

*Reform is never finished and success is never final. A perpetual cycle of reform will lead to sustained improvement for the long-term.*

-Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush

## **FLORIDA LEADS THE WAY ON K-12 EDUCATION REFORMS**

Alaska and Florida make for studies in contrast in terms of geographic proximity, population and weather, among other factors. The states are profoundly different. Both states face tremendous and varying education challenges of varying types. Florida has most of the educational challenges one can imagine including both inner-city and rural schools and large numbers of low-income and foreign born students.

Unlike Alaska, Florida has a “majority minority” student population and a majority of low-income students. Alaskans of course faces many unique educational challenges of their own. These challenges include but are not limited to a large number of small and remote communities and a considerable achievement gap between white and Inuit students.

Despite the obvious and considerable differences, both states face a broadly similar challenge of finding ways to maximize the effectiveness of their K-12 systems in order to rise to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Please note from the outset that the purpose of this work is decidedly *not* to claim that Florida has achieved K-12 Nirvana or that all Alaska schools are terribly underachieving. Neither of these things is true.

This work instead intends to detail the reforms that substantially improved learning in Florida, taking the state off the bottom of national comparisons--precisely where Alaska finds itself today. Readers should view these reforms as a baseline for action in Alaska and seek to improve K-12 outcomes.

What Florida has done, Alaska could, in time, exceed.

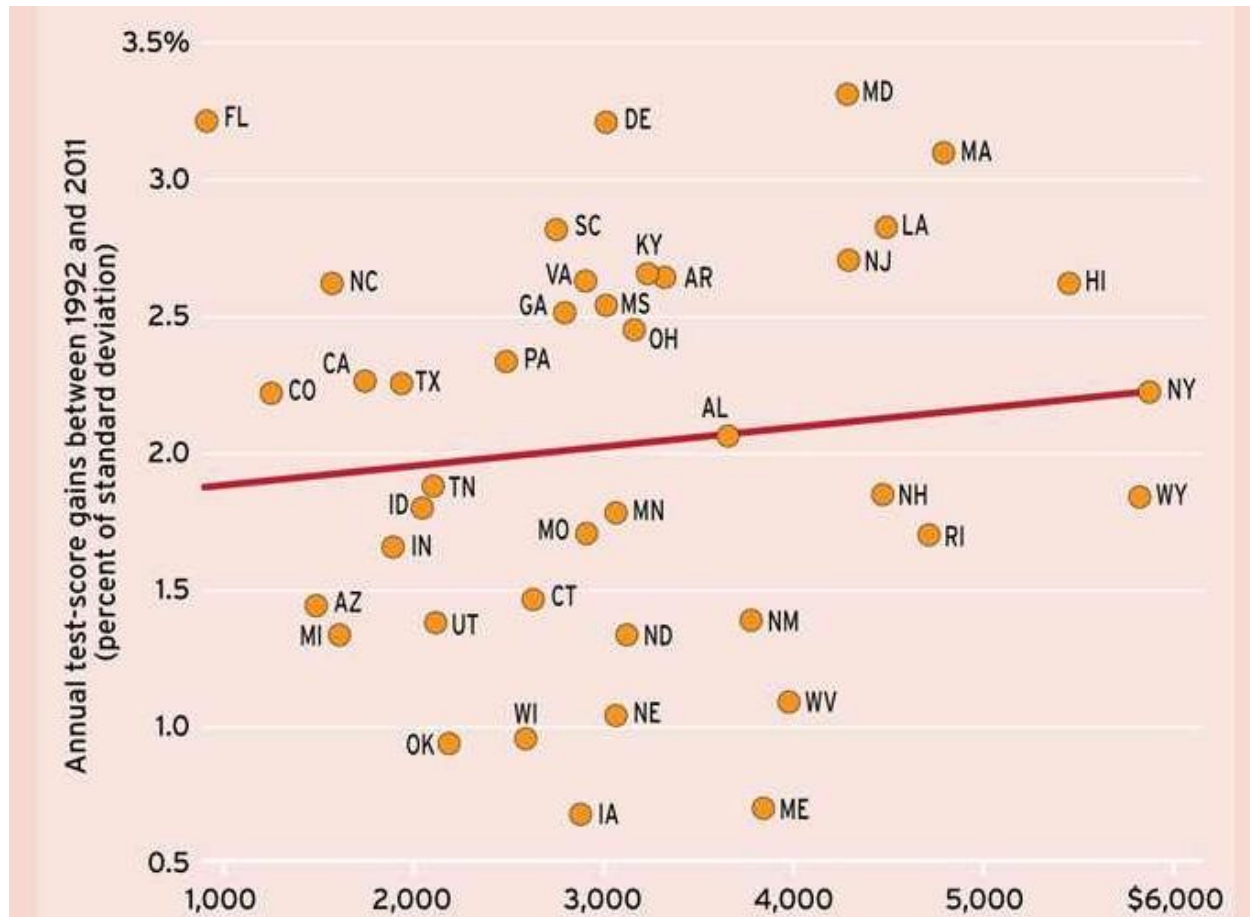
## **THE FLORIDA REFORM AGENDA**

Beginning in 1999, the Florida state legislature began adopting far-reaching education reforms. These reforms included grading schools with easily comprehensible labels—letter grades A, B, C, D, and F—and expanding school choice through charter schools and private choice programs. Florida also became the nation’s leader in virtual education—offering classes online through the Florida Virtual School. In addition, the state’s lawmakers curtailed the social promotion of illiterate elementary students, reformed reading instruction, and created multiple paths for alternative teacher certification.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests random samples of students in the states. Florida has participated in the main NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math exams since the early 1990s, whereas Alaska began its participation in 2003. Stanford economist Eric Hanushek published a paper in 2012 which utilized NAEP data in order to illustrate the relative

academic progress of states participating in NAEP since the early 1990s in relation to their trend in spending. While Alaska's relatively late beginning to NAEP participation kept them out of the comparison, the chart proves illuminating.

**FIGURE 1: AVERAGE ANNUAL NAEP ACADEMIC GAINS BY INFLATION ADJUSTED SPENDING PER PUPIL INCREASE (SOURCE: HANUSHEK, WOESSMAN AND PETERSON, 2012)**



Florida has experienced a number of positive academic trends since the late 1990s. Between 1998 and 2010, for instance, the percentage of Florida students graduating from high school increased from 67% to 87%. In large part enabled by this increase in high-school graduation rates, the percentage of Florida students pursuing higher education increased from 50% in 1997-98 to 68% in 2008-09. During this same period, the number of Black and Hispanic students passing one or more Advanced Placement exams more than tripled.

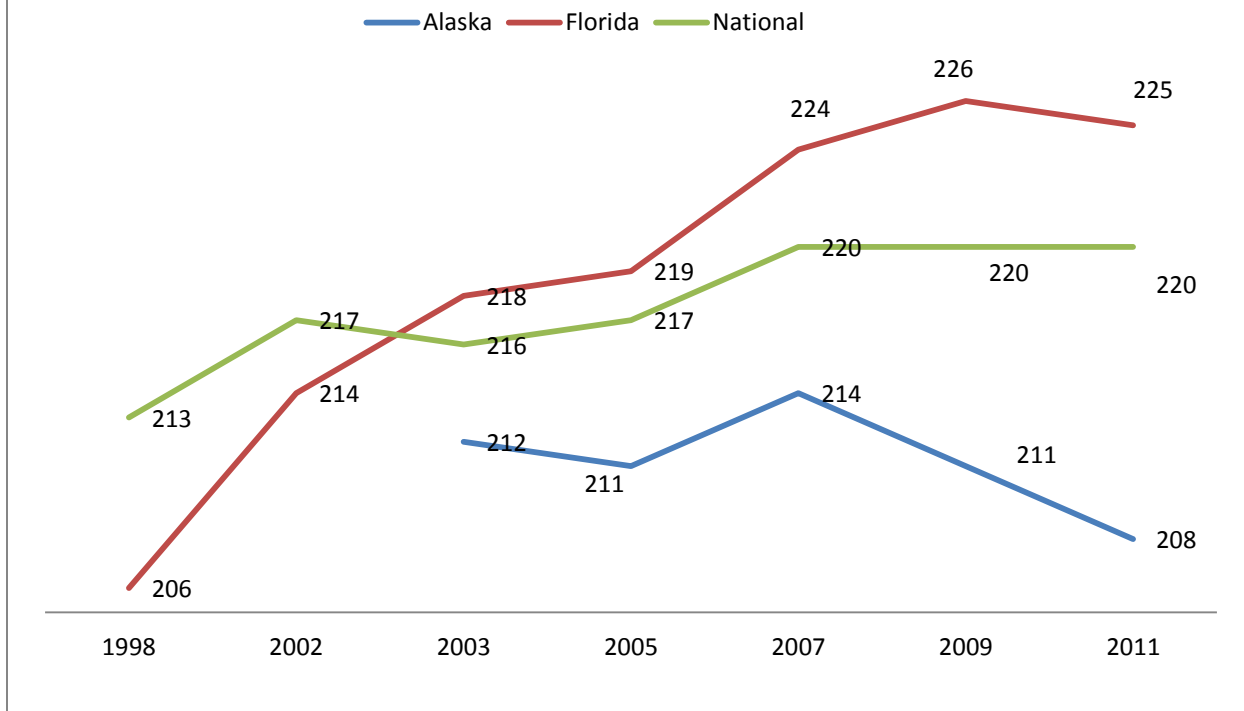
A key strategy in improving high school outcomes in Florida, however, involved teaching the most basic skills at the elementary level. Students who fail to master basic literacy skills at the developmentally critical age often struggle to keep up as grade level material advances with each ascending grade. Florida's K-12 reformers therefore focused on improving early childhood reading.

Of all the NAEP exams, education officials pay the closest attention to the fourth-grade reading exam. Literacy acquisition involves developmentally crucial periods—reading is broadly similar to learning a foreign language in that it is easier to do when you are young. Educators summarize this phenomenon with an expression: In grades K-3, you are *learning to read*. After third grade, you are *reading to learn*. If you cannot read, you cannot learn.

Alaska did not begin participation in NAEP until 2003, which prevented their inclusion in the Hanushek study but will not stop us from making comparisons of more recent trends presently. NAEP presents data both as average scores and also as levels of achievement. Figure 2 presents the scale scores from NAEP's fourth-grade reading exams for Alaska, Florida and the United States as a whole.

Florida's reforms began the year after the 1998 NAEP; prior to this time the state's reading scores had been low and flat. For the charts presented in this report, bear in mind that a 10-point gain equals approximately a grade level's worth of learning such that, all else being equal, we would expect a group of 5<sup>th</sup> graders taking the 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP Reading test to do about 10 points better than a similar group of 4<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Figure 2: NAEP 4th Grade Reading Scores-1998-2011 (Note Alaska participation began in 2003)**

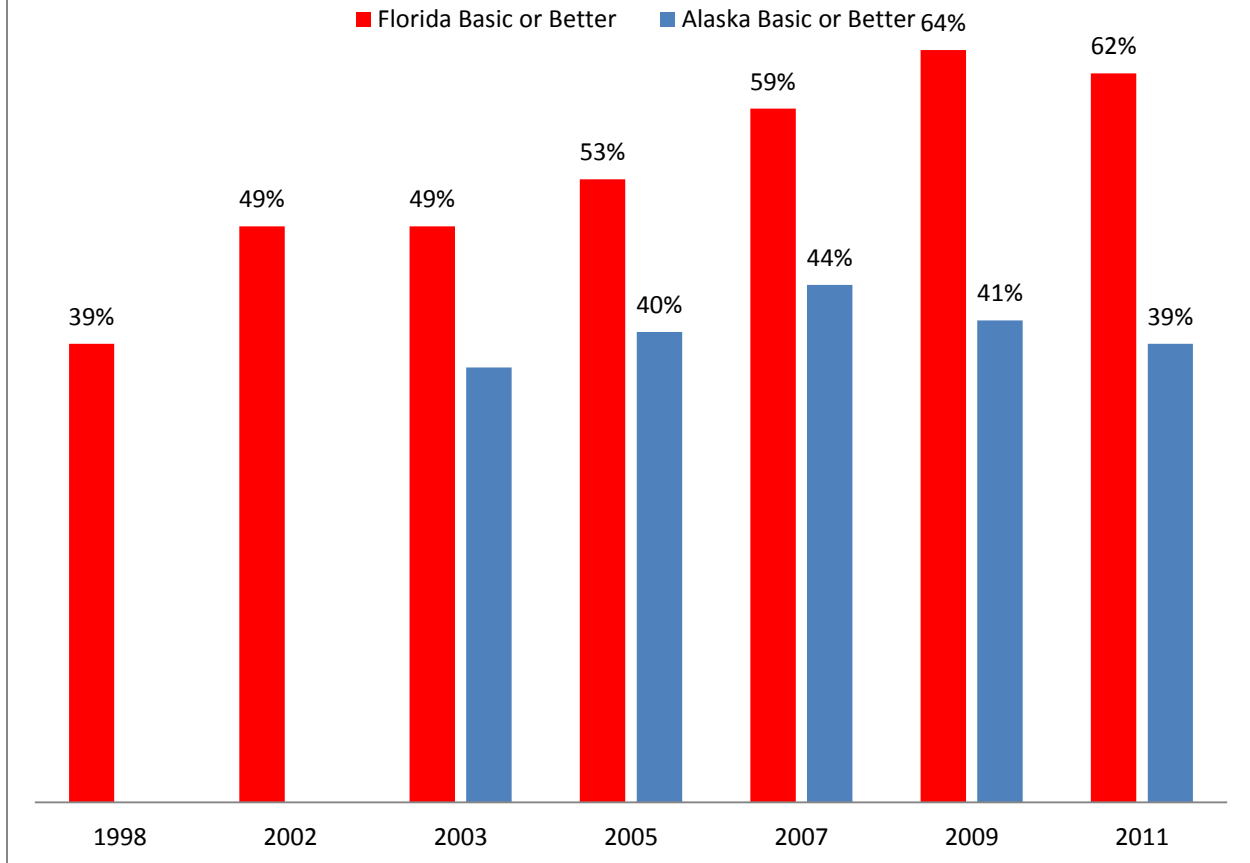


Florida students have gained 19 points on the NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading test since 1998, the year before the Florida reform efforts. Note that Florida’s 1998 score was lower even than any of Alaska’s scores since joining NAEP in 2003. In 2011, however, the average Florida student scored 17 points higher than the average Alaska student—almost two grade levels higher on a 4<sup>th</sup> grade test. Alaska’s 2011 students were about at the same reading level as Florida’s 1998 students, but their average level of achievement roughly equals what we might expect from a slightly above average Florida 2<sup>nd</sup> grader in 2011.

The scale of the differences between Alaska and Florida can also be compared by achievement levels. NAEP uses four different achievement levels: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient and Advanced. NAEP defines “Basic” achievement as “partial mastery” of grade level material, with “Below Basic” essentially signifying functional illiteracy.

Figure 3 compares the fourth-grade reading achievement of all students in Alaska to those of Florida’s students whose family incomes make them eligible for the federal Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program. Officials use this program as a poverty metric within the public school system. In 2010, a family of four could earn no more than \$40,793 per year to qualify for a *reduced price* lunch. However, of those who qualified nationwide for Free and Reduced Price-Lunch, 80 percent of children were from families who qualified for *free lunch*, which has a maximum family income of \$28,665 for a family of four.

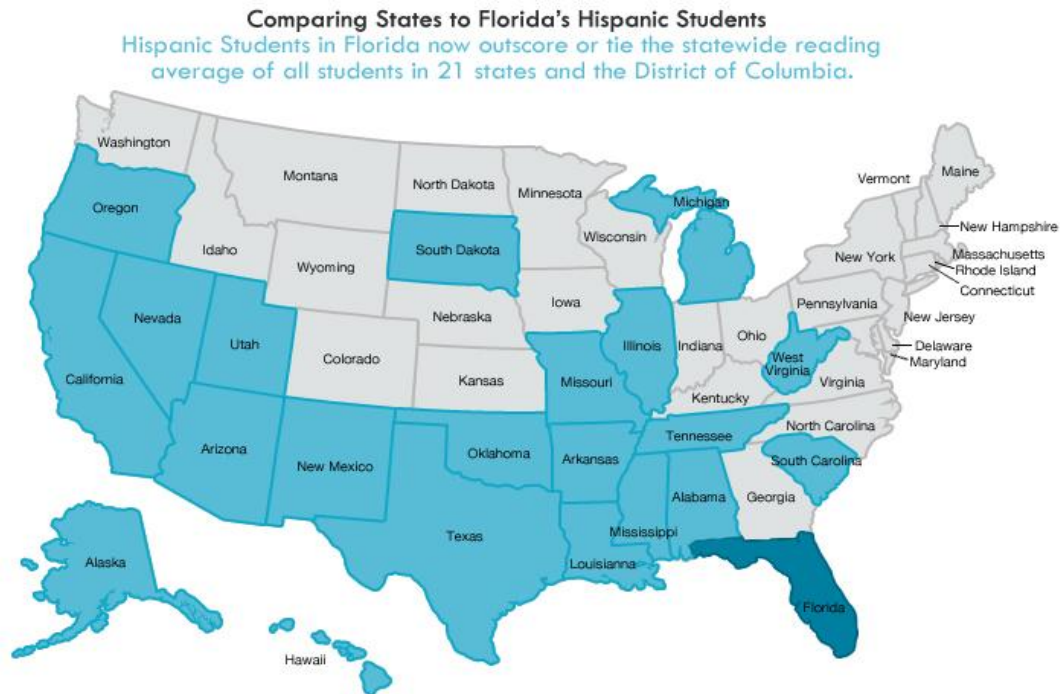
**Figure 3: Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible Students in Florida and Alaska Scoring "Basic or Better" on the NAEP 4th Grade Reading Exam (Note: AK NAEP participation began in 2003)**



Florida also made considerable progress in closing racial achievement gaps. The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan served as an aide to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon before serving as the United States Ambassador to India and then the United Nations. Moynihan then served as a United States Senator from New York while authoring books throughout his career. Moynihan used to joke about racial achievement gaps by saying that performance on NAEP tended to be perfectly correlated with proximity to the Canadian border. If a state wished to improve their performance, Moynihan jested, they should simply pick up and move closer to Canada.

If Senator Moynihan were still with us today, we can expect that he would be quite pleased to see the figure below. Florida's traditionally lowest performing student groups have led the way in academic gains. In 2011, Florida's Hispanic students outscored statewide averages for *all students* of Alaska and 20 other states. Florida's free and reduced lunch eligible students also outscored the statewide average for all Alaska students. Florida's African American students also outscored the statewide average for Alaska students in 2011- although it finished in a statistical dead heat.<sup>i</sup>

**FIGURE 4: NAEP READING SCORES FOR FLORIDA HISPANIC STUDENTS**



One can hold little doubt that the scholarly Senator would be quite pleased to see low-income, Black and Hispanic students holding their own and exceeding statewide averages. Moreover mere proximity to Canada does not seem to be serving as a substitute for strong, student-focused reforms in Alaska.

### **FLORIDA'S COMPREHENSIVE K-12 REFORMS**

Florida did not achieve these results with any single reform, but rather with a multifaceted strategy. Reform highlights include:

- Florida grades all district and charter schools based upon overall academic performance and student learning gains. Schools earn letter grades of A, B, C, D, or F, which parents easily can interpret.
- Florida has the largest virtual-school program in the nation, with more than 80,000 students taking one or more courses online.

- Florida has an active charter school program, with 445 charter schools serving more than 179,000 students.
- The Step Up for Students Tax Credit program assists 23,000 low-income students in attending the school of their parents' choice—both private (tuition assistance) and public (transportation assistance for district school transferees).
- The McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program stands as the nation's largest school voucher program, sending more than 20,000 students with special needs to the public or private school of their parents' choice.
- Florida curtailed student social promotion from the third grade—if a child cannot read, the child will repeat the grade until he or she is capable of demonstrating basic skills, which can result in a mid-year promotion.
- Florida created genuine alternative teacher certification paths in which adult professionals can demonstrate content knowledge in order to obtain a teaching license. Half of Florida's new teachers now come through alternative routes.

Note that Florida policymakers and educators implemented many of these reforms simultaneously, making it difficult to isolate the precise impact of any individual reform. Scholars have, however, provided studies showing positive benefits to public school scores specifically associated with isolated reforms including alternative certification, parental choice and social promotion curtailment.<sup>ii</sup> Below we will provide some additional discussion on individual elements of the Florida reform formula.

## **CURTAILING SOCIAL PROMOTION**

Florida's K-3 reading policy is more than just retention of third graders who cannot pass the state's third grade reading exam. Florida schools test student proficiency against state standards on the FCAT exam, but educators now use developmentally appropriate tests of literacy skills in the earliest grades. The policy, as spelled out in statute, is one of solid instruction, and immediate intervention when a child begins to struggle. The goal is to have as few children as possible reach the end of third grade unable to handle the demands of fourth grade. But for those students who aren't ready, they must be retained, with an entirely different course of instruction during that second year in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

In 2001, Florida schools retained 4.78 percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. After the enactment of the policy described below, 8.89% of Florida 3<sup>rd</sup> graders repeated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in the 2002-03 school year. This percentage of retained students proceeded to fall through the decade as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores improved, reaching 4.9 percent in 2008-09.

Empirical evidence suggests that ending social promotion has had a positive impact on students' performance. Dr. Jay Greene and Dr. Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas evaluated the results of the social promotion policy after two years. They reported that "retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students"<sup>iii</sup> with the academic benefit increasing after the second year. "That is, students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking."<sup>iv</sup>

Beyond the likely benefit of increased remediation, the threat of being retained also creates a strong incentive for children to improve their studies so they can proceed to the next grade with their peers.

Better still, schools increased parental involvement for struggling readers by developing Home Reading Plans, and began earlier testing and intervention strategies. Since the year before the retention policy came into effect, the percentage of Florida students scoring low enough to qualify for retention has fallen by 40 percent. More Florida children, in short, are learning how to read during the developmentally critical period. The students at the bottom proved the biggest winners from Florida's no-nonsense reforms.

### **SCHOOL CHOICE: ACCOUNTABILITY TO PARENTS**

Florida's school choice programs allow low-income and special-needs children to receive assistance to attend private schools of their parents' choosing. Charter schools, meanwhile, are open to all students; however, students who are unhappy with their experience in public schools are more likely to transfer into charters. Likewise, students struggling in traditional schools are the most likely to transfer under Florida's private choice programs.

A Manhattan Institute study, published in 2003, evaluated Florida's A+ Plan and the effect it had on the state's public education system—specifically, the effects from competition caused by school choice.

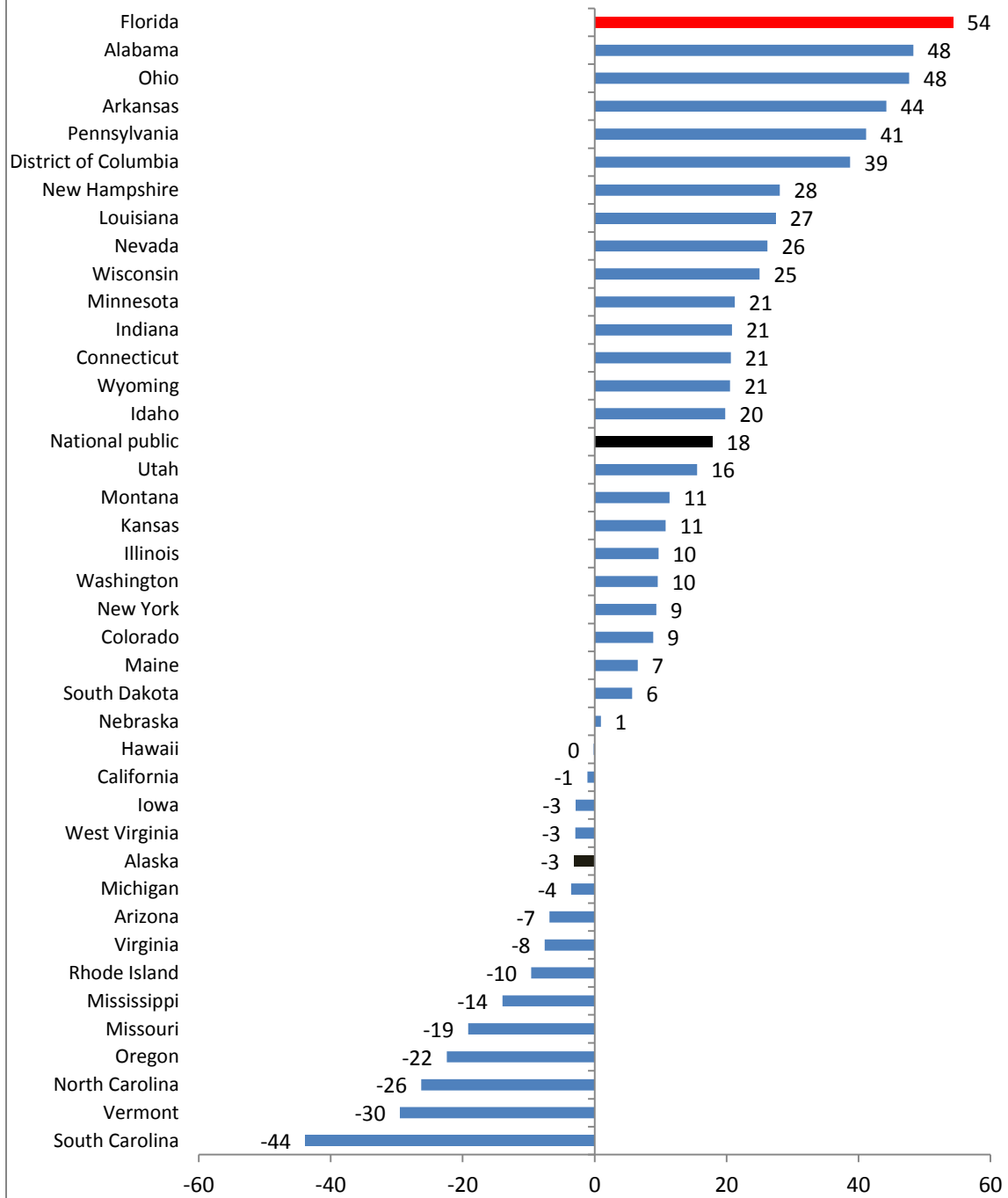
The A+ Plan provided Opportunity Scholarships to students in chronically failing public schools, that is, public schools that earned two F grades in any four-year period. The study found that public schools facing “competition or the prospect of competition made exceptional gains on both the FCAT and the Stanford-9 test compared to all other Florida public schools and the other subgroups....”<sup>v</sup>

In 2007, the Urban Institute published a similar analysis of the A+ Plan and its impact on Florida's public schools. The authors found that after school grading began, student achievement improved in schools graded F at an accelerated rate.<sup>vi</sup> Importantly, the authors discovered that reforms undertaken by the low-performing public schools contributed to the improvement: “[W]hen faced with increased accountability pressure, schools appear to focus on low-performing students, lengthen the amount of time devoted to instruction, adopt different ways of organizing the day and learning environment of the students and teachers, increase resources available to teachers, and decrease principal control.”<sup>vii</sup>

A 2008 study, also by Dr. Jay Greene and Dr. Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas found that competition caused by another school choice program spurred positive academic gains in Florida's public schools.<sup>viii</sup> The researchers evaluated the competitive effect of the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program on public schools. They report that “public school students with relatively mild disabilities made statistically significant test score improvements in both math and reading as more nearby private schools began participating in the McKay program.”<sup>ix</sup>



**Figure 5: Combined Math and Reading NAEP Gains for Children with Disabilities, 2003-2011**



The formula for calculating the gains in Figure 5 simply was to subtract the 2003 scores from the 2011 scores for children with disabilities on each of the four NAEP exams. Florida leads the way with a net gain of 54 combined points. Averaged across four exams, this means that the average

Florida child performed more than a grade level higher per exam in 2011 than children with disabilities had performed in 2003.

Florida tripled the national average, while the combined NAEP scores for children with disabilities in Alaska declined. Multiple testing experiments evaluating the impact of private school voucher programs in other communities have shown that students exercising choice improve academically, and none have found any evidence of academic harm.<sup>x</sup> Moreover, additional evaluations have found that increasing competition through school choice options (both private school choice and charter schools) leads to improvement in traditional public schools.<sup>xi</sup>

Florida has provided school choice to all children with disabilities for over a decade. If there is any evidence that this has harmed the performance of the special needs students remaining in the public school system, let's say that it is *quite difficult* to find. Like all other students, Florida's children with disabilities have benefitted from a variety of policy interventions in addition to parental choice. Florida stands out, however, in having had the most robust choice program for children with disabilities for the longest period of time.

Only a small percentage of eligible students use the McKay Scholarship directly (around 5 percent of the total) but 100 percent of Florida students with disabilities have access to the program if their parents feel they really need it. School choice empowers parents to make the best possible decisions for their children.

Alaskans meanwhile should conduct a serious inquiry into why the Alaska schools demonstrate a lack of progress among children with disabilities. Many states have shown strong academic gains among their children with disabilities and Alaskans should expect nothing less.

### **WHY HAVE FLORIDA'S DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS ADVANCED SO STRONGLY?**

Florida's reformers pushed forward a multifaceted strategy, which has benefited a wide range of students in that state. Notice, however, that *disadvantaged students* have gained the most from these reforms. Why?

Let us take the reforms one at a time. Florida's private school choice programs allow children with disabilities and low-income children to receive assistance to attend private schools of their parents' choosing. Charter schools, public schools of choice, are open to all students; however, students unhappy with their experience in public schools are more likely to transfer. Who are the big winners from public and private school choice? Those most poorly served by traditional district schools.

The same goes for Florida's third-grade retention policy. This earned promotion policy may seem cruel to some at first blush; however, it is much more cruel to send a child on to 4<sup>th</sup> grade incapable of doing grade level work.

In 2006, approximately 29,000 third-grade students failed the reading portion of Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).<sup>xii</sup> It is important to note, however, that Florida's retention policy contained a number of exemptions. An analysis by Manhattan Institute scholars

compared the academic progress of retained students to two groups of similar students (those who barely scored high enough to avoid retention and those who scored low enough for retention but received an exemption<sup>xiii</sup>).

The Manhattan team reported that after two years “retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students.”<sup>xiv</sup> The researchers found that the academic benefit increased after the second year: “That is, students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking.”<sup>xv</sup>

The retained students learned how to read, whereas the promoted students continued to fall behind grade level, which is the normal academic trajectory for children failing to learn basic literacy skills. Once again, the students at the bottom proved the biggest winners from Florida’s aggressive reforms.

Consider also alternative teacher certification. Allowing more people with degrees to demonstrate content knowledge and join the teaching profession expands the possible pool from which to recruit high-quality teachers. Inner-city children suffer the most from the shortage of high-quality teachers, as the system favors suburban systems in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers. Thus, inner-city children gain the most from reducing the shortage.

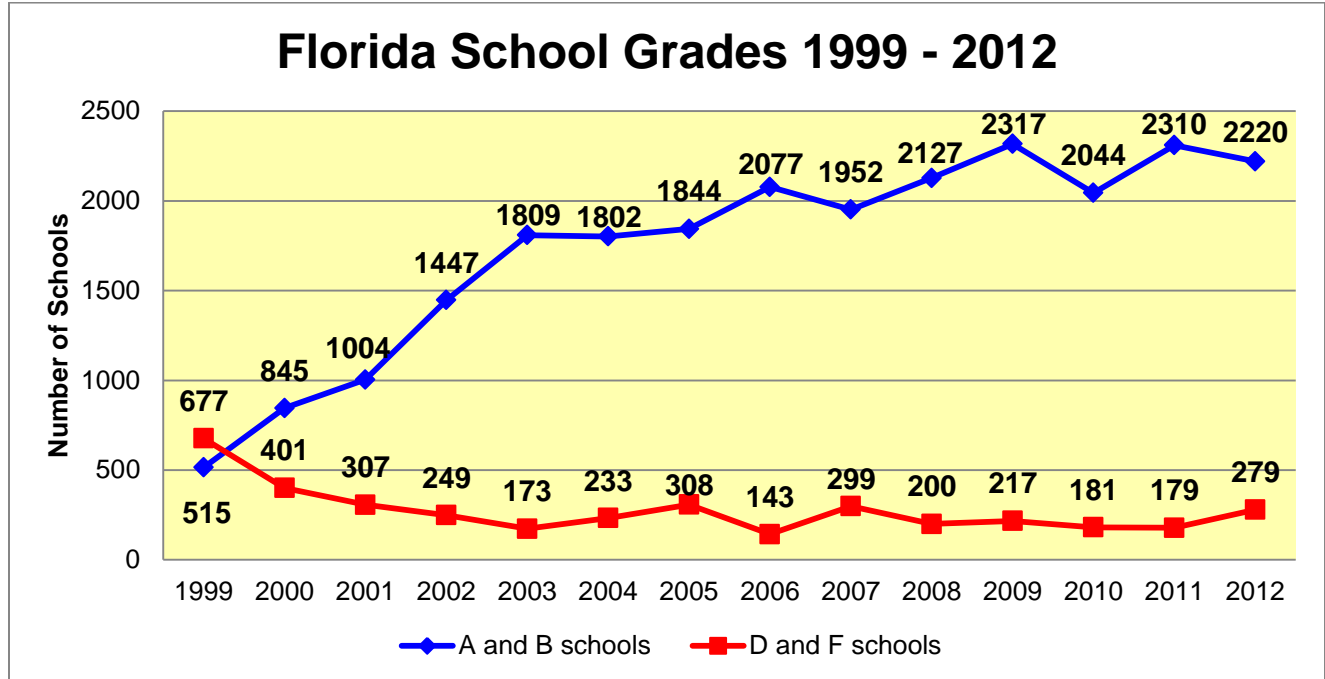
Also, Florida’s system of accountability grades schools A, B, C, D, or F, which many complained was unfair to schools with predominantly minority student bodies. A small but noisy group continues to bemoan the grading method, claiming that it is unfair to teachers and to students.

It would prove difficult to be any more mistaken, or more willfully ignorant. To be sure, grading schools A through F in Florida represents tough medicine: The state called out underperforming schools in a way that everyone could instantly grasp. Tough love is still love: Florida’s schools improved, both on the state FCAT and on NAEP (again, a source of external validation for the state exam).

Did Florida’s D and F schools wither under the glare of public scrutiny? Quite the opposite: Those schools focused their resources on improving academic achievement. Made aware of the problems in their schools, communities rallied to the aid of low-performing schools. People volunteered their time to tutor struggling students. Improving student academic performance, and thus the school’s grade, became a focus.

In 1999, 677 Florida public schools received a grade of D or F, and only 515 an A or B. Figure 6 tracks the trend for those sets of grades, and critically, the three dotted arrows represent an increase of the standards which made it more challenging to receive a high grade. In 2012, only 279 schools received a D or F, while 2220 schools received an A or B.

FIGURE 6: TRENDS IN FLORIDA SCHOOL GRADES, 1999-2012



When you see this sort of progress the best question to ask: was this just an illusion? That is, was progress achieved by lowering the “cut score” of the state FCAT exam? (The “cut score” is the minimum passing score students can achieve.) In a word: no. Florida did not make the FCAT easier to pass, maintaining a constant standard. Harvard Professor Paul Peterson has demonstrated that Florida has indeed maintained the integrity of the FCAT.<sup>xvi</sup>

Florida’s students have improved both on the FCAT and on the NAEP. Importantly, Florida’s improvement on NAEP also dispels the concern that schools are “teaching to the test.” NAEP exams have a high degree of security, and federal, state, and local authorities do not use them to rate schools or teachers. Teachers lack both the ability and the incentive to teach to the questions on NAEP exams.

Florida’s schools improved their rankings because their students learned to read at a higher level and became more proficient at math. Those who wanted to continue to coddle underperforming schools, while perhaps well intentioned, were effectively in favor of consigning hundreds of thousands of Florida children to illiteracy.

In summary, those with the least consistently gained the most from Florida’s reforms. This is perhaps clearest of all when one examines the formula for assigning letter grades to schools.

Florida determines schools’ grades in equal measure between overall scores, and gains over time. In addition, the state divides the gain part of the formula equally between the gains for all students, and the gains for the 25 percent of students with the lowest overall scores. The state determines these grades by the following formula-50 percent on overall scores, 25 percent based

on the gains of all students, and 25 percent based upon the gains of the lowest performing students.

Notably, *the bottom 25 percent of students play the biggest role in determining the grade of a school*. These students count in all the categories: the overall scores, the overall gains, and the gains of the lowest-performing students.

Notice the elegance of the Florida grading system. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) allows schools not to count subgroups depending upon the size of the group. (NCLB divides student bodies into various subgroups based upon race, ethnicity, income, disability status, etc., and requires an increasing passing threshold from each group. The exact size of the groups permissible is determined by obscure bureaucrats in state departments of education—and some exempt far larger groups of students than others.)

*Every school* however has a bottom 25 percent of students. Regardless of why those students have struggled academically, Florida's grading method will not grant schools a high grade unless those students make progress.

Academic fatalists quickly will jump up to argue that many students simply *cannot learn*. Florida and the success of others in substantially improving the scores of poor and minority children should put this “soft bigotry of low expectations” into the shameful dustbin of history that it so richly deserves.

Moreover, Florida's success in getting Hispanic and Free and Reduced-Price Lunch children to read at higher levels than the statewide average for all students in Alaska nullifies such arguments. Bottom line: Tough love for schools works great for kids, especially disadvantaged kids. The children with the least have gained the most.

## **EXPLORING OTHER POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR FLORIDA'S GAINS**

### ***Demographic Change or Big Spending?***

A small but vocal band of education traditionalists have attempted to discredit the Florida reforms as the source of academic improvement in the state. We will therefore address several alternative explanations for Florida's academic success.

For instance, could demographic change explain some of Florida's improvement? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1998, 44.7 percent of Florida children attending public schools were minority students. During the 2008 school year, 53 percent of children were minorities. In 1998, 43.8 percent of Florida students had a family income that qualified them for a free or reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines. In 2009, Florida's percentage had increased to 49.6 percent.<sup>xviii</sup> In other words, Florida's student body has become more rather than less socio-economically challenging over time.

Changes in public school funding are also an unlikely source of improvement. Spending per pupil in Florida expanded at a rate slower than the national average during Governor Jeb Bush's term in office (1999-2003), and remains below the national average on a per pupil basis (see Figure 1 above).<sup>xviii</sup>

Some may ask whether Florida's cellar-dweller performance in the 1990s led to a "regression to the mean" effect, whereby improvement came relatively easily. However, most of the states such as Florida that ranked near the bottom of NAEP in the late 1990s remained near the bottom in 2011.

Florida does have some unique characteristics, including a Hispanic population comprised of a higher percentage of Cubans than most states. Could the marked improvement in Florida's Hispanic scores be linked to relatively unique cultural characteristics? Not likely. Black and White students also made strong gains during this period. The percentage of Hispanics of Cuban origin actually declined during the period observed down to 30 percent of Hispanics in 2007.<sup>xix</sup>

### ***Artifact of Third Grade Retention?***

Could the third grade retention policy have created the appearance of gains on NAEP? Professor Walter M. Haney of Boston College argued that Florida's progress on fourth grade NAEP scores represented a "fraud" due to the third grade retention policy.<sup>xx</sup> Haney presented evidence that Florida's retentions increased after the debut of the policy, and ascribed subsequent NAEP score increases to the fact that Florida's worst performing readers were repeating third grade and thus were not tested in the fourth grade NAEP, inflating the fourth grade scores.

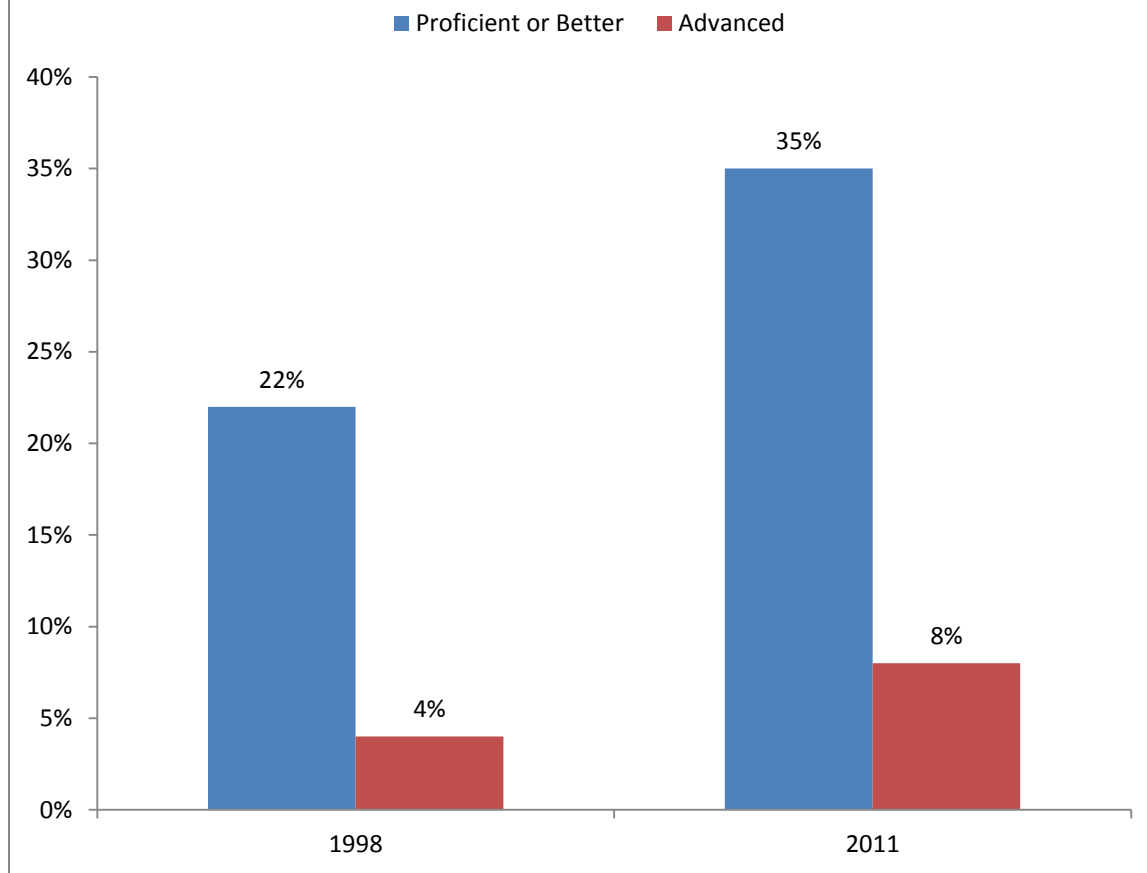
This analysis was later replicated in a "Think Tank Review Project" review performed by a group funded by the National Education Association.<sup>xxi</sup> However, neither analysis holds up under scrutiny.

First of all, Florida's NAEP scores improved strongly between 1998 and 2002. Gains during these years were not at all impacted by the retention policy. Consider that every NAEP testing since 2005 included 4<sup>th</sup> graders who were retained in third grade. Isn't that the point? That students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade should be capable of 4<sup>th</sup> grade level reading?

A good deal of the improvement in fourth-grade reading NAEP scores has come from increases in the percentage of children scoring at the "Proficient" and "Advanced" levels. FCAT scores categorize student reading achievement from 1 to 5, and the retention policy only impacts a portion of those in category 1.

Florida demonstrated very large gains among the sort of students who were profoundly unlikely to have been reading at FCAT Achievement Level 1 in the third grade (and thus unaffected by the retention policy). The percentage of students scoring Proficient on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading exam increased by nearly 60% between 1998 and 2009, and the percentage scoring Advanced doubled from 4% to 8% (see Figure 10 below).

**Figure 7: Trends in Florida NAEP Reading Scores for Proficient and Advanced Readers**



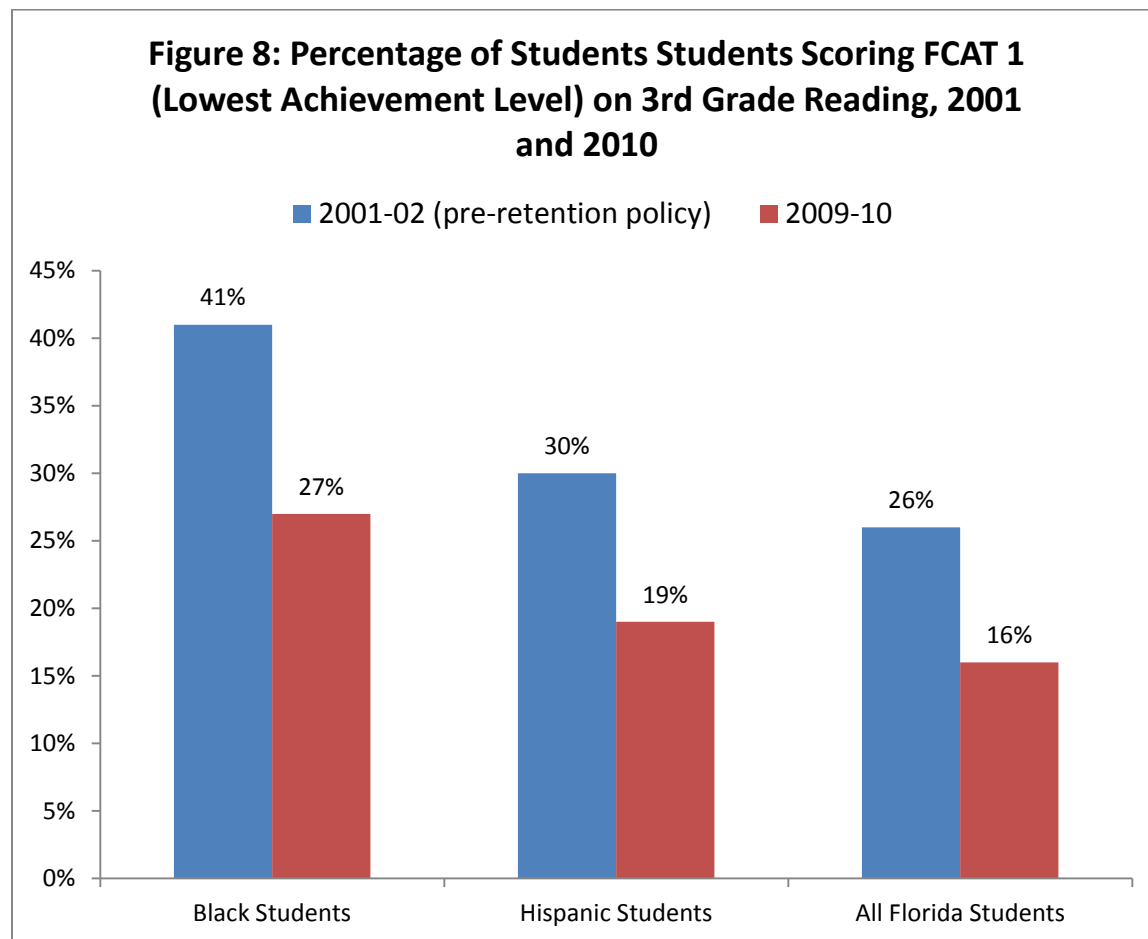
Furthermore, the percentage of third graders scoring FCAT Achievement Level 1 on reading has itself been decreasing. In 2002, 27 percent of third graders scored at Achievement Level 1, but by 2009 the number had declined to 16 percent, which represents a 40 percent reduction in the pool of students eligible for retention.<sup>xxii</sup> Likewise, the actual number of third grade students retained also declined by 40 percent between 2002 and 2007.<sup>xxiii</sup> Nevertheless, Florida's fourth-grade NAEP scores continued to improve throughout this period. If the Haney thesis were correct that retention rates were driving Florida's NAEP improvement, Florida's NAEP scores should have declined in 2005, 2007 and 2009, but instead they increased.

Since the year before the retention policy came into effect, the percentage of Black students scoring FCAT Achievement Level 1 on third-grading reading declined by 37 percent, and the percentage of Hispanic students scoring FCAT Achievement Level 1 declined by 45 percent.

None of these gains has anything to do with the children simply being a year older. In fact, the regression discontinuity analysis performed by the Manhattan Institute demonstrated that children scoring just over the retention threshold, and those scoring below it, continued to struggle with reading despite being a year older.

The third-grade FCAT data presented in Figure 14 demonstrate conclusively that an increasing percentage of Florida elementary students have been learning how to read during the developmentally critical period, grades K-3. Minority students have helped to lead the charge in producing reading gains. Best of all, black and Hispanic students have led in these enormous gains.

Before the retention policy, 41 percent of Florida's Black third graders scored FCAT Reading Achievement Level 1. In 2010, it was down to 26 percent. In the most recent testing, the percentage of Hispanic third graders scoring FCAT Reading Achievement Level 1 fell to 19 percent from 35 percent in 2002. Florida's reforms have reduced retentions the best way possible: by teaching a growing percentage of students how to read in the early grades.



Professor Haney's thesis would be hard-pressed to explain why 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores have improved so substantially. One can only characterize the evidence that Florida students have improved literacy achievement, both at the low end and high end as overwhelming.

#### ***Class Size or Pre-school Amendments?***

Florida's voters adopted two significant education policy changes at the ballot box. In 2002, Florida voters passed a state constitutional amendment limiting class size at public schools. The



limit was first implemented based upon school district averages, and then school averages, and only came into force as an actual limit on each class during the 2010-11 school year. A detailed statistical analysis of the Florida class size reduction program found no evidence that it helped to drive academic improvement.<sup>xxiv</sup> This is unfortunate, as the Florida Department of Education has found that it has cost Florida taxpayers more than \$18 billion dollars (and counting) to implement.<sup>xxv</sup>

Florida's preschool amendment may or may not prove to have positive long-term benefits. After voters adopted it, the Florida legislature quite sensibly enacted the program as a choice program to include public and private providers and to allow parents to choose. The Florida preschool program also includes specific academic goals and a provision to remove underperforming providers from participation in the program.

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program began in the 2005-06 school year, and thus none of the students have yet reached the fourth grade to be included in the NAEP. The Florida Department of Education has released some preliminary analysis of third-grade reading scores which may indicate a sustained academic benefit to the program, but those data have yet to be subjected to a rigorous statistical analysis.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In any case, none of the NAEP gains seen in Florida before 2009 have anything to do with the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program, because the students have not yet reached the age of NAEP testing. In 2011, Florida's aggregate scores did not increase from 2009 levels. A sophisticated analysis of the program will be required to establish the exact nature of its impact, but the aggregate impact of the large increase in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores can safely be dismissed as minimal at best.

## **FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD IN K-12 EDUCATION REFORM**

In December 2006, the New Commission on Skills and the American Workforce released a report titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The commission included a bipartisan mix of education luminaries, including two former U.S. secretaries of education. The report warns, "If we continue on our current course and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job."<sup>xxvii</sup>

Commenting on the report, Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "I think we've tried to do what we can to improve American schools within the current context. Now we need to think much more daringly."<sup>xxviii</sup> These and other observers have reached an unavoidable conclusion: The traditional model of delivering public education requires a drastic overhaul, not incremental reform.

Florida's example shows that it is possible to improve student performance by instituting a variety of curricular and incentive-based reforms, placing pressure on schools to improve both from the top down and bottom up. Alaska's policymakers should view Florida's reforms as a *floor* rather than a *ceiling* in terms of their own efforts to improve education in their state.

Marc Tucker, vice chairman of the New Commission also told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “We’ve squeezed everything we can out of a system that was designed a century ago. We’ve not only put in lots more money and not gotten significantly better results, we’ve also tried every program we can think of and not gotten significantly better results at scale. This is the sign of a system that has reached its limits.”

Indeed, Alaska cannot achieve global competitiveness through mere minor tweaks of an outdated system. Florida’s broad efforts and resulting outcomes prove this. Fortune favors the bold, and a brighter future awaits Alaska’s students if her adults will take strong action.

Alaskans across the political spectrum should work together with educators to fiercely pursue radical improvement in literacy skills. Americans of all philosophical backgrounds agree with the notion of providing equality of opportunity to children, which starts with literacy. Alaska students starting with the least have the most to gain from reform.

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<sup>i</sup> NAEP randomly samples students in states, meaning the scores of various subgroups of students have known levels of sampling error. The statewide average for Florida African American students on the NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading test was 209 in 2011, and for all Alaska students 208. Statistically this is “too close to call” and effectively a tie.

<sup>ii</sup> See Figlio, David N. “Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation, Compliance and Test Scores in 2009-10.” And Figlio, David N., University of Florida, Northwestern University, and National Bureau of Economic Research *Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation, Compliance, Test Scores, and Parental Satisfaction in 2008-09* (June 2010). Also see Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement.” (New York: The Manhattan Institute, 2003) and Cecilia Elena Rouse. “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure.” (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “Getting Farther by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida’s Policy to End Social Promotion.” (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2006).

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “When Schools Compete: The Effects of Vouchers on Florida Public School Achievement.” (New York: The Manhattan Institute, 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> Cecilia Elena Rouse. “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure.” (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute 2007).

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters. “The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program.” (New York: Manhattan Institute 2008).

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> For more information, see Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), pp.150-154.

<sup>xi</sup> For example, see Caroline Minter Hoxby, “Rising Tide,” *Education Next* (Cambridge, Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2001) and Matthew Ladner, “Putting Arizona Education Reform to the Test: School Choice and Early Education Expansion,” (Phoenix, Goldwater Institute, 2007).

<sup>xii</sup> Laura Green, “Despite Rise in Scores, Reading Still Emphasized; Schools Want to Reach Lowest-performing Students,” *Sarasota (Fla.) Herald-Tribune*, May 4, 2006.

<sup>xiii</sup> Florida’s retention policy allowed students to demonstrate basic literacy skills to advance with a portfolio, and limited the number of times a student could be retained.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “Getting Farther by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida’s Policy to End Social Promotion,” Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 49, September 2006.

<sup>xv</sup> Greene and Winters, “Getting Farther by Staying Behind,” 2006.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Paul E. Peterson and Carlos Xabel Lastra-Anadón, 2010. *State Standards Rise in Reading, Fall in Math*. Article in the Fall 2010 edition of *Education Next*, available on the internet at <http://educationnext.org/state-standards-rising-in-reading-but-not-in-math/>

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<sup>xvii</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010 Table 44. Number and percentage of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, by state: Selected years, 2000-01 through 2008-09* (Washington DC: United States Department of Education, 2010).

<sup>xviii</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2007. Table 186. Current expenditure per pupil in average daily attendance in public elementary and secondary schools, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1959-60 through 2006-07.* (Washington DC: United States Department of Education, 2010).

<sup>xix</sup> United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2007 (Washington D.C., United States Census Bureau, 2007).

<sup>xx</sup> Walter M. Haney, *Evidence on Education under NCLB (and How Florida Boosted NAEP Scores and Reduced the Race Gap)*. Paper presented at the Hechinger Institute “Broad Seminar for K-12 Reporters”, Grace Dodge Hall, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, Sept. 8-10, 2006.

<sup>xxi</sup> For a detailed refutation of the Think Tank Review Project analysis, see Lindsey Burke and Matthew Ladner *Florida’s Education Reforms: The Rest of the Story* (Washington D.C.: Heritage Foundation 2010).

<sup>xxii</sup> Florida Department of Education, [\*Reading Scores Statewide Comparison for 2001 to 2008 FCAT Reading – Sunshine State Standards Test.\*](#)

<sup>xxiii</sup> Florida Department of Education, *Figure 2* <http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/xls/npro0607.xls>.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Matthew M. Chingos [\*The Impact of a Universal Class-Size Reduction Policy: Evidence from Florida’s Statewide Mandate.\*](#)” (Cambridge: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government Program on Education and Governance, 2010).

<sup>xxv</sup> Florida Department of Education, [\*Florida’s Class Size Reduction Amendment History\*](#) (Tallahassee, Florida Department of Education.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Leslie Postal, “[Pre-K gets results, despite budget woes.](#)” *Orlando Sentinel*, March 21, 2011.

<sup>xxvii</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy, *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, 2006, see <http://www.skillscommission.org>

<sup>xxviii</sup> Amanda Paulson, “To Fix U.S. Schools, Panel Says, Start Over,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 15, 2006. Available online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1215/p01s01-ussc.html>.