores categorize student reading achievement

from 1 to 5, and the retention policy only a portion of those in category 1. The retention policy therefore serves as an unlikely explanation for improvement among skilled readers.

Figure 8 shows that Florida students had a large increase in the percentage of students scoring “Basic or Better” on fourth-grade reading between 1998 and 2009, but even larger increases in the percentages of students scoring “Proficient” or “Advanced” on the fourth-grade reading NAEP. Large gains among the sort of students who were unlikely to have been reading at FCAT 1 in the third grade (and thus unaffected by the retention policy) demonstrate that far more than the retention policy has been driving Florida’s literacy gains.

Furthermore, the percentage of third graders scoring 1 on reading has itself been shrinking. In 2002, 27 percent of third graders scored at the 1 ranking, but by 2009 the number had declined to 16 percent, a 40 percent reduction in the pool of students eligible for retention.²² Likewise, the

actual number of third-grade students retained also declined by 40 percent between 2002 and 2007.²³ Nevertheless, Florida’s fourth-grade NAEP scores continued to improve throughout this period.

Since the year before the retention policy came into effect, the percentage of Black students scoring FCAT 1 on third-grade reading declined by 37 percent, and the percentage of Hispanic students scoring FCAT 1 declined by 45 percent (see Figure 9).

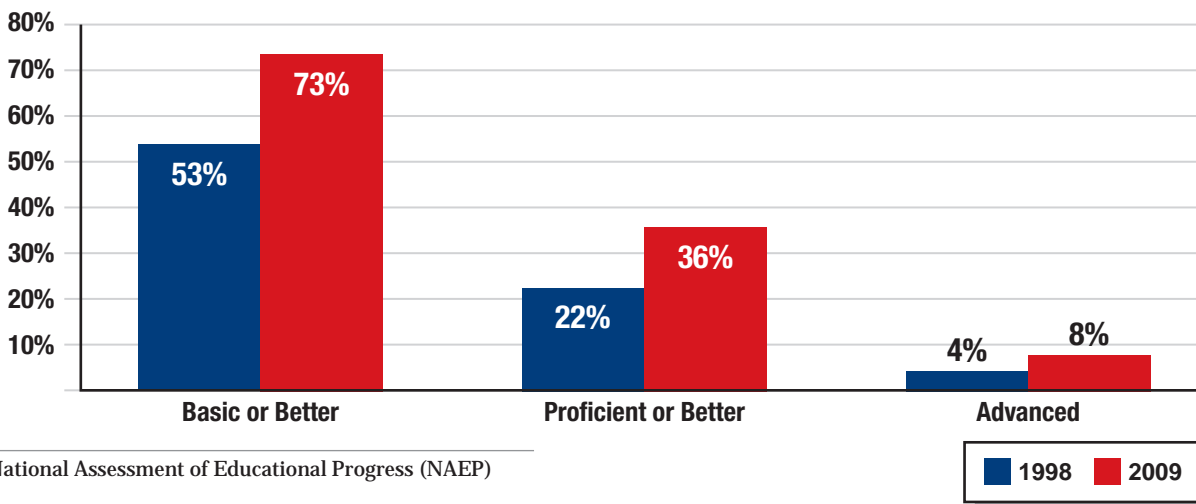
None of these gains has anything to do with simply being a year older (since they are third-grade scores). The regression discontinuity analysis performed by the Manhattan Institute in fact demonstrated that children scoring just over the retention threshold, and those scoring below it but exempted from the policy, continued to struggle with reading despite being a year older.

The third-grade FCAT data presented in Figure 9 demonstrate conclusively that an increasing

Florida students score impressive reading gains at all levels of achievement.

Figure 9

Florida fourth-grade reading achievement levels (NAEP, 1998 and 2009)



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



percentage of Florida elementary students has been learning how to read during the developmentally critical period (K-3). Minority students have helped to lead the charge in producing literacy gains.

Retained students have been included in each NAEP sample since 2002. Some retained students advance after a summer program, some advance after being retained a semester, and others repeat the entire third grade. In any case, at various paces, retained third-grade students do make it into the fourth grade and thus into the NAEP sample, some of them “on time” with their original peers to be included in the NAEP. Each NAEP sample since 2002 has contained retained students (of various sorts) and the scores have continued to improve.

If the retention policy were in fact as powerful as Haney alleged, we would expect to have seen a spike

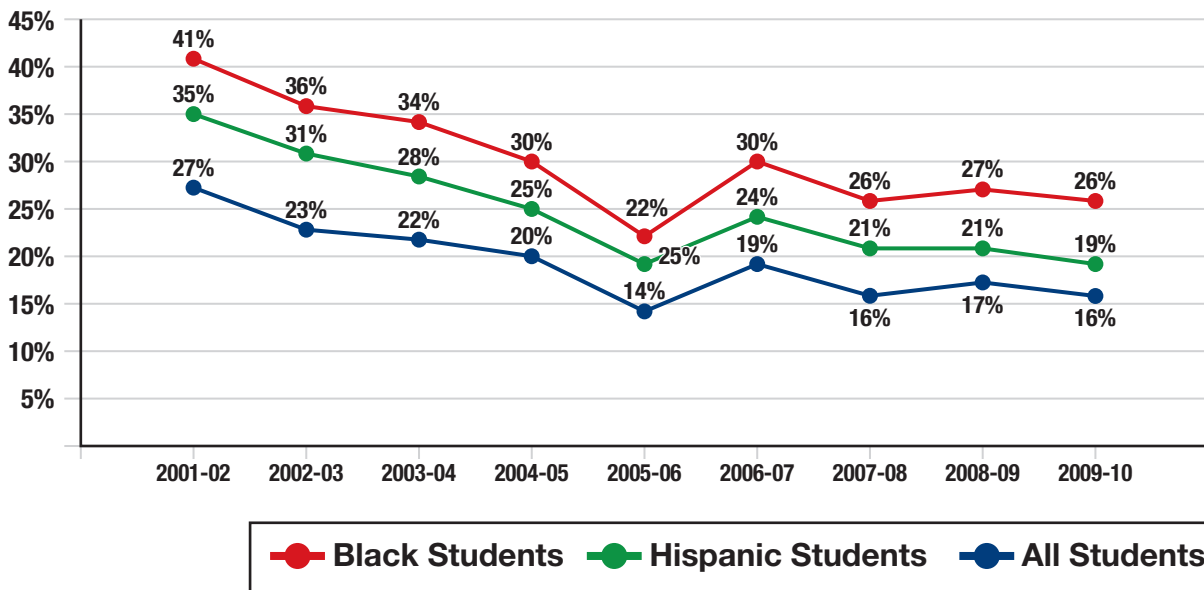
in scores in 2003, followed by declines in 2005, 2007, and 2009. In fact, NAEP shows steady increases after 2003, despite a large decline in retention.

Class Size or Pre-school Amendments?

Florida voters enacted two significant education policy changes at the ballot. In 2002, Floridians enacted a class size limit for public schools. The limit was first implemented based on school district averages, and then school averages, and only actually came into force as an actual limit on each class during the 2010-11 school year. A detailed statistical analysis of the Florida class size reduction program found no evidence that it helped to drive academic improvement.²⁴ This is unfortunate, as the Florida Department of Education has found that it has cost Florida taxpayers more than \$18 billion dollars (and counting) to implement.²⁵

The percentage of Florida students scoring low enough to qualify for retention in third grade has fallen substantially. **Figure 10**

FCAT 1 scores (qualifying for retention), third-grade reading, 2001-2009



Florida's preschool amendment may or may not prove to have positive long-term benefits. After adoption by the voters, the Florida legislature rather sensibly enacted the program as a voucher program to include public and private providers and to allow parents to choose. The Florida preschool program also includes specific academic goals and a provision to remove underperforming providers from participation in the program.

Florida's Voluntary Pre-K program began in the 2005-06 school year, and thus none of the students has yet reached the fourth grade to be included in the NAEP. The Florida Department of Education has released some preliminary analysis of third-grade reading scores, which may indicate a sustained academic benefit to the program, but those data have yet to be subjected to a rigorous statistical analysis.²⁶

In any case, none of the NAEP gains seen in Florida to date has anything to do with the Voluntary Pre-K program because the students have not yet reached the age of NAEP testing.

Conclusion: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Reform Works Best

Florida students are improving academically at a higher rate than students across the country. Encouragingly, children from minority populations are making the greatest improvements, demonstrating that Florida is making progress at reducing the academic "achievement gap." The aggressive education reforms implemented by Florida policymakers over the past decade appear to be having a positive impact. Specifically, initial evidence suggests that ending social promotion,

increasing school accountability, and expanding parental choice in education are contributing to improved academic achievement and public school performance. Policymakers in other states should study Florida's model and implement similar systemic reforms.

More broadly, the Florida experience shows that the proper mix of reforms can lead to levels of academic achievement for disadvantaged students that many have argued are impossible without massive increases in public spending. Powerful interests, most notably the teachers' unions, fought Gov. Jeb Bush's reform efforts almost every step of the way. But since then, Florida fashioned an enviable education legacy proving that demography is not destiny.

An old saying holds that the difference between a condition and a problem lies in whether or not you have given up. A problem is something you still are trying to solve. A condition is something that you have grown to accept as unalterable.

Florida's improvement in academic achievement among minority and economically disadvantaged students proves once and for all that public education's shortcomings are problems to be solved, not conditions to be accepted. Other states should follow Florida's lead in combining incentive- and instructional-based reforms, and in fact, take them further. America's children await these tragically overdue measures.

Florida's success should inspire replication in other states, but in the end, Florida's reforms should be viewed as a floor, not a ceiling. Florida's reforms have greatly improved education in that



state, but Florida still is a ways off from achieving true international competitiveness when compared to its Asian and European competitors. Reformers must go much further, not simply extracting greater efficiency out of an antiquated system, but over time reformatting our basic model of schooling completely.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored an in-depth five-year study of public school finance. Paul T. Hill and Marguerite Roza, the project's lead researchers, wrote in *Education Week* that “people from outside the school finance community” noticed that when public schools received large infusions of new money, higher levels of student test scores seldom followed the windfall.

Hill and Roza reported that their collection of studies “has confirmed that money is used so loosely in public education—in ways that few understand and that lack plausible connections to student learning—that no one can say how much money, if used optimally, would be enough... Districts can't choose the most cost-effective programs because they lack evidence on costs and results.”²⁷

The Florida reforms helped to focus the mind with pressure from the state and from parents, but there are many miles to go in this race. Florida's story proves that effective education reform is not just about the kids. The kids can learn. Effective education reform is ultimately about adults and whether they have the courage to do what is right.

Notes

- ¹ Dan Lips and Matthew Ladner. Portions of this paper previously appeared in *Demography Defeated: Florida's K-12 Reforms and Their Lessons for the Nation*. (Phoenix: Goldwater Institute, 2008), available online at <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/article/2577>
- ² For free and reduced price lunch income guidelines, see United States Department of Agriculture at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/notices/iegs/IEGs09-10.pdf>.
- ³ Paul E. Peterson and Carlos Xabel Lastra-Anadón. *State Standards Rising in Reading but Not in Math*. Article (Cambridge: Harvard University, Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2010).
- ⁴ Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement." (New York: The Manhattan Institute, 2003).
- ⁵ Cecilia Elena Rouse. "Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure." (Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 2007).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Greg Forster. *Lost Opportunity: An Empirical Analysis of How Vouchers Affected Florida Public Schools*. (Indianapolis: The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2008).
- ⁸ Ibid.
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- ¹⁰ Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters. "The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida's McKay Scholarship Program." (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2008).
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² For more information, see Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp.150-154.
- ¹³ For example, see Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Rising Tide," *Education Next* (Cambridge: Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2001) and Matthew Ladner, "Putting Arizona Education Reform to the Test: School Choice and Early Education Expansion," (Phoenix: Goldwater Institute, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Ledyard King. "Some schools denying students free pass to next grade." *Gannett News Service*. September 26, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "Getting Farther by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida's Policy to End Social Promotion." (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2010 *Table 44. Number and percentage of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, by state: Selected years, 2000-01 through 2008-09*. (Washington DC: United States Department of Education, 2010).
- ¹⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2007. *Table 186. Current expenditure per pupil in average daily attendance in public elementary and secondary schools, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1959-60 through 2006-07*. (Washington DC: United States Department of Education, 2010).
- ¹⁹ United States Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2007* (Washington DC: United States Census Bureau, 2007).
- ²⁰ Walter M. Haney, *Evidence on Education under NCLB (and How Florida Boosted NAEP Scores and Reduced the Race Gap)*. Paper presented at the Hechinger Institute "Broad Seminar for K-12 Reporters", Grace Dodge Hall, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, Sept. 8-10, 2006.
- ²¹ For a detailed refutation of the Think Tank Review Project analysis, see Lindsey Burke and Matthew Ladner *Florida's Education Reforms: The Rest of the Story* (Washington DC: Heritage Foundation, 2010).
- ²² Florida Department of Education, *Reading Scores Statewide Comparison for 2001 to 2008 FCAT Reading – Sunshine State Standards Test*.
- ²³ Florida Department of Education, *Figure 2* <http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/xls/npro0607.xls>.
- ²⁴ Matthew M. Chingos *The Impact of a Universal Class-Size Reduction Policy: Evidence from Florida's Statewide Mandate*. (Cambridge: Harvard University, Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2010).
- ²⁵ Florida Department of Education, *Florida's Class Size Reduction Amendment History* (Tallahassee: Florida Department of Education).
- ²⁶ Leslie Postal, "Pre-K gets results, despite budget woes." *Orlando Sentinel*, March 21, 2011.
- ²⁷ Paul T. Hill and Marguerite Roza. "The End of School Finance as We Know It: A Brief History, and a New Direction." *Education Week*. April 30, 2008.



About the Author



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