



## REVIEW OF *CLOSING THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP*

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### Summary of Review

The Heritage Foundation report, *Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida's Reforms*, endorses a set of policies from Florida: vouchers funded by tax credits, charter schools, online education, performance-based teacher pay, grading of schools and districts primarily based on test scores of students, test-based grade retention, and alternative teacher certification. The report claims that Florida's student achievement trends improved and gaps were substantially reduced for Black and Hispanic students because of this package of reforms. Based on these purported successes, it recommends adopting these reforms in other states. However, the central analysis compares average test scores of students in the nation versus Florida without considering key group differences, an oversight that leads to erroneous causal interpretations on effects of reforms using purely descriptive data. The report further ignores group differences resulting from the state's mandatory grade retention policy for the weakest readers in grade 3. This policy-driven increase in grade retention rates spuriously inflated the average scores of grade 4 students on state and national assessments, making racial achievement gaps narrower. The report also fails to examine test score data on all subjects and grade levels, instead relying only on grade 4 reading, which showed the most positive results. Finally, although a great deal is known about the reform policies the report promotes, it neglects this research literature. These serious flaws call into question the report's conclusions.

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# REVIEW OF *CLOSING THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP*

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## I. Introduction

Matthew Ladner and Lindsey M. Burke's recent Heritage Foundation report, *Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida's Reforms*,<sup>1</sup> points to a series of educational reforms in Florida, contending that these policies led to improved student achievement. The report strongly recommends that the policies be widely adopted.

The report argues that despite increasing federal expenditures, racial achievement gaps have increased in the United States as reflected in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) averages. The exception, according to the report, is Florida, where achievement gaps have diminished due to "far-reaching" educational reform policies (p. 1), which include public

*The report's key conclusions are unwarranted and insufficiently supported by research.*

school choice, tax-credit-funded vouchers, charter schools, virtual education, performance-based teacher pay, grading of schools and districts, annual testing, banning of social promotion, and alternative teacher certification. Overlapping the implementation of the grade retention policy in 2002,<sup>2</sup> Florida embarked on a class-size reduction policy in 2003-04.<sup>3</sup> The class size reforms and their effects are not discussed or considered, however.

The report's key conclusions are unwarranted and insufficiently supported by research.

Specific flaws in the report include the following.

- Making causal inferences on the effects of reforms by comparing student groups from the nation and Florida on purely descriptive test score averages presented in charts and graphs
- A failure to account for the influence of fundamental policy changes on test score averages and racial achievement gaps in grade 3-4 students. In particular, Florida instituted a grade retention policy from 2002 that resulted in 14-23% of largely Black and Hispanic third-grade students being held back in grade 3 if they performed poorly on the state reading test. This policy of screening out the weakest readers, along with the presence of unknown numbers of older grade repeaters in the grade 4 samples, changes the composition of the students tested in grade 4 and invalidates comparisons

concerning student performance as a whole as well as results concerning ethnic group achievement gaps.

- The decision to look only at grade 4 NAEP Reading scores and the resulting inflated conclusions. The evidence on Florida's NAEP achievement trends and gaps is mixed when other grade levels and subject areas are examined between 2002 and 2009.
- A failure to examine relevant literature on well-documented issues, including the negative impact of grade retention on children's long-term academic progress<sup>4</sup> and high school dropout levels,<sup>5</sup> as well as a failure to provide empirical research support for the multiple reforms endorsed in the report.

In the following sections, this review will provide details and data excerpts to explain the above list of concerns.

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report begins by contending that increased federal government spending and greater involvement in K-12 education have not resulted in accompanying increases in student achievement trends. In particular, racial achievement gaps have not been closed. The performance of Florida, according to the report, is different because Florida's Hispanic students are now outperforming their counterparts in 31 states based on NAEP reading scores. Florida's Black students have also gained at a rate exceeding other states, according to the report. It claims the observed changes are directly attributable to Florida's reform programs: "In 1999,

*The report fails to account for systematic effects of grade retention policies on the achievement data of grade repeaters...*

Florida enacted far-reaching K-12 education reform that includes public and private school choice, charter schools, virtual education, performance-based pay for teachers, grading of schools and districts, annual tests, curbing social promotion, and alternative teacher certification" (Abstract, p. 1).

In addition to the specific reforms the report endorses, it also recommends granting states autonomy from federal regulations, and granting parents the freedom to take federal funds to schools of their choice. The report concludes that "Florida's example shows that it is possible to improve student performance by instituting a variety of curricular, choice-based, and incentive-based reforms, placing pressure on schools to improve" (p. 13).

## III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report's rationale appears to be based on five primary claims:

- The report strongly endorses the use of school and school district grading systems similar to Florida's A-F system that place "pressure on schools to improve" (p. 17). The

claim is that rigorous teacher and school accountability measures are a chief reason for narrowing of student achievement gaps.

- To argue the case against what is characterized as excessive education spending, the report quotes the president of the American Federation of Teachers calling for comprehensive, full-service schools for poverty-related student needs such as those in the Harlem Children's Zone. The report projects that such services would increase spending about \$50,000 per student by grade 4, without yielding corresponding levels of student achievement. The projection that student achievement would *not* improve is based on the 2009 NAEP grade 4 reading score report, which showed 34% students in the U.S. at the "below basic" (or lower) level (p. 3). Two added graphs provide examples of out-of-control spending between 1979 and 2006, showing increases in Florida's per-pupil expenditure from \$4,489 to \$10,041 and reduced student-teacher ratios from 22.6 to 15.5. The implication is that nationally, education spending has been excessive but it has not made a sufficient impact on student achievement.
- The report presents graphs of "Key Education Trends: 1970s to Today" to support the above claim (p. 11). Here, we find NAEP reading scores for grades 4 and 8 charted from 1970-2009. Grade 8 gains are from 255 to 264 (+9 scale score points); grade 4 gains are from 208 to 221 (+13). The report's implicit claim is that these gains are not substantial or sufficient in light of the above-mentioned spending increases. No mention is made of how changes in the scope or cost of services provided to students may have inflated these costs. No breakdowns are offered with regard to different sources of funds and particular categorical allocations, such as exceptional student education funds under the IDEA legislation passed in 1975 that could inflate the dollar figures.
- Citing a 2009 book by Moe and Chubb,<sup>6</sup> the report similarly contends that U.S. public education policies are heavily influenced by teacher unions, which are characterized as protecting employment interests of teachers while increasing school revenues.
- To illustrate the narrowing of racial achievement gaps, the report includes two sets of graphs. The first presents grade 4 NAEP average reading scale score trends from 1998-2009, for White, Black and Hispanic children in Florida. The second presents these trends nationwide (Charts 1-2, pp. 5-6). In two other figures (pp. 7-8), NAEP grade 4 reading averages of Black and Hispanic sub-groups for several selected states are compared with the scores of those sub-groups in Florida, to make the case that Florida's students in these minority groups outscore those in other states.

As indicated earlier and elaborated below, students in the nation versus Florida are inappropriately compared using descriptive averages and without controlling for relevant background differences. Regardless, the report makes inferences about causal effects of Florida's education reforms on student achievement trends and gaps. Most importantly, the report fails to account for systematic effects of grade retention policies on the achievement data of grade repeaters in Florida's grade 4 or the systematic screening out of the poorest reading performers in grade 3 that artificially narrows ethnic achievement gaps. Nevertheless, the authors conclude that: "Charts 1-2 show how to close racial achievement gaps" (p. 6), making causal

interpretations from cherry-picked data, and ignoring other more plausible explanations for the observed achievement patterns.

#### IV. The Report's Use of the Research Literature

The report presents descriptive data from NAEP and Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCAT) performance (Florida Department of Education, FDOE), but it does not ground its analyses in, or otherwise present or discuss, the large body of peer-reviewed literature concerning grade retention and the specific reform ideas being promoted.

To make its case, the report relies largely on commentaries published via general or media outlets (such as *Education Week* and the *New Yorker*), along with speeches and position papers.

*The report omits any references to peer-reviewed research reviews or syntheses that could offer comprehensive evidence on the merits or demerits of the various endorsed reform initiatives.*

Outside of the above-mentioned book on educational reforms by Moe and Chubb, only two research reports are referenced, prepared by the College Board and the Manhattan Institute, the latter of which is an advocacy organization favoring reforms similar to those advocated in this report.

The report omits any references to peer-reviewed research reviews or syntheses that could offer comprehensive evidence on the merits or demerits of the various endorsed reform initiatives. There are no references to empirical research on the effects of grade retention on long-term student performance and dropout rates, or on the benefits and harms associated with high-stakes testing policies.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the report does not address the research on comprehensive school evaluation models, teacher performance pay policies, or charter schools. Omitting a meaningful literature review denies readers the opportunity for understanding existing knowledge in these areas.

#### V. Review of the Report's Methods

There are several methodological, logical and conceptual problems with drawing inferences from merely descriptive data.

##### School Grading System

Established in 1995, Florida's school grading and annual report card system has changed frequently with a shifting set of quality indicators. Since 2001, school ratings have incorporated a 50% weighting for student gains recorded on the annually-administered state FCAT tests.<sup>8</sup> The report does not mention any test-related technical information. In fact, outside of the report's endorsement of school grading, the reader is given no validity information supporting Florida's

decision to use the FCAT for high-stakes use in school evaluations, teacher assessments and student retentions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Investments in Comprehensive Services**

As noted, the report is framed in part to challenge the campaign to devote added resources for disadvantaged students, particularly the growth of approaches comparable to the Harlem Children’s Zone. To stall further investments for full-service schools, the authors point to 2009 NAEP reading achievement results for Florida’s grade 4 students, showing 34 percent falling “below basic” (p. 3). The conclusion is that “schools are already drowning in money but the system is failing to equip millions of students with basic academic skills” (p. 3).

The NAEP reports cited in the report, however, do not provide breakdowns that would permit such conclusions regarding causal effects of complex services. No data are reported on the types and levels of services received by students; nor do the authors provide any sub-group analyses of their own to support their point (p. 3). In sum, the data and analyses presented do not provide any meaningful findings on the effects of comprehensive services at all.

### **Florida’s Achievement Trends, Gains, and Closing Racial Gaps**

The report’s interpretation of achievement trends and the closing of the achievement gap is particularly flawed, and these flaws are largely due to a failure to recognize or account for Florida’s grade retention policies, which were implemented in 2002-03.

The state’s policy requires that public school students scoring at Level 1 (the lowest level) on the FCAT reading test in grade 3 be retained in grade 3. The mandate resulted in an important shift in the composition of NAEP samples that were tested in grade 4 since 2003; 14-23% students who were the weakest readers were held back annually since 2002 in third grade with smaller numbers retained in other grades at the elementary level. The crucial impact of this policy is best understood by looking at data from the pre-retention policy period compared to the post-retention policy years. A year after policy enforcement, (a) fourth-grade students who could not read well were still third-grade students and did not take the NAEP test; and (b) the students who would have (before the policy) been in the fifth-grade group were now (after the policy) in the fourth-grade group. The older students’ grade 4 reading scores will be higher because they are essentially grade 5 students (they have had two years of reading instruction, as opposed to only one had they been in the pre-reform cohort). This was found to be particularly true for Black and Hispanic sub-groups, which were disproportionately retained (see Appendices A-C). This major difference invalidates group comparisons and the report’s key conclusions.

The report simply fails to account for proportions of over-age grade repeaters in grade 3 and 4 samples—a very serious problem. The literature on grade retention consistently shows temporary achievement spurts of over-age retainees.<sup>10</sup> While these benefits do not last after one to two years and are associated with higher dropout rates, the temporary bump is directly relevant to the results in Heritage report’s claims. In addition, as illustrated in Appendix D, a



singular reliance on grade 4 NAEP reading scores fails to provide a complete and balanced picture of Florida's ethnic achievement gaps and trends.

## VI. Review of the Validity of Findings and Conclusions

The report's key finding is Florida students' learning, as reflected in NAEP reading scores in grade 4, increased—and test score gaps closed—as a result of the advocated package of reforms. However, NAEP performance of grade 4 students was artificially inflated due to the screening out and elimination of the weakest readers by the state's retention policy mandate, particularly Hispanic and Black students, and the presence of smaller numbers of older retained fourth-grade students. The tables in the Appendix set forth these patterns in detail. There is no question that the retention policy results in non-comparability of student groups, whether the comparison group for the post-reform cohorts is the pre-reform Florida cohort or other states (that do not have the same third-grade retention policy).

The report's key finding also depends solely on the results of the grade 4 NAEP reading scores. But NAEP scores are also available in seven other categories: Grade 4 Math; Grade 8 Reading, Math, and Science; and Grade 10 Reading, Math, and Science. A cursory review of these other Florida NAEP data for grades 4 and 8 (see Appendix, Part 4) shows that the gap patterns are neither consistent nor as impressive as one would think if one looked only at reading in grade 4. In sum, the report fails to provide a balanced treatment of student achievement results.

Finally, the report's key findings depend on a confusion of correlation with causation without adequate controls and appropriate study designs, as elaborated in the final section of this review.

## VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Setting aside the unsettled question as to whether Florida's results are, in fact, positive, readers cannot know if the beneficial outcomes presented in the report are due to all the identified reforms, some of them, or none of them.. The possibility that *none* of the reforms endorsed by the report actually worked is especially salient because the report neglects to mention that Florida embarked on one of the nation's most ambitious class-size-reduction efforts in 2002.

Determining what causes changes in education presents significant design challenges because multiple policies are often implemented at the same time, targeting the same outcomes.<sup>11</sup> While we can often say that two things are associated with one another, it is much more difficult to make a valid causal inference. So, while cooler weather in the northern hemisphere is associated with the giving of holiday gifts, one cannot sensibly argue that cold weather causes generosity in people.

In the case of education policies, different intended policies and unrelated factors (e.g., economic downturns) can and do interact with each other to affect achievement outcomes in students. Some or all may influence student achievement outcomes. This report ignores these difficult causation issues and assumes simplistic connections between student achievement and



the multiple and rather diverse reform strategies that they espouse. For each of these reasons, the report's conclusions are neither defensible nor useful from a policy and practice perspective.

In sum, the report's analyses are highly biased and of very limited value. The major elements of Florida's education reform policies are in need of continuing and more careful examination, individually and collectively, before they can be recommended for wider policy adoption.

## Appendix

### *1. Influence of Over-age Grade Repeaters on Grade 3 Achievement Trends and Ethnic Composition of Repeaters*

**Table 1. FCAT Reading Performance of the Grade 3 Students in Florida: Pre- and Post-Grade Retention Policy Distributions at Level 1 (lowest) and Level 3 and above (highest)**

| Grade Level | Academic Term       | Total Number of Students | % of Students at Level 1 | % of Students at Level 3 or Above | Number of Students Retained | % of Black Students at Level 1 | % of Hispanic Students at Level 1 |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Grade 3     | <b>Pre-policy:</b>  |                          |                          |                                   |                             |                                |                                   |
|             | 2001 - 2002         | 188,387                  | 27%                      | 60%                               | 6,435                       | 41%                            | 35%                               |
|             | <b>Post-policy:</b> |                          |                          |                                   |                             |                                |                                   |
|             | 2002 - 2003         | 188,414                  | 23%                      | 63%                               | 27,713                      | 36%                            | 31%                               |
|             | 2003 - 2004         | 206,435                  | 22%                      | 66%                               | 23,348                      | 34%                            | 28%                               |
|             | 2004 - 2005         | 202,976                  | 20%                      | 67%                               | 20,121                      | 30%                            | 25%                               |
|             | 2005 - 2006         | 204,238                  | 14%                      | 75%                               | 14,151                      | 22%                            | 19%                               |
|             | 2006 - 2007         | 202,294                  | 19%                      | 69%                               | 16,676                      | 30%                            | 24%                               |
|             | 2007 - 2008         | 204,272                  | 16%                      | 72%                               | 13,666                      | 26%                            | 21%                               |
|             | 2008 - 2009         | 205,144                  | 17%                      | 71%                               | 13,340                      | 27%                            | 21%                               |

Source: Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Florida Department of Education, at <https://app1.fldoe.org/FCATDemographics/Default.aspx>. Retrieved on October 15, 2010.

The table above shows that the number of students retained in grade 3 in Florida jumped from 6,435 in 2001-02 (pre-policy year) to 27,713 in 2002-03, the first year of policy implementation—reflecting 23% of all third-grade students who fell in the Level 1 category on the reading section of FCAT that year.<sup>12</sup>

Of those retained, 67% were either Black (36%) or Hispanic (31%) students. Consistent with the previously-cited empirical literature, the influence of over-age grade 3 repeaters on achievement trends is evident in the 60% to 71% rise in proportions of students at or above Level 3 in post-policy years. According to the literature, this temporary increase is unlikely to be sustained over time.

2. Influence of Screening out Poorest Readers in Grade 3 on Grade 4 Reading Achievement Trends on FCAT

**Table 2. FCAT Reading Performance of the Grade 4 Students in Florida: Pre- and Post-Grade Retention Policy Distributions at Level 1 (lowest) and Level 3 and above (highest)**

| Grade Level | Academic Term | Total Number of Students | % of Students at Level 1 | % of Students at Level 3 or Above | Number of Students Retained | % of Black Students at Level 1 | % of Hispanic Students at Level 1 |
|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Grade 4     | Pre-policy:   |                          |                          |                                   |                             |                                |                                   |
|             | 2001 - 2002   | 192,117                  | 30%                      | 55%                               | 7,207                       | 46%                            | 39%                               |
|             | Post-policy:  |                          |                          |                                   |                             |                                |                                   |
|             | 2002 - 2003   | 193,391                  | 25%                      | 60%                               | 7,922                       | 40%                            | 33%                               |
|             | 2003 - 2004   | 176,148                  | 16%                      | 70%                               | 4,505                       | 26%                            | 21%                               |
|             | 2004 - 2005   | 195,680                  | 15%                      | 71%                               | 4,558                       | 25%                            | 20%                               |
|             | 2005 - 2006   | 192,480                  | 19%                      | 66%                               | 3,812                       | 30%                            | 23%                               |
|             | 2006 - 2007   | 196,543                  | 18%                      | 68%                               | 3,778                       | 29%                            | 23%                               |
|             | 2007 - 2008   | 192,769                  | 17%                      | 70%                               | 2,439                       | 29%                            | 22%                               |
|             | 2008 - 2009   | 195,851                  | 13%                      | 74%                               | 2,396                       | 22%                            | 17%                               |

Source: Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Florida Department of Education, at <https://app1.fldoe.org/FCATDemographics/Default.aspx>. Retrieved on October 15, 2010.

Tables 2 and 3 show the influence of the grade 3 retention policy on grade 4 test results on the FCAT and NAEP, where the proportions at the lowest performance levels have gradually decreased in post-policy years. The percentage of grade 4 students at or above FCAT Level 3 in reading, correspondingly, has spiked from 55% in the pre-retention-policy year to a median of 70% in the post-policy years. Due to the grade 3 retention policy mandate, therefore, we find that the grade 4 population is narrowly selected and screened to optimize student performance on state and national reading assessments. Since 2002, historical state-level data show that the highest proportions of grade retentions occurred and continues to occur in grade 3 (shown) and grade 9 (not shown)—which means that students tend to be retained just before grade 4 and grade 10 NAEP testing, as well as before high school graduation.

Note also that the number of retentions in grade 4 drops precipitously after the grade 3 retention policy is instituted. Florida’s retention policy allows for a given student to be retained

twice during his or her K-12 years. The increase in the number of grade 3 retentions is therefore felt in a corresponding decrease in grade 4 retentions.

### 3. Influence of Screening out Poorest Readers in Grade 3 on Grade 4 Reading Achievement Trends on NAEP

**Table 3. NAEP Reading Performance of the Grade 4 Students in Florida: Pre- and Post- Grade Retention Policy Distributions at Below Basic Level**

| Grade Level | Academic Term              | Total Number of Students | % of Students Below Basic Level | % of Black Students Below Basic Level | % of Hispanic Students Below Basic Level |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Grade 4     | Pre-policy:                |                          |                                 |                                       |  |
|             | 2001 - 2002                | 192,117                  | 40%                             | 61%                                   | 47%                                      |
|             | Post-policy <sup>1</sup> : |                          |                                 |                                       |  |
|             | 2002 - 2003                | 193,391                  | 37%                             | 60%                                   | 45%                                      |
|             | 2004 - 2005                | 195,680                  | 35%                             | 55%                                   | 39%                                      |
|             | 2006 - 2007                | 196,543                  | 30%                             | 48%                                   | 36%                                      |
|             | 2008 - 2009                | 195,851                  | 27%                             | 44%                                   | 29%                                      |

Source: The Nation's Report Card™, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>. Retrieved on October 15, 2010.

The retention policy also has an apparent effect when one looks separately at the performance of Florida's Black, Hispanic and White students on the NAEP Grade 4 Reading test (see Appendix D). The results for each group continue to improve visibly, at least in part due to the policy-mandated manipulation of the target population from which NAEP samples are selected. That is, the retained students have an extra year to grow, so when more students are retained, the grade 4 students tested are a very different group than the cohort tested before the retention policy. In 2002 (pre-policy year), White grade 4 students averaged 226, Hispanics 207, and Blacks 196. In 2009 (the most recent, post-policy year), the corresponding means are 233 for Whites, 223 for Hispanics, and 211 for Blacks. The gaps have narrowed but are still present. However, a good proportion of students in the post-reform years—chiefly made up of Hispanic and Black students—are more likely to be a year older and to have had another year of schooling, as compared to the pre-reform year. By analogy, imagine if two states wanted to measure the average height of their fourth-grade students, but one state first identified the shortest 23% (approximately one-quarter) of third-grade students and held

<sup>1</sup> Main NAEP Assessment measures student performance in mathematics and reading every two years.

them back to grow an additional year before measurement. The resulting comparison of the fourth-grade students in the two states would not be valid.

4. A Complete Picture of Florida's Achievement Trends and Gaps

**Table 4. Historical NAEP Math, Reading, and Science Performance of the Students in Grades 4 and 8 in Florida**

| Academic Term       | Grade Level / Subject | Average Scale Score |       |          | % of Students Below Basic Level |       |          |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------|----------|---------------------------------|-------|----------|
|                     |                       | White               | Black | Hispanic | White                           | Black | Hispanic |
| <b>Pre-policy:</b>  |                       |                     |       |          |                                 |       |          |
| 2001 - 2002         | Gr4 Math              | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr4 Reading           | 226                 | 196   | 207      | 26%                             | 61%   | 47%      |
|                     | Gr4 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr8 Math              | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr8 Reading           | 269                 | 244   | 252      | 19%                             | 45%   | 38%      |
|                     | Gr8 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
| <b>Post-policy:</b> |                       |                     |       |          |                                 |       |          |
| 2002 - 2003         | Gr4 Math              | 243                 | 215   | 232      | 13%                             | 48%   | 26%      |
|                     | Gr4 Reading           | 229                 | 198   | 211      | 25%                             | 60%   | 45%      |
|                     | Gr4 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr8 Math              | 286                 | 249   | 264      | 22%                             | 64%   | 47%      |
|                     | Gr8 Reading           | 268                 | 239   | 251      | 21%                             | 52%   | 38%      |
|                     | Gr8 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
| 2004 - 2005         | Gr4 Math              | 247                 | 224   | 233      | 9%                              | 33%   | 22%      |
|                     | Gr4 Reading           | 228                 | 203   | 215      | 25%                             | 55%   | 39%      |
|                     | Gr4 Science           | 161                 | 130   | 144      | 17%                             | 61%   | 38%      |

(Continued)

**Table 4. Historical NAEP Math, Reading, and Science Performance of the Students in Grades 4 and 8 in Florida (Continued)**

| Academic Term       | Grade Level / Subject | Average Scale Score |       |          | % of Students Below Basic Level |       |          |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-------|----------|---------------------------------|-------|----------|
|                     |                       | White               | Black | Hispanic | White                           | Black | Hispanic |
| <b>Post-policy:</b> |                       |                     |       |          |                                 |       |          |
| 2004 - 2005         | Gr8 Math              | 286                 | 251   | 265      | 22%                             | 61%   | 44%      |
|                     | Gr8 Reading           | 265                 | 238   | 252      | 25%                             | 53%   | 38%      |
|                     | Gr8 Science           | 155                 | 118   | 131      | 32%                             | 76%   | 62%      |
| 2006 - 2007         | Gr4 Math              | 250                 | 225   | 238      | 6%                              | 29%   | 17%      |
|                     | Gr4 Reading           | 232                 | 208   | 218      | 19%                             | 48%   | 36%      |
|                     | Gr4 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr8 Math              | 289                 | 259   | 270      | 20%                             | 52%   | 39%      |
|                     | Gr8 Reading           | 268                 | 244   | 256      | 20%                             | 45%   | 33%      |
|                     | Gr8 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
| 2008 - 2009         | Gr4 Math              | 250                 | 228   | 238      | 7%                              | 27%   | 16%      |
|                     | Gr4 Reading           | 233                 | 211   | 223      | 19%                             | 44%   | 29%      |
|                     | Gr4 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |
|                     | Gr8 Math              | 289                 | 264   | 274      | 20%                             | 47%   | 34%      |
|                     | Gr8 Reading           | 272                 | 250   | 260      | 18%                             | 38%   | 27%      |
|                     | Gr8 Science           | -                   | -     | -        | -                               | -     | -        |

Source: The Nation's Report Card™, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>. Retrieved on October 15, 2010.

*Note:* The magnitude of the White-Black or White-Hispanic gaps on the scale score match or exceed the national NAEP gains of +9 and +13 that are ignored in the Heritage report. That is, the apparent gap closing was found to be a noteworthy success, but the overall growth of the same amount was considered to be insignificant—suggesting differing and double standards for evaluating the policy significance of student achievement data for the nation versus Florida.



## Notes and References

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<sup>1</sup> Ladner, M. & Burke, L. M. (2010). *Closing the racial achievement gap: learning from Florida's reforms*. Backgrounder, (2468), Retrieved October 8, 2010, from <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/09/Closing-the-Racial-Achievement-Gap-Learning-from-Floridas-Reforms>.

<sup>2</sup> Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA), Florida Legislature. (2008). The department of education has taken initial steps to improve student progression data. OPPAGA Report, (08-42), Retrieved October 15, 2010, from <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/MonitorDocs/Reports/pdf/0842rpt.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Florida Department of Education, Class Size Reduction Amendment. Retrieved October 15, 2010, from <http://www.fldoe.org/classsize/>.

<sup>4</sup> Shepard, L. A. & Smith, M. L. (1989). *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

See also:

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<sup>5</sup> Holmes, C. T. (2006). Low test scores + high retention rates = more dropouts. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 4 (2), 56–58.

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<sup>9</sup> Penfield, R. D. (2010). Test-based grade retention: Does it stand up to professional standards for fair and appropriate test use? *Educational Researcher*, 39(2), 110–119.

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<sup>12</sup> The most recent data show that 17% of third-grade students in Florida were held back in 2009.

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