

## **FLORIDA'S A+ PLAN FOR EDUCATION: A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR SCHOOL REFORM**

*By Jim Horne*

In 1999 Florida embarked on a bold new course in American public education. Florida's A+ Plan for Education set out to overhaul a K-12 system that struggled under dramatic increases in student enrollment, a widely diverse student population, climbing dropout rates and lagging student achievement. The success of the A+ Plan for Education in reversing these trends provides an example of real-world reform in education policy in the United States. Florida's success came as a result of several key policy pieces working together: high standards, improved measurement, increased accountability and a true K-20 pipeline.

Policy makers first realized that significant education reform had to begin with a standard education level that students are expected to attain at each grade level, in each subject. Florida's set of benchmarks, called the Sunshine State Standards, spelled out the level of knowledge and skill for students to be considered competent at each grade level. These standards were developed by educators, administrators and policy makers, and approved by the State Board of Education in 1996. Administrators were free to design curricula for districts and schools based upon the competency levels set out in the Sunshine State Standards.

Much of the challenge facing policy makers seeking to reform public education in Florida lay in closing the "achievement gap." The often disparate quality levels of education in affluent, mostly white schools versus poor urban and rural schools --often with high minority enrollments --is an obstacle that continues to frustrate many education policy makers in the United States. By intentionally setting standards high, Florida aimed to equalize the quality of public education throughout the state of Florida for children of all races and socio-economic backgrounds.

Standards alone, however, can be of no practical use to educators, administrators, parents and policy makers unless the extent to which students attain the standards is known. To this end, Florida's A+ Plan for Education implemented a comprehensive measurement and diagnostic system called the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT. The FCAT, launched in 1999, was designed to test student mastery of the Sunshine State Standards, which at that time had been in place for three years. By consistently measuring student performance in key subject areas, educators and administrators would know exactly how well curriculum choices and instruction methods over time were working in the classroom.

Accountability is a key element to Florida's plan for school reform. This was particularly important as the state attempted to affect significant change in K-12 education at all levels. If higher standards work to set goals for Florida's educators and students, and if precise diagnostic tests are used to measure progress, then genuine accountability measures provide the motivation necessary to change a public education system that had, in its entire history, experienced neither sanctions nor rewards for the performance of its students.

Accountability measures now in place in Florida reward schools for improvement or sustained excellence in student achievement and assign each school a letter grade based upon its student achievement. Under the A+ Plan, schools that improve a letter grade, or maintain an "A," are given a monetary reward. Failing schools are provided additional funding, instructional support and teaching personnel to fill key positions. School choice becomes an option for parents whose child attends a school with two "F" grades in a four-year period. Such parents are able to transfer their child to a more successful public school. This strong accountability system, combined with high standards and measurement of student performance, has brought tremendous change to Florida's public education system in the years since its implementation. Student achievement is rising for the fourth straight year, and, perhaps more importantly, minority students in poor and urban areas that were once neglected and underserved are improving at a faster rate than their counterparts in more affluent areas.

With the key ingredients for public K-12 education reform in place, Florida set out to further revolutionize its education system by connecting its disparate components into a seamless, coherent whole. The K-20 pipeline concept works to unify K-12 education, workforce development, community college and vocational education, and university education. This seamless system incorporates myriad programs and initiatives, many aimed at transitioning Florida high school students to workforce development, community college or university programs with maximum ease and efficiency. Much of the success of Florida's K-20 pipeline has been a dynamic, flexible and engaged community college system that is able to quickly respond to the workforce needs of local communities. This system gives individual community colleges the ability to add and drop programs at will in order to fill region-specific workforce needs.

While Florida recognizes the value of high school-specific reform programs that may target curriculum or structure, it realizes that no meaningful high school reform can take place in an environment of lagging student achievement, lax standards and soft accountability. Having implemented a system that insists on high standards, precise measurement and strict accountability, Florida has created a fertile environment in which additional reform measures can be developed and can flourish. By insisting that all students can be well educated in a large, diverse public education system, Florida is poised to be among the nation's leaders in education reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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