



Florida students have achieved dramatic and sustained academic improvement. Between 1998 and 2001, Sunshine State students' test score gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have risen well ahead of the national average. Florida's minority students have made the biggest progress, narrowing the achievement gap. Florida's Hispanic students are now reading as well or better than the statewide average of *all students* in 21 states on the NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading examination. The map above shades those states with statewide averages below or tied with that of Florida's Hispanics. Florida's African-American students are not far behind – reading as well or better than statewide averages in eight states.

Governor Bush's education reforms faced intense opposition, but by the end of his second term, once-controversial elements of his reform agenda earned bipartisan support. Florida's common sense and proven reforms can work in other states to give all children the opportunity to receive a high-quality education and pursue the American dream.

## **Florida's Education Reform Strategy**

Florida is the only school system to implement a set of sweeping reforms simultaneously. In recent years, a number of other states have followed Florida's lead. Florida's policymakers designed these reforms to strengthen the traditional public school system, offering parents the widest range of choice options to spur competition and innovation. The result has been a systematic transformation and dramatic improvement in students' academic achievement.

### **1. Holding Schools Accountable for Results**

The A-F School Grading System underlies the entire Florida's K-12 reform strategy. State officials grade schools using an objective and transparent A through F grading scale based upon the proficiency and learning gains of students.

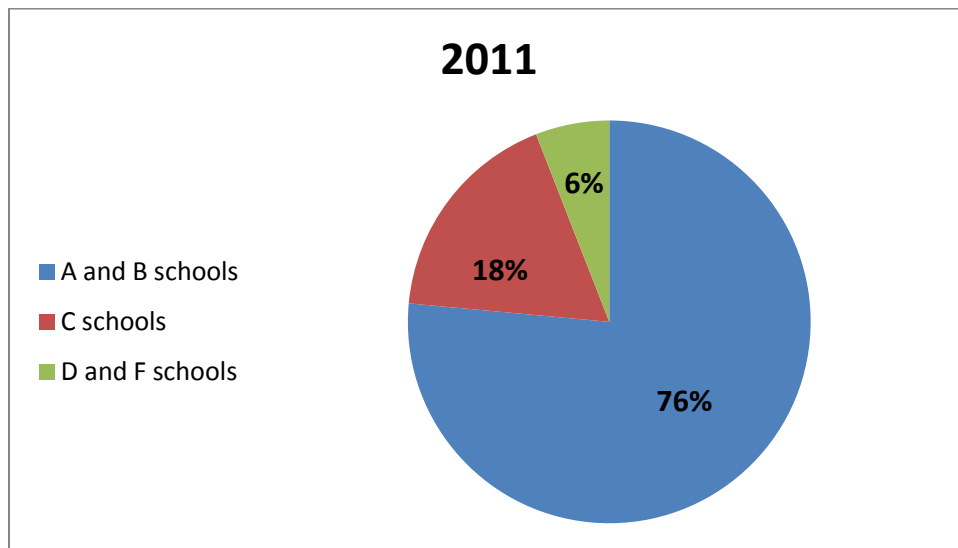
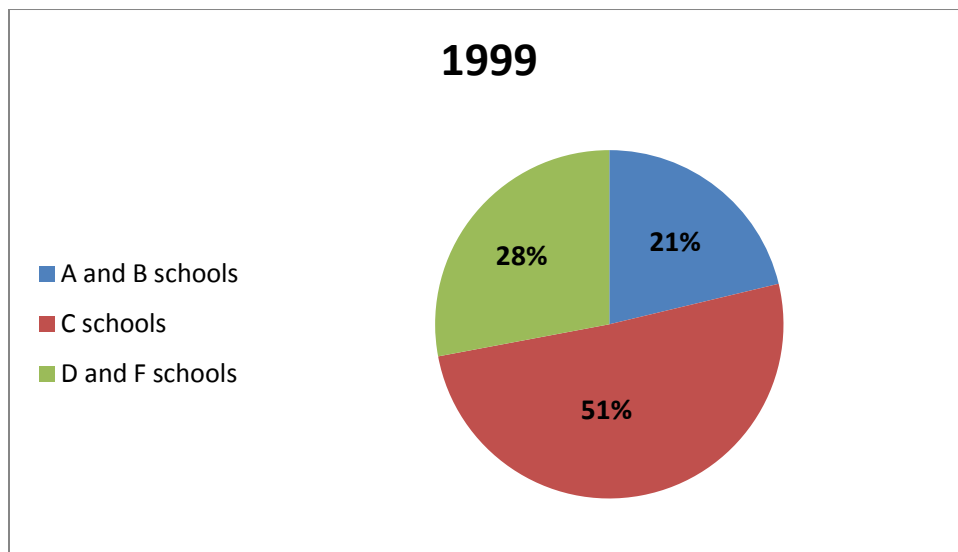
In 2001, Florida required public school students in grades 3 through 10 to take annual tests in reading and mathematics, called the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). (Florida previously offered FCAT writing tests at the elementary, middle and high school level and later incorporated science exams to the FCAT system also at each school level.)

The state determines each school's grade 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. State officials base the remaining half of the school's grade upon individual student learning gains—that is, the percentage of students who made progress in reading and math from his or her previous achievement level the prior year. Making progress equally 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. To help the most struggling students, the school grade calculation emphasizes the progress of the lowest 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of students by doubling their impact on a school's grade. 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. In 2010, in an effort to include 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades in the high

school calculation, the state began including graduation rates for all students, graduation rates for at-risk students, acceleration rates (AP/IB/dual enrollment and industry certification) and college readiness rates as of half of the high school grading formula.

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. When Florida started grading schools, only 21 percent of schools earned an A or B. In fact, Florida had more D and F schools than A and B schools. Today, 74 percent of schools earn an A or B, and the bar for good grades has been raised four times.

### Results of Florida's A+ Plan: School Grades in 1999 & 2011



Under the A-F grading system, the state gives cash awards to schools that earn an A grade or improve a letter grade, such as going from a C to a B. The state awards these bonuses, \$100 per student, directly to schools and the majority of funds are used to provide bonuses to teachers and staff.

The state offered children at schools that earned two “F” grades in a four year period the opportunity to transfer to a better performing school. Through the A+ Opportunity Scholarship Program, students could leave their low-performing public school to attend another public school or a private school. The private school option of this program ended in 2006 when the Florida Supreme Court ruled the program violated an “exclusivity” provision in the state constitution.

## **2. Setting High Expectations**

In 2003, the state ended social promotion for third grade students in a tough-love strategy to improve literacy. To proceed to fourth grade, students must attain a minimally acceptable score on the FCAT reading test. Students who fail the FCAT reading tests are given other test-based opportunities to demonstrate reading proficiency. Students who still cannot demonstrate reading skills are retained and provided with aggressive intervention and the opportunity to learn fundamental skills necessary for future success.

Reformers designed this policy to ensure that students attain literacy at the critical grade where students transition from learning to read to reading to learn in other subjects. Florida supported this policy by enacting a statewide reading initiative—*Just Read, Florida!*—which provided professional development to all K-3 teachers and literacy coaches to elementary schools throughout the state.

An evaluation by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research revealed that students who were retained under the social promotion ban outperformed their peers who had been promoted through an exemption after one year, and that the gap grew larger after two years.<sup>ii</sup> The recent follow-up study found that retained students were still outperforming promoted students in reading and math as late as 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Better still, the percentage of Florida 3<sup>rd</sup> graders scoring high enough to avoid retention has soared.

Florida also set a higher bar for high school students. In 2002, the state raised the academic level of its longstanding high school exit exam from an 8<sup>th</sup> grade test to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level on the FCAT examination. Between 1999 and 2010, Florida’s high school graduation rate increased by 21 percent (after decreasing by 7 percent from 1990 to 1998).

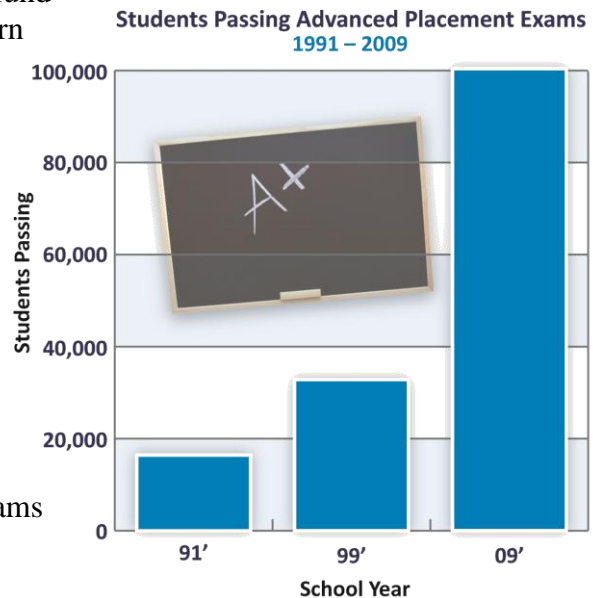
## **3. Fostering and Rewarding Success**

Florida’s systemic reform strategy also created incentives and provided greater flexibility to enable schools to meet these higher expectations. Reformers restructured existing funds that formerly were only available for use after students failed – programs such as dropout prevention or summer school. Schools were given the flexibility to use the funds throughout the school year to improve student literacy or assist those struggling to pass their high school exit exam.

Florida education reformers also made high school more rigorous to better prepare students for college and careers. As the first step, Florida lawmakers provided state funding for all Florida 10<sup>th</sup> graders to take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) or the equivalent PLAN exam for the ACT. Officials forged a partnership with the College Board to use this data to identify students with the potential to pass Advance Placement (AP) coursework and exams. Under this partnership, the state also provided professional development to train teachers, primarily those in C, D, and F schools with skills to teach AP courses.

In 2000, Florida lawmakers created a merit pay system that provides teacher bonuses for teachers whose students earn passing grades on AP exams. In the early '90s Florida began providing a \$700 bonus to schools for every student who passes an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate (IB) exam as a way to fund these programs. From these funds, teachers now earn awards of \$50 for each student passing an AP or IB test up to a total award of \$2,000. To incentivize high expectations in low-performing schools, teachers in D and F schools earn an additional bonus of \$500 for the first student who passes an AP test.

Since 2000, the number of students taking AP exams in Florida has increased by 366 percent. The number of students passing AP tests has grown by 249 percent. Since the advent of the program, the number of African-American and Hispanic students passing Advanced Placement exams has tripled. Florida reformers redirected existing revenue to fund the system of school-wide and teacher bonuses.



#### 4. Giving Families the Power to Choose

Florida empowers families with the financial freedom to choose the best school for their children. The state has the broadest array of public, private and virtual school options in the nation.

**Private School Choice:** Florida created two private school choice programs—the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

Last school year, nearly 21,000 students with disabilities took advantage of scholarships offered through the McKay program. These state-funded scholarships allow special education students to attend a private or public school of their parents' choice. An evaluation by University of Arkansas researchers found that the competition created by offering choice to the families of special education students spurred improvement by special needs students in traditional public schools.<sup>iii</sup> The NAEP scores of Florida's children with disabilities have

substantially improved statewide since the 1990s, due to the combination of the McKay program and other reforms.

Last school year, over 36,000 low-income students received scholarships funded by the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. This program allows businesses to receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits for contributions made to non-profit organizations that provide tuition scholarships to low-income children. Businesses are eligible to donate as much as \$140 million through the tax credit program.<sup>iv</sup> A study by Northwestern University researchers found that the competition created by offering low-income kids scholarships spurred academic improvement in the traditional public school system.<sup>v</sup>

**Public School Choice:** Florida also offers families choice within the traditional public school system. Many families take advantage of open enrollment in public schools. The state also has one of the strongest charter school laws in the nation. In 2011, more than 154,780 children attended charter schools in Florida.<sup>vi</sup> Charter schools are publicly funded schools that agree to meet certain performance standards set by the government, but are otherwise free from the majority of the bureaucratic rules and regulations that encumber traditional public schools. Charter schools allow teachers and school leaders the chance to create high quality learning environments, providing families with a new option besides their child's traditional public school.

**Virtual Education:** Florida is also recognized as the leading state in offering families virtual schooling options. The Florida Virtual School is widely considered the most innovative statewide virtual school in the nation, offering all – public, private or home educated - students access to a wide range of online courses. Funding follows the child down to the course level and providers of virtual courses only earn funding when students complete the course. In recent years, Florida has expanded access by allowing private providers to enter the marketplace. Florida's growing number of virtual learners show larger learning gains and higher course completion rates.

## **5. Opening up Access to Effective Teachers**

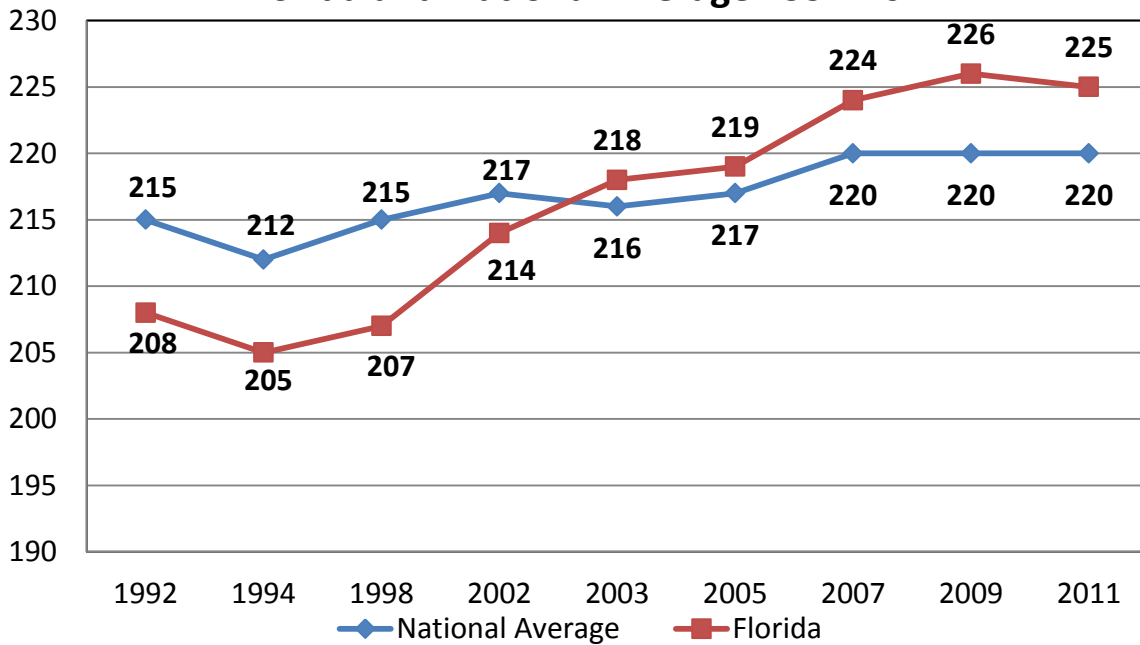
Researchers identify teacher effectiveness as the main in-school factor affecting students' academic achievement. Florida changed its policies to attract new talented professionals into the teaching workforce. Previous law required teachers to earn a teaching certificate from one of the state's schools of education before they could enter the classroom. In 1999, Florida created new pathways for people to become teachers—offering alternative routes to certification. For example, aspiring teachers who have a college degree in a field other than teaching can work at any public school district and receive on-the-job training and mentoring while they are teaching.

Other aspiring teachers can enter the teaching workforce by completing programs at Educator Preparation Institutes offered by Florida's community colleges. Florida also accepts teaching certifications through reciprocity from any other state in the country. Half of Florida's new teachers now enter the workforce through these pathways, which are helping to bring highly talented professionals into the classroom where they can begin a fulfilling career making a difference in children's lives.

## The Results—Dramatic Improvement in Florida Students’ Academic Achievement

After implementing these reforms, Florida’s students began a dramatic climb in academic achievement that continues today. On the “National Assessment of Educational Progress” or NAEP—the so-called “nation’s report card”—Florida students, who were well behind in the 1990s, are now outperforming the national average on the critical 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> reading examinations. It is important to note that Florida is a majority minority state with a higher percentage of students designated as low-income (eligible for free and reduced lunch) than the nation. Florida also spends less than the national average per pupil.<sup>vii</sup> The chart below shows Florida’s fourth grade students reading a full grade level behind the national average to moving above the national average.

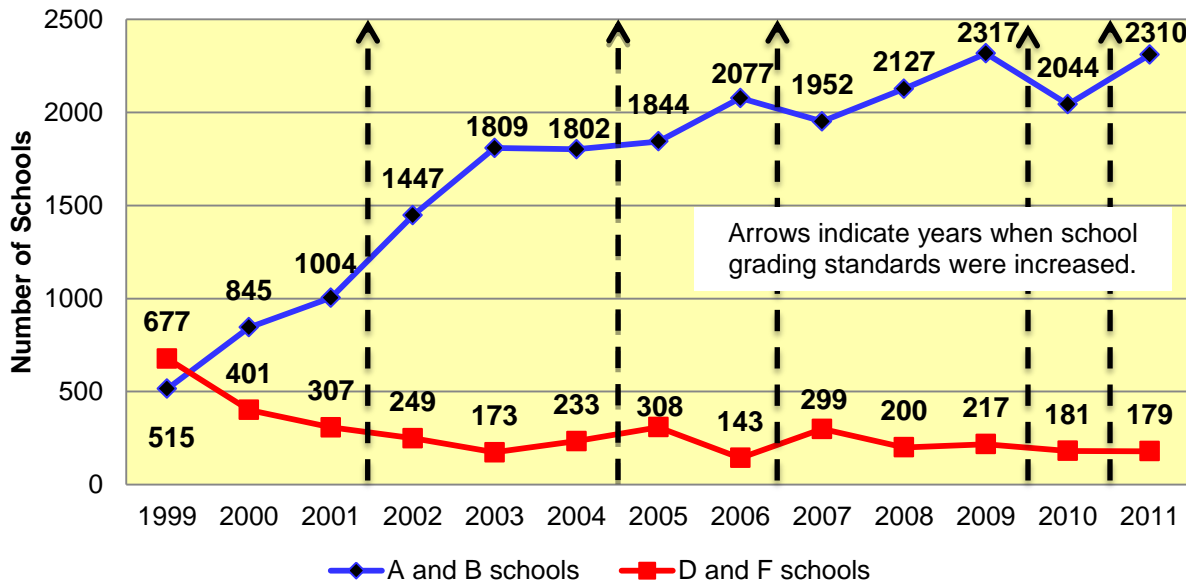
**Average NAEP 4th Grade Reading Scores,  
Florida and National Average 1992-2011**



The chart below shows the results of Florida's A+ plan to grade schools A – F. The dotted lines indicate times when the standard for achieving a grade was raised.

## Florida School Grades 1999 – 2011

*Number of A & B versus D & F schools*



Like other states, Florida still has far to go to ensure that all children receive a high quality education. Florida's experience shows, however, that these common sense and now proven reforms can spur real improvement in student learning. State and federal leaders now have the opportunity to learn from Florida's success and pursue even bolder and innovative ways to transform American education and provide every student the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and their careers.

<sup>i</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Florida state profile, at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, "Revisiting Grade Retention: An Evaluation of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy," Education Finance and Policy, Fall 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, "The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida's McKay Scholarship Program," Manhattan Institute, April 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Florida Department of Education, "Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program," July 2010, at: [http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/CTC/files/ctc\\_fast\\_facts.pdf](http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/CTC/files/ctc_fast_facts.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> Cassandra M.D. Hart and David Figlio, "Does Competition Improve Public Schools?" Education Next, Winter 2010.

<sup>vi</sup> Florida Department of Education, "Charter Schools Program," August 2010, at: [http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/Charter\\_Schools/files/fast\\_facts\\_charter\\_schools.pdf](http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/Charter_Schools/files/fast_facts_charter_schools.pdf).

<sup>vii</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2009, Table 183.