

Executive Summary

Thirty Major Recommendations

At the invitation of the chairman of the Florida State Board of Education, Philip Handy, and Governor Jeb Bush, the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K–12 Education has undertaken an assessment of Florida's education policies and practices. The task force focused on the most pressing issues on the state's K–12 agenda—accountability, curriculum reform, effective teaching, school choice, and organizational change, including voluntary preschool education, class-size reduction, and more effective resource management. In its investigation, the Koret Task Force found much for which Florida can be rightfully proud. In many areas, Florida has already accomplished a great deal, establishing the Sunshine State as a national leader. Crucial tasks remain, however, and we believe this timely and objective assessment will provide important guidance that will help inform the decision making of the public and the state's leadership.

Overall Performance

1. In 1996/98, Florida 4th-grade math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were among the bottom fourth and fifth of the participating states, respectively. By 2005, Florida surpassed the national average in its 4th-grade math and reading NAEP scores. Gains by African Americans and Hispanic students have been, in most cases, even larger, helping Florida close the ethnic achievement gap at a rate that exceeds the national average.

2. Results from Florida's own Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) are consistent with those improvements in NAEP test-score performance. Except for 10th-grade reading scores, students' FCAT performance over the period 2001 to 2006 has moved upward in both reading and math at all grade levels tested (3 through 10). The most recent results (for 2006) are particularly impressive. For grades 3 through 10, the state saw the largest year-to-year increase in reading scores since 2001. Likewise, there were also strong gains in students' mathematics skills. It is especially notable that average scores in reading for 10th graders began to reverse their earlier decline, while those for students in 6th and 7th grade moved upward at a more rapid rate than previously. That upward move in middle and high school test scores is especially welcome, because, in 2005, in both 8th-grade math and reading, Florida's performance on the NAEP was lagging behind the national average.

3. Yet much remains to be accomplished. As elsewhere across the nation, NAEP scores for 17-year-olds remain disturbingly low, and the FCAT scores for high school students have not kept pace with those in the lower grades. The 2006 middle school gains on the FCAT, while welcome, remain modest, and more substantial gains in reading cannot be expected apart from acting upon the curricular and other recommendations that follow. The ethnic achievement gap, too, will

not be eliminated in the foreseeable future unless even more rapid gains in minority achievement are realized.

Accountability

4. The A+ Accountability Plan (A+) sets up an intuitive grading system, ranking schools on a five-grade scale—A, B, C, D, and F—that is readily understood by any parent, taxpayer, or news reporter. Although the grading scheme can be enhanced, it does an excellent job of isolating the schools that are least effective.

5. A+ is supported by a comprehensive warehouse of data that enables educators to track each individual student's progress from one year to the next. Making use of its information warehouse, A+ has a scoring system that evaluates schools both on the basis of overall level of student accomplishment and on the amount of individual student growth over the previous year. Although this scoring system is clearly superior to the one employed by NCLB, it could be further enhanced by giving still more weight to the students' growth.

6. A+ provides for clear positive and negative consequences for schools depending on the grade each school has received. A+ also holds students themselves accountable by requiring a graduation exam and setting a clear retention policy for those students in the 3rd grade who do not score above the minimum level on the FCAT. Florida should consider extending its current policy for 3rd graders to subsequent grade levels.

7. It is commendable that Florida has not lowered its proficiency standards, even though it could have more readily met NCLB requirements had it done so. Instead, Florida is planning to raise the level of proficiency students are expected to achieve in both reading and math, a step that should be taken.

8. Florida should continue to seek modifications in federal policy so that state and federal accountability systems reinforce one another.

Curriculum

9. Florida should implement thoroughly its current plans to revise state standards and grade-level expectations through grade 8 so as to better align them with high school achievement goals. The initial guidelines for the new standards remain vague about what students are expected to learn in each grade. As planning continues, these guidelines need to be given greater grade-by-grade content specificity for all subjects including language arts to ensure that students are taught a well-defined, coherent body of content at each grade level.

10. The state's reading program, "Just Read, Florida!" has done much to enhance reading instruction, first in the elementary grades and then at the middle school level. It now requires that any students in grades 6 through 12 who have phonological problems enroll in an intensive reading course. As it continues to implement these policies, it should both seek student mastery of phonological skills (through 12th grade, if needed) and the acquisition of appropriate knowledge at each grade level, an aim that is not currently emphasized in the "Just Read, Florida!" guidelines but is an essential element in enabling students to read at grade level as they advance to middle school and high school. In mathematics, the state should enhance the rigor of its standards and expectations from grade 5 on, develop end-of-course examinations for algebra and beyond to match the new standards, and integrate those examinations into the accountability system.

11. Continuing efforts should be made to identify any students not making adequate progress in reading and vigorously support their remediation needs. Schools should continue to provide for the diagnostic testing of all students in reading in the K–2 years of schooling (before FCAT is required) and then, in subsequent years, maintain

diagnostic evaluations for all students who are scoring below the basic level on the FCAT.

Teachers

12. To meet the challenge created by the need to recruit thousands of new teachers in the years ahead, Florida's two alternative teacher certification programs are steps in the right direction. The first asks all districts to design programs that meet state criteria, while giving districts flexibility to determine how best to adapt those criteria to meet local conditions and concerns. The second allows community colleges, as well as four-year colleges and universities, to set up Education Preparation Institutes (EPIs), which have their own programs, consistent with state standards, designed to provide career-changers with the professional knowledge and skills to enter teaching.

13. Building on these innovations, Florida should move toward a more streamlined approach to certification. The state should allow principals to hire any candidate, provided they have a bachelor's degree, can demonstrate substantive competence, and can pass a background check. Passage of subsequent requirements or coursework should not be required, if a teacher is meeting administrator expectations. To help eliminate poorly performing teachers, Florida should increase the probationary period of new teachers from three to five years to allow districts a reasonable length of time to observe their performance and make retention decisions.

14. Veteran teachers should be required to demonstrate their competence by possessing a college (or graduate) degree in the relevant subject, by passing a rigorous test of their knowledge of that subject, or by showing that the students in their classrooms are making satisfactory achievement gains on the FCAT. Otherwise, veteran teachers should be placed on probation. If they do not improve within a rea-

sonable period of time, or if it is found that their teaching in any way harms students' academic growth, they should be dismissed.

15. Florida's innovative teacher-compensation programs are noteworthy, including the STAR (Special Teachers Are Rewarded) program, which increases the proportion of teachers whose performance can be rewarded to no less than 25 percent. The state also allocates funds to schools based on the gains in student performance that are accomplished, giving each school a fiscal incentive to boost student performance. In this regard, Florida is leading the nation. Although other states are moving in this direction, none matches Florida in terms of magnitude, breadth, and focus.

16. As it implements its new policies on differentiated pay, Florida should closely monitor the size and distribution of performance rewards to ensure that they keep high-quality teachers in the classroom and that compensation be competitive with outside earning opportunities. The compensation program should also ensure that experienced, effective teachers remain in high-needs schools and subject areas.

17. Consistent with Florida's newly enacted policy on performance pay, school administrators—particularly principals—should be rewarded for effectiveness in raising student achievement.

School Choice

18. Florida's broad selection of school-choice programs, including the McKay, Corporate Tax Credit, and, until recently, Opportunity Scholarship, as well as its charter and virtual school programs, has distinguished the state as a trendsetter for the nation. By allowing its programs to grow and expand in an organic fashion, the state has created a complementary set of choice options that benefits a variety of students, ensuring a more diverse population of participants than is found elsewhere.

19. Florida's choice programs are highly accessible to the target populations, which include disabled and poor students as well as those whose own schools are deficient. Participants are fairly representative of the student population of the state and are becoming more so. To the extent that participants are not representative, the programs are being used disproportionately by the disadvantaged. The programs do not appear to have increased school segregation.

20. The state's many school-choice options should continue to expand. Corporate scholarships, scholarships for disabled students, charter schools, virtual schooling, and long-distance learning should become a significant component of the Florida educational system. The legislature should take steps within its authority to restore the Opportunity Scholarship Program. Once that is done, school eligibility for participation in the program should be made less stringent, so that more traditional public schools are challenged by the option.

Pre-K

21. Florida is making good progress in the establishment of its new statewide preschool program. The system is decentralized, operates independently of the public schools, gives families choices, and encourages the participation of nonprofit, for-profit, and religious providers. Program operators are expected to demonstrate clear evidence that the program is having the desired results by way of preparing children to succeed in kindergarten.

22. Going forward, Florida should, within constitutional parameters, concentrate its state preschool resources on segments of the population in most need of such services.

23. Florida should require that pre-K students be assessed both upon entering and exiting the program to fully measure its impact.

24. Parents should be given more accessible and complete informa-

tion about their provider options. Changing providers should be made easier and more efficient.

25. The state should focus on year-round programs for those children who need these educational services.

26. Individual programs should be monitored for quality, integrity, and impact on student readiness for school. In this regard, Florida should develop a data system for pre-K comparable to the one it currently has in place for K–20 education.

Class Size and Resource Utilization

27. The Florida legislature should ask voters to repeal the class-size amendment or devise and ask voters to approve an alternative amendment that grants flexibility in the use of scarce financial resources to state and local education authorities.

28. Florida has done an excellent job of achieving a high degree of equity among school districts and is well positioned, because of the quality of its data on school finance and student performance, to work on within-district equity and efficiency issues as well.

29. Funding and resource utilization patterns need to complement other reforms. For example, school-performance accountability assumes that schools serving similar students get comparable resources and that school leaders have enough control over the instruction they deliver to justify holding them responsible for the results. Similarly, family choice can be meaningful only if dollars move from one school to another depending on parents' enrollment decisions. Florida should move toward a school finance system that funds students, not programs or mandates, and prevents any school's evading accountability on grounds that it receives less money than other schools or has no influence over how money was spent.

30. Florida should consider experimenting with pupil-based funding programs, either in particular districts or with programs where expenditure decisions are made above the school level. Experiments should be closely monitored, both to test whether schools with greater control of funds are becoming more productive and to identify spending patterns that prove especially productive.