

Florida Education Monthly: March 2006
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*It's About the Children, Stupid
*A-Plus Plan for Education: A History
* FCAT/Sunshine State Standards

IT'S ABOUT THE CHILDREN, STUPID

<http://www.ceo-sc.org>

“It's time to take on the teachers' unions. The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are pursuing a political agenda that stands between our children and a good education. What the union bosses couch as educational reform is just corruption, designed for their self-serving political agenda, not to help children.

“Former Congressman Floyd Flake refers to what the public school system is doing to poor and minority children as ‘educational genocide.’ Affluent parents rightly choose to send their kids to schools that are clean, safe, and promise rewards for academic achievement. Children in disadvantaged communities go to schools that are crumbling, dangerous, and scream, ‘Despair! There is no future to be found within these walls.’

“In some cities, as many as 40 percent of public school teachers send their children to private schools, but the unions want to deny low-income parents the same choice. If poor children cannot attend a good school, they have no hope of participating in the American dream.

“Yet, the NEA and the AFT are spending millions of dollars, to deny low-income parents the right to choose where their children go to school. They fought Milwaukee's school choice program all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. They have even misled some ministers and black organizations, convincing them to, oppose school choice. The unions don't want low-income parents to choose where their children go to school because schools that don't educate will have to close their doors. That is as it should be. Education is not about protecting union power. It's about giving our children a future.”

A-PLUS PLAN FOR EDUCATION: A HISTORY

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Prior to 1997, students in Florida's public high schools needed to maintain only a 1.5 grade-point average and pass an 8th grade level exit exam to graduate. There were no algebra requirements, and there was a low bar for individual student performance. Things began to change after the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was developed. The writing test was first administered in 1995. Math and reading tests followed in 1997. In 1998, the state began using the FCAT for student and school accountability. The FCAT set high standards for student performance. It measured and

publicly reported on school performance, and provided state support and assistance for schools.

Schools are now annually given a grade (A,B,C,D,F) that the general public can understand. This grades are based upon pupils' performance and learning gains. Through this grading system, schools are recognized for their achievements and shortcomings. Schools receive \$100 per student for increasing a letter grade and receiving or maintaining a grade of "A." The school staff and school advisory council decide on the use of the funds. Since 1999, approximately \$700 million has been provided in school recognition awards. Contrary to some erroneous reports, "F" schools receive, on average, \$1,000 more per student than "A" schools. Since 1999, Governor Bush and the Florida Legislature have provided about \$100 Billion to public schools.

On January 5, 2006 the Florida Supreme Court ruled that Opportunity Scholarships were unconstitutional. Research done by the Manhattan Institute (www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_02.htm), Cornell University (repec.org/esNASM04/up.2034.1075271881.pdf), and Harvard University (www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/pdf/papers/FloridaPEPG_PR.pdf) has all shown that Opportunity Scholarships are working.

FCAT/S UNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

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Setting Standards for Student Learning

- In the mid-1990s, a group of Florida teachers and other curriculum and instruction experts came together and created a set of academic standards for Florida's public schools.
- The teachers asked themselves, "What do we think students need to learn in school before they move on? What do we want them to know about math? About science? What kind of reading and writing skills should they have?"
- In answering those questions, the group of teachers created a list of skills students need to know in every subject and grade level.
- These skills became known as the Sunshine State Standards (SSS).
- Essentially, they are benchmarks for expected student learning.

Measuring Student Performance

- In Florida, we expect every student to gain a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time by mastering the skills outlined in the SSS.
- So, how do we know if students are meeting this target?
- The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is a valid and reliable tool to measure student performance.
- Given to Florida students in 3rd through 10th grades (11th grade in science), the FCAT gauges what they know and are able to accomplish in reading, writing, math, and science.
- We use the FCAT to ensure that our students have these essential skills.
- Without these skills, students will have difficulty succeeding in future grades and life.

- Test results also provide parents and teachers with insights into the individual needs of every child, so learning and instruction can be tailored to best meet those needs.
- The FCAT was designed by teachers and subject-matter experts.
- Educators at all levels, representing school districts across the state continue to play a critical role in the development of new FCAT questions.
- Each year, hundreds of Florida teachers, principals, parents, and testing experts develop and review test questions to ensure that they are aligned with Sunshine State Standards and that they are accurate and unbiased. Any one of these individuals can delete any question before it reaches an actual test booklet.
- Florida educators ensure the FCAT measures the SSS.
- When teachers teach the SSS, then the test takes care of itself.
- Just like any other test, the FCAT is simply an instrument that lets us see how a child is doing.
- Test security and test accuracy are important. Each test is graded by at least two independent professionals, who must agree on the scoring. This ensures accuracy of grading any performance items.

Charting Progress and Seeing Results

- Through data we have gathered from the FCAT, we know that students have made significant progress, and Florida is moving in the right direction.
- In 1998-99, only 51 percent of our fourth-graders could read on grade level.
- Last year, that number rose to 71 percent.
- As of 2001, we had tested every student in grades 3 through 10, and we knew that only 46 percent of students could read at grade level or above.
- Today, 53 percent of Florida students have this critical skill.
- Florida's minority students are making the greatest gains, and Florida has made tremendous strides in closing the longstanding achievement gap.
- Last year, Hispanic and African-American students improved nearly twice as fast in reading and three times as fast in math as their white counterparts.
- The FCAT has been a catalyst for rising student achievement.
- The FCAT brings accountability to Florida and consistency to the entire state.
- We know all this because we measure.
- We measure because we care.
- We want our students to continue on the path to academic success.

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