



Demography



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A major debate among education reformers over how best to reduce the achievement gap broke out during the 2008 presidential campaign. Most advocates on both sides backed Barack Obama, but they urged him to pursue different policies. The Education Equality Project (EEP) supported a continuation of accountability and other school-focused reforms. The coalition for A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education claimed that the greatest gains could be achieved by addressing health, housing, and other social ills (see “Straddling the Democratic Divide,” *features*, Spring 2009).

as Destiny?

By MATTHEW LADNER and DAN LIPS

A close look at recent changes in education in the state of Florida sheds light on that debate. One finds in this southern state, a closing of the achievement gap that has eluded allegedly more progressive states. When it comes to education progress, Florida is a star performer. Moreover, its success has come in spite of a challenging student demographic profile and relatively modest resources.

Let us begin with a basic demographic fact often cited by those in the Broader, Bolder camp. Over the past 20 years, the schools of Florida, California, Texas, and New Mexico have all seen rapid growth in their Hispanic populations. Compared to other groups, Hispanic students underperform academically, drop out of school in higher numbers, and attend college in lower numbers. A straight projection of the recent past into the future looks bleak for these students and their educational outcomes.

But demography need not be destiny. Over the past decade, Florida has succeeded in improving student achievement despite its demographic profile. Low-income students (those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) make up almost half of Florida’s K–12 student body. Florida has a “majority minority” mix of students, with non-Hispanic

Hispanic student success in Florida

white students making up 48.3 percent of the total, African Americans about 24 percent, and Hispanics 25 percent. But the educational situation is not as bleak as those statistics might imply: both minority groups have recently made academic strides forward.

Florida has managed to realize such gains although the state's per-student funding is below the national average. More than making up for its fiscal limitations, the state, led by former governor Jeb Bush, implemented a series of school reforms that together appear to have had dramatic consequences for student performance. Upon taking office in 1999, the governor pursued a multipronged strategy of education reform: an emphasis on reading, standards and accountability for public schools, and new choice options for students. The bulk of the reforms passed in his first year in office. Subsequently, those initial measures were buttressed by additional innovations, including the curtailing of social promotion for students who failed to learn to read in the early elementary grades.

Academic Achievement

Prior to the introduction of those innovations, Florida's educational record was little short of abysmal. Among the 43 states that in 1998 were gathering information on their students' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Florida had the fifth-lowest 4th-grade reading scores.

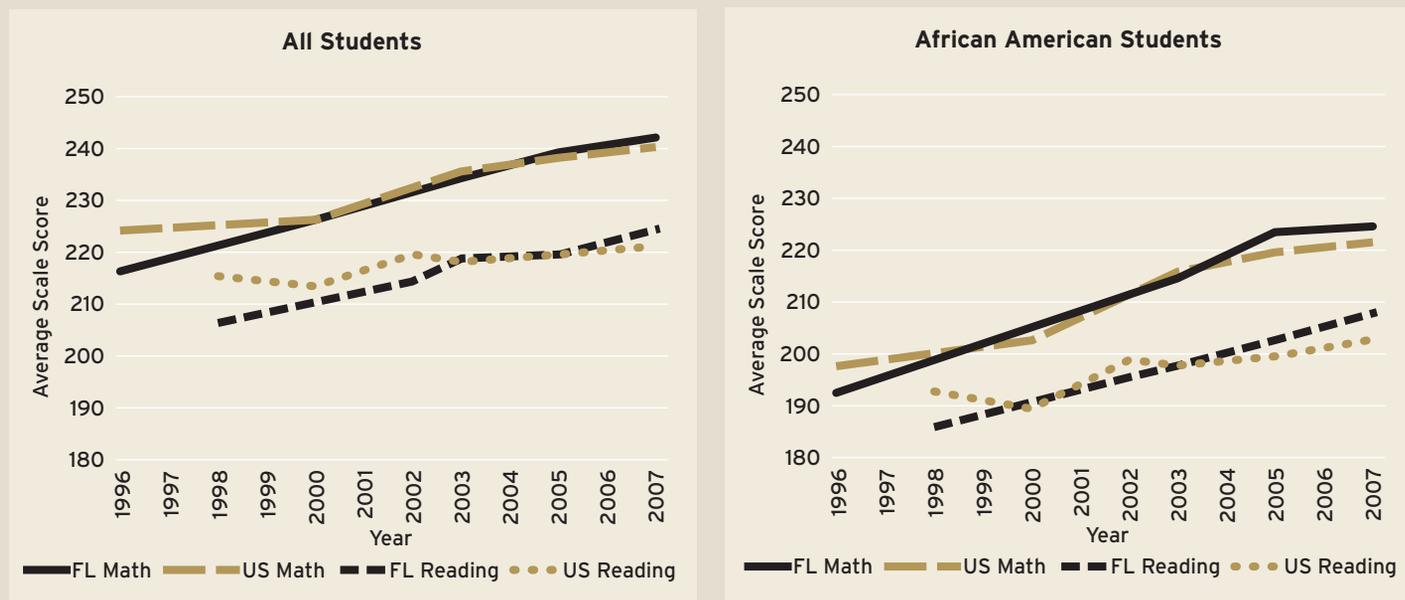
But over the next decade those scores moved sharply upward so that by 2007, Florida's scores were tied for 8th highest among all the states. As the state moved up the leader board, Florida students, on average, were making strikingly larger gains on NAEP exams than the average student nationwide (see Figures 1 and 2). Nor were gains occurring only in reading. Fourth-grade math scores were climbing at an even faster rate. In 8th grade, reading and math gains in Florida were less impressive but they still outpaced the nation.

Those statewide trends could have been masking a widening of the achievement gap between whites and minorities. But exactly the opposite was happening. Far from lagging behind, Florida's minority students were doing much to drive the overall rise in test-score performance. In the decade after the education reforms began, the average NAEP reading score for Hispanic 4th graders in Florida rose steeply so that by 2007 scores were higher than the average NAEP reading scores of all students (regardless of ethnicity) in 15 states (see Figure 3).

One might think that rising scores among Hispanic students reflect their families' movement up the income ladder into the middle class. But even Florida's low-income Hispanic students scored, on average, equal to or higher than nine statewide averages for all students (regardless of income). Average scores of all Florida low-income students, regardless of ethnicity, tied or exceeded the statewide

Student Leaders (Figure 1)

Since the Florida reforms began, the state's 4th graders have made greater gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also made larger gains than their counterparts nationwide.



SOURCE: National Assessment of Educational Progress



Comparison of trends in Florida with those in California is particularly intriguing. California has largely eschewed the kinds of accountability and choice reforms that Florida adopted.

average for all students in seven states. Many of these differences are small and thus within the margin of NAEP sampling error, so should be thought of statistically as ties. The margin of error cuts both ways, however, as the 2007 statewide averages for all students in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas all fell within two points of Florida's average for Hispanics on the 4th-grade reading exam. Indeed, the national average for all students falls within this same narrow margin.

Comparison of trends in Florida with those in California is particularly intriguing. Both are large states with growing Hispanic populations. California's median family income is 12 percent higher than Florida's, meaning families have more resources to devote to their children's education. But California has largely eschewed the kinds of accountability and choice reforms that Florida adopted.

The consequences for students range between noteworthy and startling, as shown in Figure 4. The chart displays the differences in the NAEP gains 4th- and 8th-grade students made in the two states. As they did in 4th-grade reading, Florida's Hispanic students outperformed California students in 4th-grade math and 8th-grade reading; they tied the California average in 8th-grade mathematics.

Explaining Florida's Success

Not everyone thinks that something remarkable has been happening in Florida. The state's success is only an apparent one, says Boston College education professor Walter Haney. He discounts Florida's progress on 4th-grade NAEP scores, on the grounds that Florida's worst-performing readers repeat 3rd grade and thus are not included in the 4th-grade NAEP. Without the low-performing 4th graders who have been held back for a year, the average scores of the remainder jump upward.

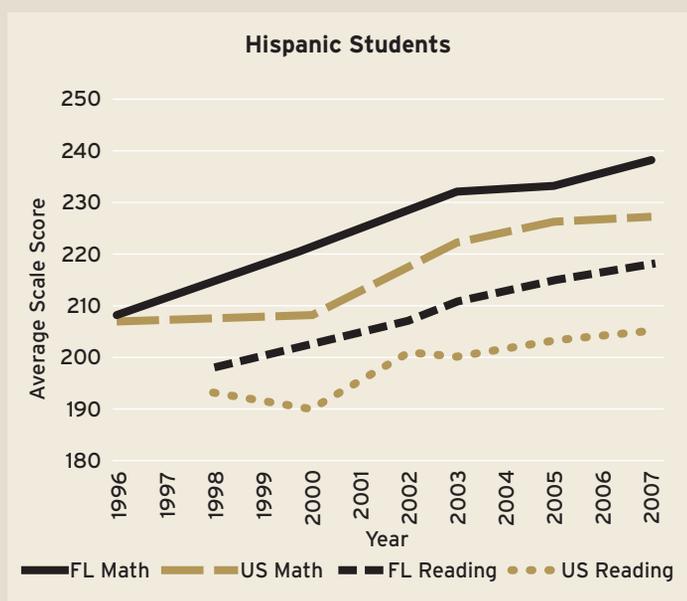
Haney's critique is worth considering. One of the pillars of the Florida accountability reforms has been the policy, introduced in 2003, of not promoting 3rd graders unless they perform at a minimally acceptable level on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

But a more careful look at the data shows that Florida's NAEP scores were rising before implementation of the retention policy. Between 1992 and 1998, Florida's average NAEP score in 4th-grade reading dropped by two points. Between 1998 and 2002 (before the social promotion policy affected 4th grade), however, it increased by eight points. One of the reasons for lower retention rates was improved 3rd-grade performance on the state's examination. In 2002, 27 percent of 3rd graders scored at the lowest level on the reading portion of FCAT, but by 2008 only 16 percent did so, a 40 percent reduction in the pool of students eligible for retention. This helps explain why actual retention rates declined by 40 percent between 2002 and 2007.

One would expect, if Haney's interpretation is correct, to see an upward spike in 4th-grade test scores in 2003 followed by a steady decline in test performance in subsequent years. But in fact the trend line shows no such spike and decline, only a steady movement upward.

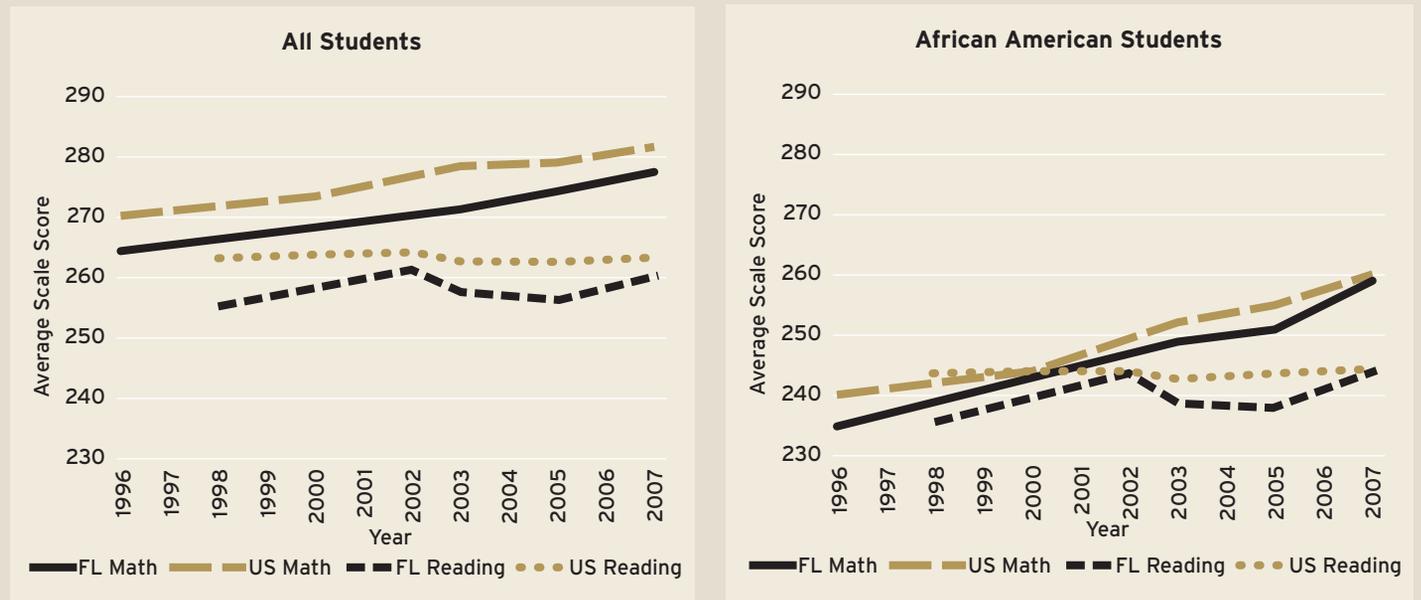
Perhaps Florida's gains are only apparent for another reason: its low starting point in 1998. Is it possible that gains

reading and math tests than U.S. students overall. Minority students



Steady Progress (Figure 2)

Florida's 8th graders have begun to close the gap vis-à-vis their peers nationwide on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gap while Hispanics moved even further ahead of their peers in other states.



SOURCE: National Assessment of Educational Progress

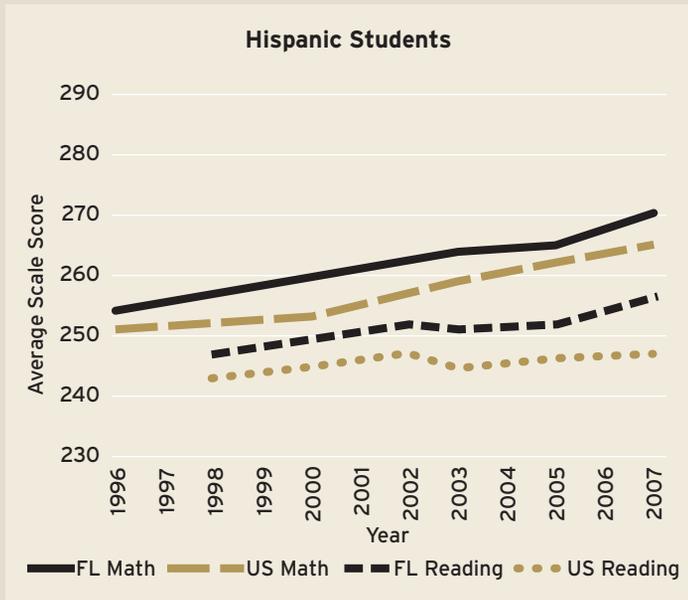
are realized most easily when scores are initially very low? On this question, opinion is quite divided. Some think gains are more easily realized if students are already accomplished, while others think those with high scores have neared a ceiling, making it difficult to raise their scores further. However that issue is settled in principle, it cannot account for the fact that Florida made striking gains while states with equally low scores did not. For example, on the 1998 4th-grade reading test Florida was near the bottom, with Arizona, California, Hawaii, Mississippi, Louisiana, and New Mexico. In 2007, all those states but Florida were still clustered near the bottom.

But if the Florida achievement gains are genuine, and not imaginary, they might still be attributed to factors over which schools have little or no control, for example, demographic changes in the state. Such is the claim of those who say that demography is destiny. Were demographic change the best explanation, however, student performance in Florida would be worse than ever. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 45 percent of Florida children attending public schools in 1998 were of minority background. By 2005, that percentage had climbed to just over 50 percent. Similarly, the percentage from low-income backgrounds (eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) rose from 43 to 45 percent between 1998 and 2007.

Another plausible explanation for the Florida success story is the 2002 passage of an amendment to the state's constitution mandating universal preschool education for all those who would like to participate. But however valuable the program may prove to be, it cannot explain the gains in achievement observed thus far. The amendment did not require implementation until 2005, and none of the students participating in the Florida early childhood program had reached the 4th grade by 2007, the most recent year for which NAEP data are available.

Much the same can be said for a second constitutional amendment—the class-size reduction amendment—approved by Florida voters in 2002. As in the case of preschool, there is some research evidence that suggests class-size reduction can yield significant gains in student achievement in the early grades. Florida state law now mandates no more than 18 students per classroom in grades K through 3, and no more than 22 students in grades 4 through 8. But the constitutional amendment is being implemented slowly. Through the 2008–09 school year, administrators have been considered in compliance if their schoolwide average class sizes were under the constitutional limits. According to the state department of education, from 2002 to 2008, average class sizes in the early grades were reduced from roughly 23 to 16 students in pre-K to grade 3 and from 24 to 18 students in grades 4 to 8. Still, if class-size reductions

reading and math tests. African American students have closed the



had any effect on achievement gains between 1998 and 2007, it could only have been toward the end of the period.

Nor can the gains in education be easily attributed to changes in public school funding. Florida's average spending per pupil rose from \$7,183 in 1998–99 to \$7,683 in 2004–05, in constant dollars. This was less than half the increase in the national average over the same period.

One can pretty much rule out these possible explanations for the Florida success story. The gains are not an artifact of



Florida has introduced a comprehensive program of school reform that has five main points: school accountability, literacy enhancement, student accountability, teacher quality, and school choice.

the elimination of social promotion in 3rd grade or of the ease with which low test scores can be lifted. Nor can they be attributed to demographic change, the introduction of preschool education or class-size reduction, or greater per pupil expenditure. One must look elsewhere for an explanation. The most likely

remaining candidate is school-focused reforms, which have the vigorous support of the EEP side of the education reform debate.

The Florida Reforms

Over the past decade, Florida has introduced a comprehensive program of school reform that has five main points: school accountability, literacy enhancement, student accountability, teacher quality, and school choice. Together, the reforms created a system that appears to have focused teachers and students on the task of learning in a way that has yielded the dividends we have highlighted above.

School Accountability. In 1999, the state legislature enacted a law that required students in grades 3 through 10 to take annual tests in reading and mathematics, known as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or FCAT. The assessment had two distinctive features lacking in most other accountability systems, including the one prescribed by the federal law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). First, it gave each school in the state a very clear grade of A to F based on the results from the test *and* offered a specific fiscal incentive to schools to try to reach as high a grade as possible. Bonuses were given for obtaining an A or raising one's grade from one year to the next. Conversely, schools receiving an F grade twice over a four-year period were asked to carry out a variety of reforms. The law offered students at "double F" schools the opportunity to attend private schools until a court decision disallowed the practice in 2006.

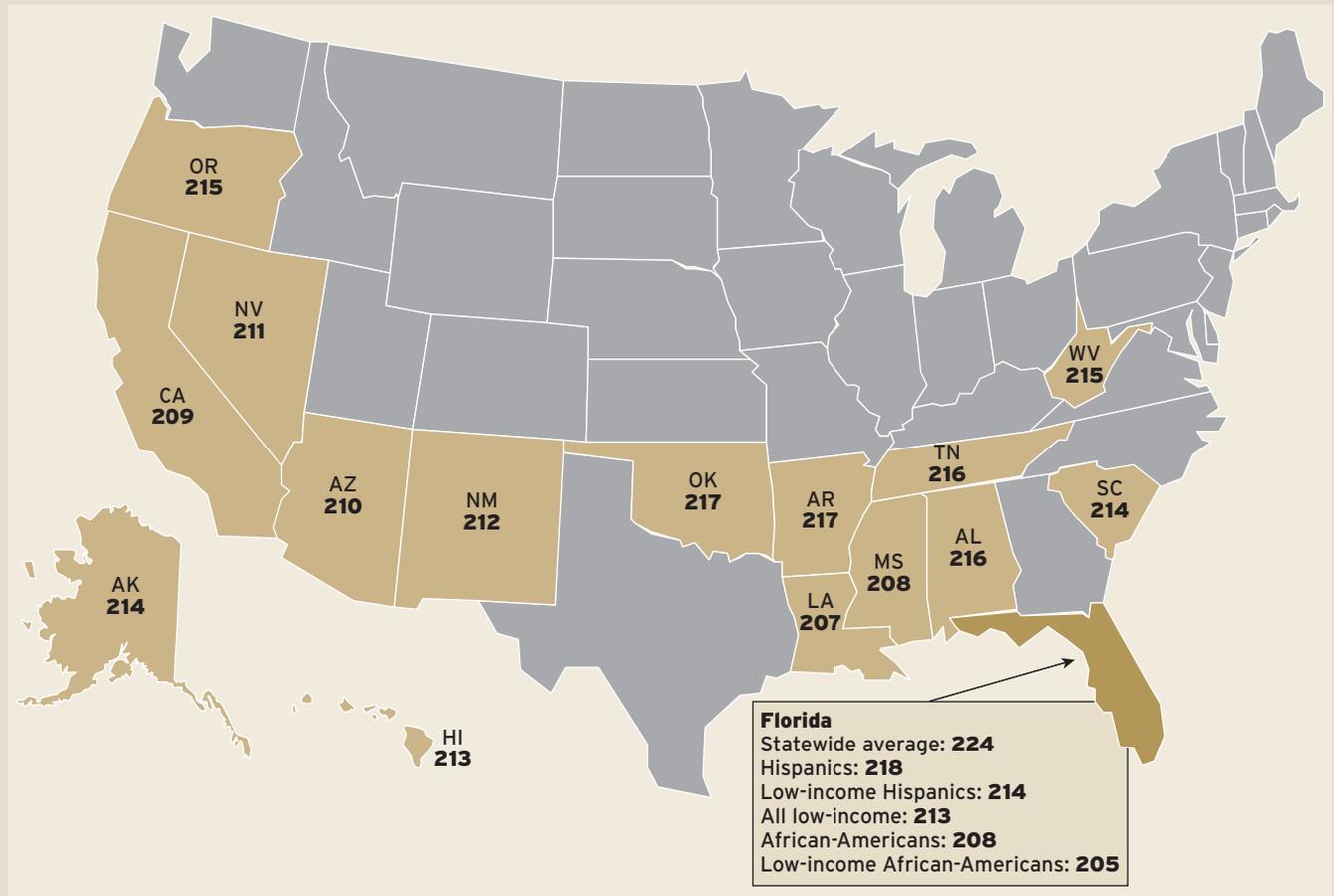
Beginning in 2002, the accountability system included measures of student progress from one year to the next, a feature not incorporated into NCLB. That gave schools with low-performing students an opportunity to raise their grades without imposing upon them the extremely difficult task of matching the performances of schools whose student body enjoyed a preferred demographic portfolio.

Clear, realistic incentives to improve were made available to schools across the state.

Focus on Literacy. Along with its accountability system, Florida in 2002 introduced a statewide program known as "Just Read, Florida!" The effort created new academies to train

Success Story (Figure 3)

On the 2007 NAEP test in reading, Florida's Hispanic 4th graders scored somewhat lower than Florida's statewide average but higher than the average for all students in 15 other states.



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation

teachers in reading instruction and provided for the hiring of 2,000 additional reading coaches. Teachers in grades K–3 took mandatory reading training courses over a three-year period. Students in grades 6 through 12 who demonstrated insufficient reading skills were provided remedial instruction.

Student Accountability. Beginning in 2003, Florida students were asked to pass a more demanding examination if they were to be given a high school diploma. In addition, Florida lawmakers, as discussed above, curtailed the social promotion of 3rd-grade students who performed at very low levels in reading. According to a careful evaluation by Jay Greene and Marcus Winters at the University of Arkansas (see “Getting Ahead by Staying Behind,” *research*, Spring 2006), the program had a positive impact on the performance of all 3rd graders, including those who were retained in that grade. Apparently, they

benefited more from an additional year of instruction than they would have had they been pushed on to 4th grade when they were not well prepared for the more challenging material.

Teacher Recruitment. Florida enacted new policies for broadening the pool from which teachers were being selected. Previously, teachers were required to earn a certificate by attending one of the state’s schools of education. Florida supplemented that channel of recruitment with a variety of alternative paths. The state opened “Educator Preparation Institutes” to facilitate the transition into teaching. Districts were allowed to offer alternative certification. Today, more than one-third of all new teachers in Florida are coming to the profession through alternative certification programs. The state’s teaching workforce has become the nation’s third most ethnically representative (see “What Happens When States Have

Genuine Alternative Certification?” *check the facts*, Winter 2009).

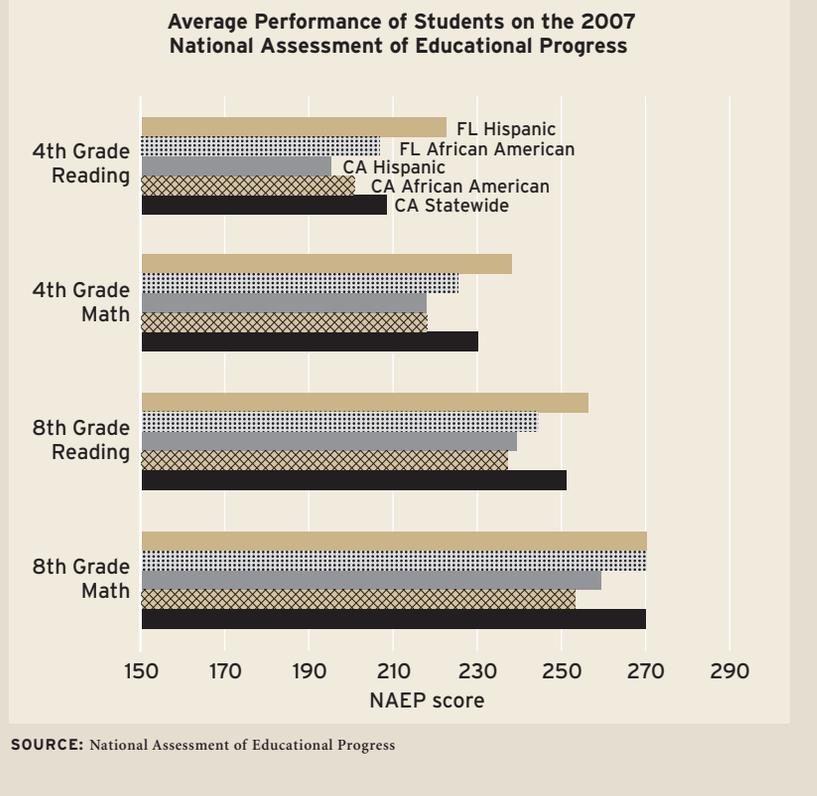
The alternative certification program may have had a particularly significant impact on Hispanic students. Florida enjoys a large immigrant population that fled from Cuba in the years following the establishment of Castro’s communist regime. Many of the immigrants were middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs, and they have established a strong economic, political, and cultural presence in southern Florida. That population provides a pool of potential educators of high talent who speak both English and Spanish. Just how important alternative certification was to the recruitment of highly qualified bilingual instructors is unknown, but it cannot be ruled out as a potential explanation for the particularly large gains Florida’s Hispanic students have made. On the other hand, it cannot be the whole story, as African American and non-Hispanic white students also made strong gains during this period. Moreover, the percentage of Hispanics of Cuban origin has declined during the past decade (though this may not have affected the size of the pool of qualified bilingual teachers).

School Choice. Florida is well known for the range of school choice legislation it has enacted over the past decade. Charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and online education all provide students and families with greater choice in 2008 than they had in 1998. For example, 105,329 students were enrolled in the state’s 358 public charter schools in 2007–08. That same year 19,852 students eligible for special education took advantage of the opportunity to use a voucher to attend private schools, and 21,493 students received scholarships averaging \$3,750 from a tax credit program that opened private schooling to students from low-income families. The state-funded Florida Virtual School currently offers students more than 90 online courses (ranging from GED to Advanced Placement courses). Middle and high school students anywhere in Florida can access these classes free of charge. The state projects that 168,000 courses will be taken and completed during the 2008–09 school year (see “Florida’s Online Option,” *features*, page 12). Multiple evaluations, by organizations ranging from the Manhattan Institute to the Urban League, have found the choice programs to have had a positive impact on Florida public schools.

Despite the numbers, the school choice programs are not large enough to have had more than a limited statewide impact on the millions of students attending Florida’s public

South Beats West (Figure 4)

In most cases, Florida Hispanics outperform California students, whatever their ethnicity.



schools. Yet they helped create a climate in which public schools may have wanted to demonstrate their effectiveness for fear that choice opportunities would continue to expand.

Identifying what has caused the rise in Florida student performance cannot be done with perfect certainty. It might have been the accountability system, or the state’s reading program, or its decision to expect more from students, or its alternative certification program, or its plethora of school choice innovations, or some combination of all of them. But the results from Florida do suggest that concerted efforts to improve the quality of an education system can pay dividends for students. It is probably not a coincidence that the one state that has outdone the others in its efforts to reform its schools has made outside gains in student performance. Exactly which of the many reforms Florida undertook was the key to success may never be known, but the reform package offers other states—and the nation as a whole—a clear path on which they, too, can move forward.

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