

STATE RESEARCH

Lessons for Tennessee from Florida's Education Revolution

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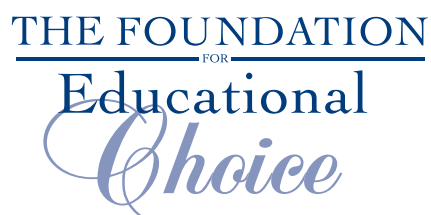
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** Figures 1, 2, 3, and 5 display the years the NAEP test was administered in every state.*



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 A decade of bold reforms led to dramatic achievement gains in Florida, while academic improvements in Tennessee were held back by a lack of strong policy changes.

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, 47 percent of Florida's fourth-grade students scored below Basic in 1998, meaning they were unable 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; Florida's African Americans rank fourth-highest when compared to their peers in other states.

Compared to Tennessee, the average Florida Hispanic student scored higher than the average score for *all Tennessee students* on NAEP's fourth-grade reading test in 2009. Tennessee's students are not alone. Florida's Hispanic students also outscored the statewide averages for all students in Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. In addition, Florida's African American students went from being far behind their peers in Tennessee to being significantly ahead of them.

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

“A decade of bold reforms led to dramatic achievement gains in Florida, while academic improvements in Tennessee were held back by a lack of strong policy changes.”

Introduction: Florida’s Revolutionary Reforms and 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 the social promotion of illiterate students, 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 making a positive impact on student learning and growth. The gains of Florida’s fourth- and eighth-grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (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 Tennessee. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for policymakers in Tennessee who wish to mirror Florida’s experience.

Tennessee’s Lost Decade on Education Reform

National and state test results show that Florida students are making considerable progress in reading and mathematics.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—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/or 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 components are not exposed to educators beforehand. Both security measures increase the NAEP tests’ reliability.

Across subject and grade levels, Florida has



made substantial progress on NAEP. This paper, however, focuses 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 that fail 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, and/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 alone sufficient, to improving education outcomes overall.

Although this paper's focus is on early childhood reading scores, Florida's gains were not limited to that subject. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) published an analysis of the main NAEP exams (fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math) in a way designed to maximize comparability among states based on family income and special program status. ALEC's analysis covered the entire period for which all 50 states gave the NAEP exam, and found that Florida students made the largest overall gains on the combined four tests.² In the ALEC report ranking student performance, Florida ranked third among the 50 states, whereas Tennessee ranked 36. Also, the same report gave Florida a B+ grade for the quality and scope of its education reforms, whereas Tennessee received a D grade.

The reader should bear in mind that on NAEP's 0-500 point scale, a change of 10 points roughly approximates one 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.

In 1998, Tennessee's fourth graders scored 212 on the NAEP exam, ahead of Florida's meager 206. As seen in Figure 1 (next page), however, Florida's students made far greater progress than Tennessee's in literacy skills. By the early part of the previous decade, Florida's students opened up a lead, and by 2009, that lead had grown to nine points—almost an entire grade level's worth of progress.

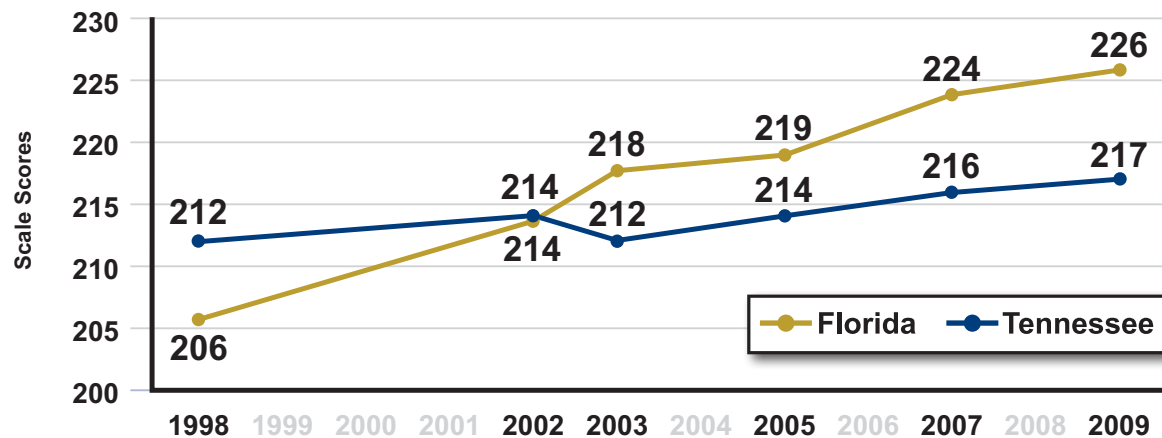
With a gain of 20 points, Florida's fourth graders, in 2009, were reading at about two grade levels better than the average for Florida students in the late 1990s. Tennessee's five-point gain represents more modest progress.

But Figure 1 understates the true scale of Florida's achievement, as it compares all students without making “apples to apples” comparisons regarding student demographics. Approximately half the students in both Florida and Tennessee qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch under federal guidelines (a standard measure of family income). Florida's far larger Hispanic population, however, means that Florida has a majority-minority student population, whereas Tennessee does not. In terms of ethnic composition, 47 percent of Florida students are white, whereas 68 percent

Florida students went from being about a half-grade level behind Tennessee students in 1998 to being nearly a grade level ahead in 2009.

Figure 1

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



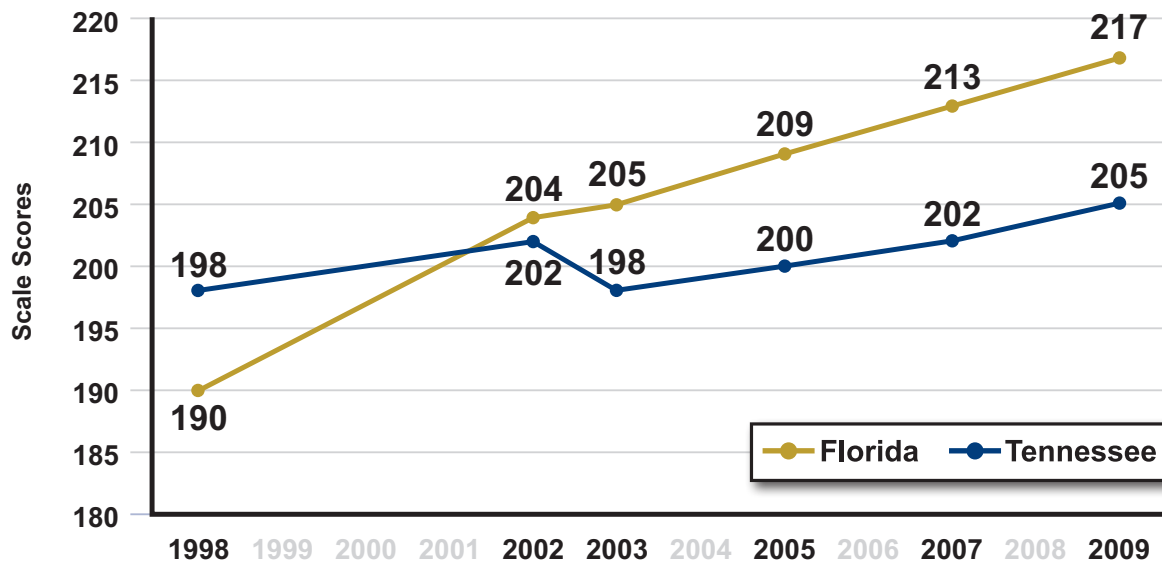
Bold dates indicate the years the NAEP test was administered in every state

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

In 1998, Free and Reduced-Price Lunch eligible Florida students scored eight points below the average for similar students in Tennessee. By 2009, Florida's low-income students advanced far ahead of Tennessee in this category.

Figure 2

Fourth-grade reading scores for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch eligible students in Tennessee and Florida (NAEP, 1998-2009)



Bold dates indicate the years the NAEP test was administered in every state

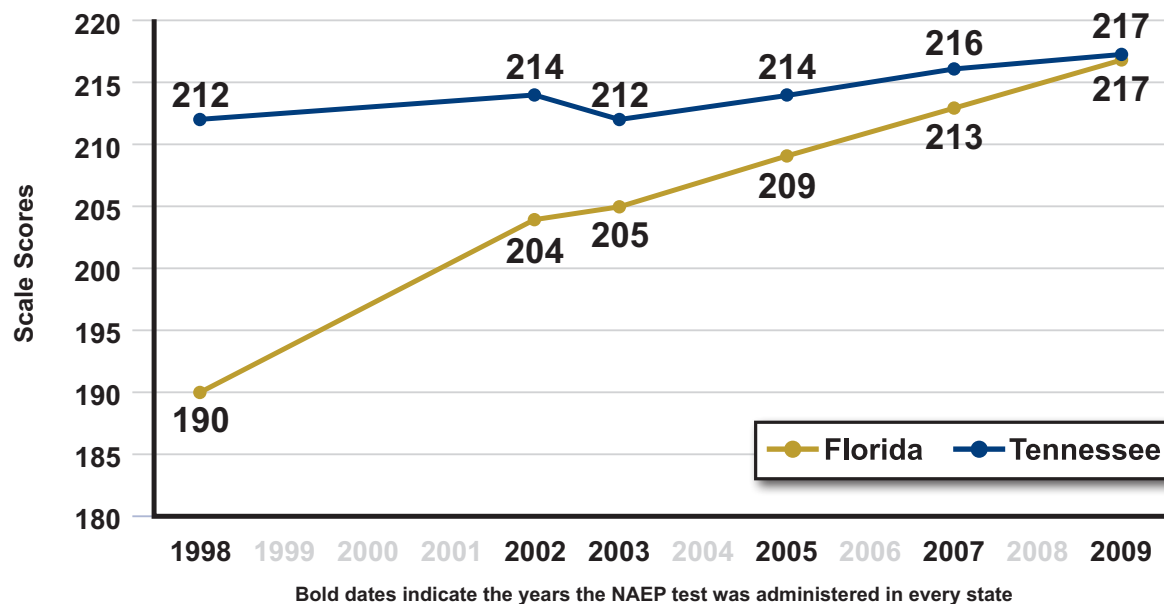
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)



In 1998, Free and Reduced-Price Lunch eligible Florida students scored 22 points below the average for all students in Tennessee. By 2009, these populations tied.

Figure 3

Fourth-grade reading scores for all students in Tennessee and Free and Reduced-Price Lunch eligible students in Florida (NAEP, 1998-2009)



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

of Tennessee students are white. Both states have about 24 percent of their student population comprising African Americans, but Florida's Hispanic population is approximately nine times larger than Tennessee's on a percentage basis (26 percent compared to only 2.8 percent, respectively).

Both states' demographic profiles make Florida's achievement victory over Tennessee presented in Figure 1 all the more impressive. When comparing student peer groups, Florida outpaces Tennessee by an ever wider margin. Figure 2 compares the test scores of Tennessee and Florida students eligible for Free and Reduced-

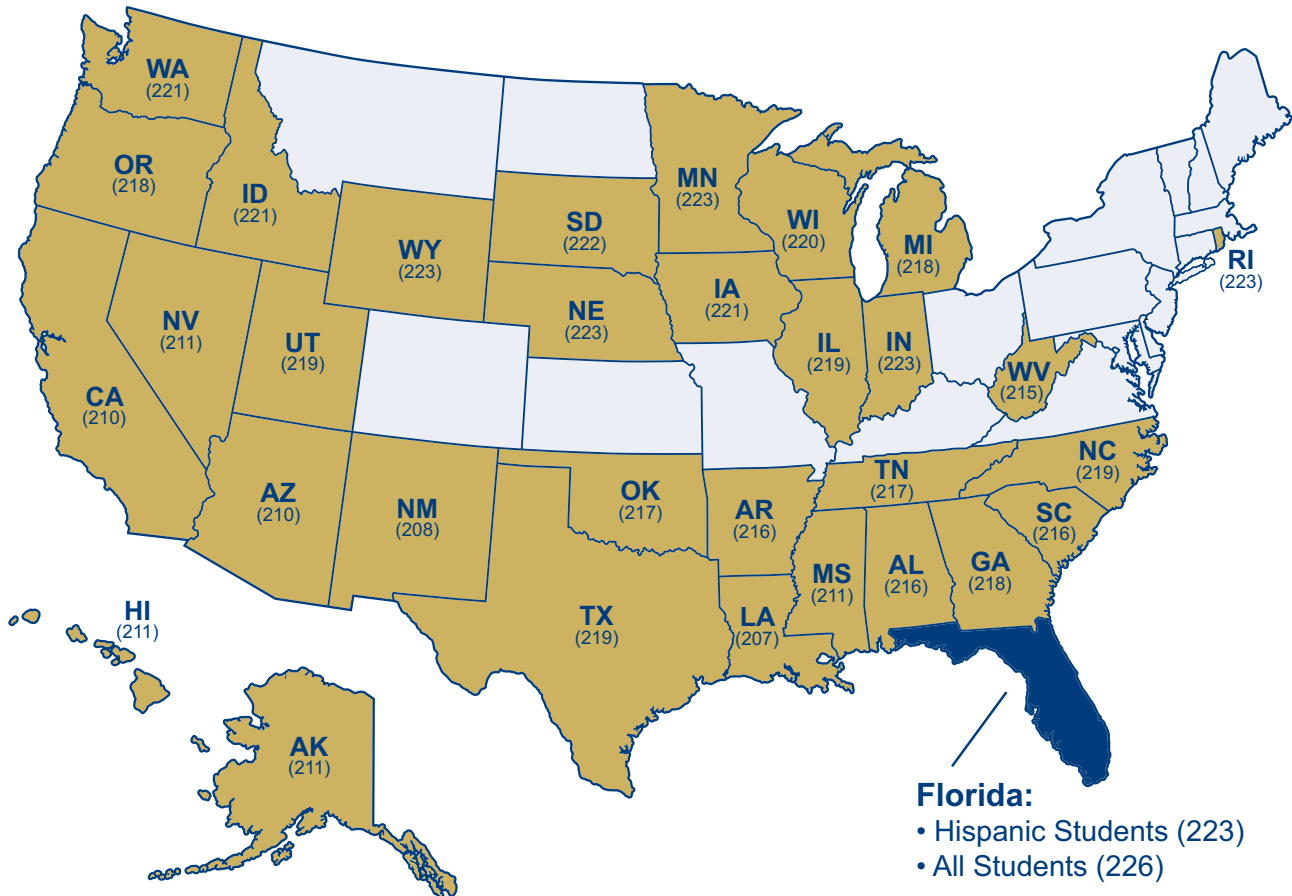
Price Lunch. In 2008-09, a family of four could have a maximum income of \$39,220 to qualify for a reduced-price lunch, but approximately 80 percent of these students nationwide qualify for a free lunch, which required a maximum income of just \$28,000. Moreover, Florida's students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunches now tie the average for *all students* in Tennessee (see Figure 3).

Florida's improvement in test scores among minority students has likewise been extremely impressive. In 2009, after a decade of progress, the average Florida Hispanic student's score on NAEP's fourth-grade reading test exceeded

In 2009, Florida's Hispanic students outscored or tied the statewide averages for all students in Tennessee and 30 other states.

Figure 4

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)

the overall average scores of all students in Tennessee, and exceeded or tied the average in 30 other states as well (see Figure 4).

Minority Test Scores Surged in Florida, Crept in Tennessee

In 1998, the test scores of Florida's African American students were at the bottom nationally,

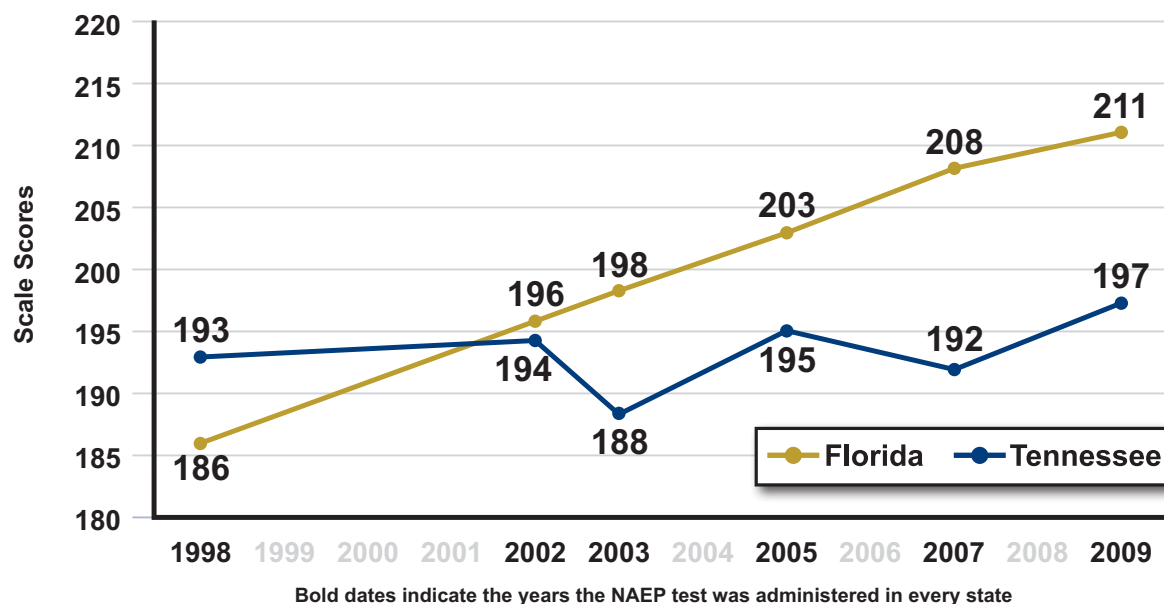
ahead of only Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico. Over the past 10 years, they, too, made substantial progress on NAEP's fourth-grade reading test; certainly more than their peers in Tennessee did. In 1998, Tennessee's African American students on average were performing about half a grade level higher than Florida's African American students. By 2009, however, Florida's African American students realized a 25-point gain in average achievement, whereas



Tennessee’s African American students’ average score has improved by four points since 1998. Meanwhile, Florida’s African American students improved by 25 points.

Figure 5

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



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

African American students in Tennessee progressed by only four points (see Figure 5). Florida’s African American students went from being substantially behind their Tennessee peers to surging more than a grade level ahead.

Education Reform in Florida: How the State Improved Academic Achievement

Florida did not achieve such 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 can easily interpret.
- The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program allows 28,000 low-income students to attend 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 21,000 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 or more courses 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, which can result in mid-year promotion.
- 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 from the teachers' 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 charters. 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.

In 2006, approximately 29,000 third-grade students failed the reading portion of Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), which contains a number of exemptions.³ An analysis of that policy by Manhattan Institute scholars compared the academic progress of retained students to two groups of similar students (those who barely scored high enough to avoid retention and those who scored low enough for retention but received an exemption).

The Manhattan team reported that, after two years, "retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students."⁴ Moreover, the researchers found that the academic benefit increased 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."⁵

The retained students learned how to read,



whereas the promoted students continued to slip behind. Schools did not do the exempted children any favors: They continued to fall behind grade level, which is the normal academic trajectory for children failing to learn basic literacy skills. Once again, the students at the bottom proved the biggest winners from Florida's tough-minded reforms.

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 this shortage.

Curriculum reform follows the same pattern. The U.S. Department of Education's "Project Follow Through" spent a billion dollars over multiple decades and ultimately found that traditional methods of instruction were far more effective, on average, than "progressive education."⁶ In the United Kingdom, former Prime Minister Tony Blair led the charge against progressive education, noting that it is the lowest-income students most harmed. Wealthier children in two-parent families have greater opportunities to learn through reading at home or from tutors than do low-income children from single-parent families whose parent is often struggling to make ends meet. The poor have the most to

gain from the adoption of proper instruction methodologies. Florida's experience mirrors this perfectly.

In addition, Florida's system of accountability grades schools with A, B, C, D, or F labels, which many complained was cruel to 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 state FCAT and on NAEP (a source of external validation for the state exam).

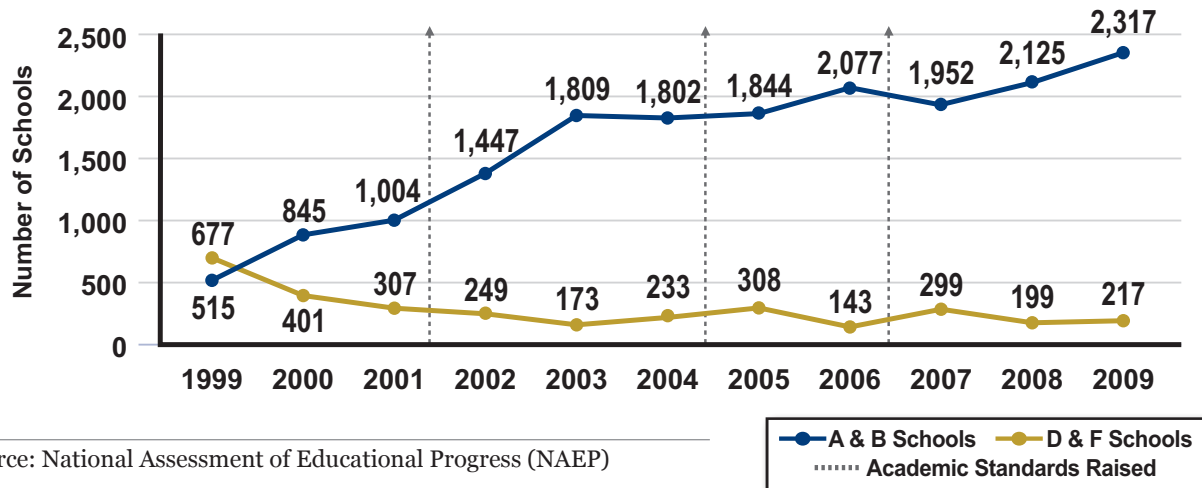
Did Florida's D and F schools wither under the glare of public shame? Quite the opposite: Those schools focused their resources on improving academic achievement. Made aware of the problems in their low-performing schools, communities rallied to their aid. People volunteered their time to tutor struggling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

In 1999, 677 Florida public schools received a grade of D or F, and only 515 an A or B. Figure 6 (next page) tracks the trend for those sets of grades, and critically, the three dotted arrows represent a raising of academic standards,

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

Figure 6

Trends in Florida's school grades (1999-2009)



which made it more challenging to receive a high grade. In 2009, only 217 schools received a D or F, whereas 2,317 schools received an A or B (see above).

With such strong improvement, it is entirely appropriate to ask: Are the gains in Figure 6 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 has indeed maintained the integrity of the FCAT (although the test does receive a C grade from Peterson in terms of its difficulty). Unfortunately, the same study by Peterson showed that Tennessee has among the lowest standards in the country, earning an F grade for

how its exam, the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), compares with NAEP. TCAP not only receives an F grade on the most recent comparisons between the fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading NAEP exams, it has done so consistently on all such comparisons with NAEP since 2003.⁷

Both Florida and Tennessee should improve the rigor of their exams. But it is TCAP, however, that represents the crueler joke on children craving to learn and to be challenged.

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, those children performing 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 to ignore subgroups depending upon 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.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Florida's Reforms

Florida's success of improving all students' academic achievement levels and reducing the achievement gap between ethnic minority and white children warrants greater research to judge which reforms have had the greatest positive impact on students and classrooms. In all likelihood, the tapestry of reforms implemented over the past decade is responsible for the state's improvement. The following is an overview of the initial research evidence evaluating specific reforms.

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, 6,500 students were retained in third grade. In 2002, more than 27,000 third-grade students were retained.⁸ In 2006, approximately 29,000 third graders failed and were at risk of being retained.⁹

Evidence suggests that ending social promotion has had a positive impact on student 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”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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. This policy warrants further research and analysis to determine the full impact on students’ academic achievement.

Accountability and School 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; that is, 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....”¹²

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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴

In 2008, Dr. Greg Forster of the Foundation for Educational Choice published a new study evaluating the effect of the A-Plus Program on public schools affected by the possibility of losing children through the school voucher option.¹⁵ 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 that 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 affected public schools once vouchers were incorporated: “In 2002-03, public schools whose students were offered vouchers outperformed other Florida public schools by 69 points.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

Multiple testing experiments evaluating the impact of private school voucher programs in other communities have shown that students receiving vouchers improve academically.¹⁸ Moreover, additional evaluations have found that increased competition through school choice options (both private school choice and charter schools) leads to improvement in traditional public schools impacted by competition.¹⁹

A 2008 study by Dr. Greene and Dr. Winters found that competition caused by another school choice program spurred positive academic gains in Florida’s threatened public schools.²⁰ The researchers evaluated the competitive effect of the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program on public schools. They report 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.”²¹

Conclusion: Comprehensive 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 making 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 one has 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 efforts 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 six-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,

Effective education reform is ultimately about adults and whether they have the courage to do what is right.

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."²²

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 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.

Does Tennessee have the fortitude to deliver the reforms necessary to drive academic gains for its students? Tennessee children deserve nothing less than their own education revolution. ■



Notes

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