

**Good and Bad News About Florida Student Achievement:
Performance Trends on Multiple Indicators
Since Passage of the A+ Legislation**

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Executive Summary

What is the news on Florida's student performance since the passage of the A+ legislation? This brief presents a review of long-term data on five state and national indicators. It verifies outcomes and trends and examines the main premise of the A+ mandate that, given appropriate schooling, students will have equitable outcomes and access to opportunities. The data show positive outcomes and steady gains at the elementary level; the pattern, however, is not sustained at the secondary level.

Good News at Elementary Level in all Subjects

Elementary achievement trends show the strongest gains and performance in writing, and steady improvements over time in reading and mathematics. Findings concur on the FCAT-CRT, FCAT-NRT, and the NAEP.

Bad News on Secondary Level Reading

About 60% of Florida's high schoolers are still performing below the Level 3 (passing) mark on the FCAT-CRT in 10th grade, while less than 50% place below the national median on the FCAT-NRT.

Good News on Writing and Fair News on Mathematics at all Levels

On the FCAT writing tests, more than 80% stayed above Level 3 for three to five years in all grades. Compared to other U.S. students in all grades tested over time, Florida's students have an advantage in writing, with 84-86% at or above the Basic level in the most recent NAEP testing. At all levels, Florida's students also steadily improved over time in mathematics achievement on the FCAT-CRT, FCAT-NRT, and the NAEP.

Mixed news on Achievement Gaps among Florida's Students

Achievement gaps are still large between White and other subgroups as of 2003, but appear to be smaller in some subgroup comparisons, such as White vs. Hispanic students (see 2003 results in Appendix D). On the FCAT-CRT in 2003, Limited English Proficient students and Exceptional Education students showed the poorest performance in all grade levels. Also on the FCAT, among elementary school students, ethnic achievement gaps that were slowly closing over time in reading showed no change. The data revealed widening gaps in secondary grades: a large female-to-male gap in reading starts in elementary school and widens in middle school on the NAEP. A small male-to-female gap in mathematics is evident in elementary school, and also widens in middle school (NAEP). On the NAEP, among Florida's students, gaps between ethnic minority

groups and Whites remained the same or decreased in mathematics over time; the gaps remained the same or increased on reading and writing tests over time.

Mixed News on Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates, and College-bound Seniors

Over time, U.S.-to-Florida comparisons show a gap of 10-12% in the high school graduation rate per year through 2000: Florida is behind, with a graduation rate of 55% in 2000. The *number* of high school diplomas issued in Florida, however, has increased over time. Florida's dropout rate, based on counts of students giving withdrawal reasons, has slowly declined from 5% to 3% since the A+ legislation. Calculations of both graduation and dropout rates are limited as they do not include student migration or grade retention factors. More college-bound seniors from Florida are now taking the SAT, with a greater percentage from ethnic minority groups. U.S.-to-Florida comparisons show a widening gap in both quantitative and verbal areas. Only 25% of Florida's test-takers reported that they were from high-income families in 2003, compared to 58% in the nation. Based on the documented relationship between income and SAT performance, lower scores are predictable when students come from low-income households. On the SAT composite in 2003, however, Florida's Hispanics scored +39 points better on average than Hispanics in the nation. More information on these data may provide insight as to what factors affect minority student success.

Given the current data trends and research, it is recommended that Florida legislators and policy-makers undertake the following:

1. Provide local support and evaluation training opportunities to help teachers and school leaders make better use of data to reduce achievement gaps in reading and mathematics, particularly at the secondary level.
2. Document and reward the pedagogically sound practices that follow from Recommendation 1, even when short-term gains are small. These practices, informed by data, will support student learning and sustained growth.
3. Create conditions to help schools teach to the Sunshine State Standards along a K-12 continuum – conditions that lead to real engagement of teachers and students in learning activities tied to standards and that reduce the amount of test preparation. This includes removing the use of teaching to the (FCAT) test language, currently on the A+ website, that tends to encourage short-term gains.
4. Make greater use of appropriate sampling techniques (NAEP type of design) in school evaluations, lowering anxiety and fear resulting from the present accountability system. This will allow Florida to retain high levels of accountability while lowering the stakes for individual school staff.
5. Seek ways to set reasonable and staggered timelines, within the NCLB and A+ frameworks, for schools with diverse and challenging populations to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP).
6. Rethink sanctions and grade retention policies in light of new and past research that finds that grade retention does not improve student achievement.

7. Identify specific reforms with positive and sustained achievement effects by supporting long-term research that looks at diverse students' achievement in relation to school and teacher practices over time.

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/EPSL-0401-105-EPRU.doc>

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