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Education Policy Research Unit

Reforming the Structure of Florida’s Accountability System

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Executive Summary

The legal definition of Florida’s public education system includes its local public schools, charter schools, voucher schools, and schools contracted to provide special-education services. The constitutional mandate for a “uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high-quality system of free public schools” suggests that the expectations of a high-quality education should be the same for all schools receiving aid from the state. Considering the recent controversy over the accountability of private schools given public funding—the voucher schools in the state’s four voucher programs—a scrutiny of Florida’s accountability system is timely. This review includes a comparison to the constitutional mandate and a description of how it applies to the different schools receiving direct and indirect aid from state policy.

This brief explains why accountability is a common public expectation today; it describes what is new in Florida’s accountability policies since 1999; and it compares those policies to the national mandates in the No Child Left Behind Act. The explicit value of Florida policies is described here; the state Department of Education’s implementation of the accountability policies is explicated, as is the applicability of the

policies to different types of schools receiving direct and indirect aid from the state. The brief finds both benefits and areas of concern in the current accountability policy, when it is looked at as a set of structures.

Benefits

1. Florida policy sets positive expectations for children. Florida’s official assessment and accountability policies affirm children’s rights to a high-quality education.
2. Florida’s accountability policy is an extension of adult experiences in education. Florida’s official assessment and accountability policies dovetail with the experiences of adults in the state.
3. Florida has had a practical testing program since before 1999. The original (1995 and 1996) design of the FCAT would have allowed it to be a reliable guide to student achievement over the years—had it not been used as a basis for so many consequences.

Areas of Concern

1. Florida does not hold all publicly-aided schools to the same standards. Because all schools receiving financial aid are part of the “free public education” system under Florida’s constitution, the existence of different rules for different types of schools constrains parents, and the state from making accurate and fair comparisons among tax-supported schools in Florida.
2. Florida has frequently-changing and obscure accountability rules. The standards for grading Florida’s local public and charter schools have changed

frequently and are not clear, or easily understandable, to either educators or the general public.

4. Florida relies on one set of measures for all accountability consequences. Florida's accountability system relies on a snapshot of student performance for multiple purposes.
5. Florida keeps test items secret after the end of testing each year. Test security must be balanced against the need for transparency so that the public can ensure that tests, especially those carrying high stakes, are accurately scored—and that they validly measure what they purport to measure.

Recommendations

1. Create a uniform system of accountability that allows the accurate assessment of, and comparison among, all schools receiving direct or indirect financial aid from the state.
2. Redesign Florida's accountability regime so that the FCAT and other test results are used in a professionally-validated manner as described in the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, published jointly by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education.
3. Release the test items on the FCAT test each year for public review (and comment).

The foregoing is a summary of a policy brief in the report *Reform Florida* (Education Policy Research Unit, April 2004). The complete policy brief is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) website at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSL-0401-106-EPRU.doc>

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