



**Alternatives for Florida's Assessment
and Accountability System**

Sherman Dorn
University of South Florida

Executive Summary

There is broad agreement that public education must be accountable. Florida's current accountability system is, however, not the only model available. Accountability does not have to mean tax money provided or withheld on the basis of test scores. This brief describes the current federal mandates for state accountability, professional standards for testing and accountability, and testing and accountability options that currently exist or have existed in practice outside Florida.

The No Child Left Behind Act does not bind states to their current plans indefinitely. Florida, therefore, has considerable freedom to change its current assessment and accountability system. The state is free to create alternatives to those components of its accountability system which are ineffective while retaining those that work well. This brief recommends that Florida continue to track student achievement and provide technical assessment assistance to low-performing schools. In addition, this brief recommends that legislators and education policymakers seeking a more effective educational accountability system in Florida enact the following recommendations:

1. *Institute a moratorium on monetary rewards and then reform the rewards system.* An effective accountability system that meets professional standards for test use and is credible to educators across the state *requires a moratorium on the monetary rewards attached to single letter grades* assigned to schools. There may well be a method of monetizing accountability without violating professional testing standards or undermining the system’s credibility. Developing such a method involves considerable consultation with teachers across the state, as well as with testing experts and the general public.
2. *Break the tie between a single letter grade and recognition of merit in schools.* Provide different avenues for recognition:
 - a. Recognition that can be earned through test scores in one year.
 - b. Recognition that can be earned through improvement across multiple years.
 - c. Recognition attached to other measures of school performance, including measures of school violence and suspensions.
 - d. Recognition based on the use of assessment data to guide instruction—an option that is particularly important to encourage appropriate instruction for some students with disabilities and other very difficult-to-teach students, where data-driven instructional decisions may not have measurable performance improvements.
3. *Restrict the spending of any monetary rewards, especially the payment of individual staff.* The following options are less likely to cause the problems that currently exist:

- a. Sharing the school's expertise with other schools.
 - b. Permanent salary increases for staff members, teachers, and administrators when they voluntarily transfer to low-performing schools for at least three years.
 - c. One-time bonuses for staff members, teachers, and administrators when they have significant direct contact with students attending low-performing schools.
4. *Reduce the categories used for school accountability from five to three.* The only categories needed under any of the options above and the No Child Left Behind Act are failure, passing, and passing with distinction.
 5. *Use testing primarily to screen for early intervention in schools.* Meeting professional standards for test use requires either an accountability system that has lower stakes or a system that accounts for measurement error and standard errors. The simpler option is to lower the stakes moderately and to use failure in the accountability system as a screening device, to select low-performing schools for intervention. Thus a failing mark in statewide testing would trigger intervention, not sanctions.
 6. *Reform the Assistance Plus program.*
 - a. Switch from a consultant-based model to a model of on-site educational auditing. Such educational auditing teams need to be led by former classroom teachers with significant experience in instructing difficult-to-teach students and have a staff comprised of a majority of current or former teachers and specialists.

- b. Continue development and support of assessment used throughout a school year, including support for curriculum-based measurement such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS).
7. *Develop and implement a pilot county-level accountability process.* Making county school systems more accountable for equal educational opportunities and for student outcomes requires some process to hold county administrators responsible. Given Florida's history of racial inequality and the distrust many African-American and Latino residents feel toward county school systems, that process must extend beyond test scores and must be independent of school systems. An appropriate mechanism would be the use of grand juries to examine county school systems. California's grand juries investigate the effectiveness of local governments, and many states used to give grand juries that authority. Expanding the role of the grand jury in Florida thus has current as well as historical precedents. Granting authority to a grand jury to investigate local government would not be the first expansion of grand-jury authority in Florida: the grand jury system has in fact been used in the past to serve special needs.

The foregoing is a summary of a policy brief in the report *Reform Florida* (Education Policy Research Unit, April 2004). The complete policy brief is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) website at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSTL-0401-107-EPRU.doc>

Education Policy Studies Laboratory
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
College of Education, Arizona State University
P.O. Box 872411, Tempe, AZ 85287-2411
Telephone: (480) 965-1886
Fax: (480) 965-0303
E-mail: epsl@asu.edu
<http://edpolicylab.org>