Review of Florida Test Scores Confirms Substantial Gains over Past Decade

After the end of social promotion in 3rd grade, Florida shown to have boosted student performance

CAMBRIDGE, MA – A new study of Florida test score gains confirms the state’s position as one of the country’s most rapidly improving school systems over the period 2002 to 2009. Although Florida’s record of steady improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (a national test administered to students in all states) has won plaudits from observers across the country, critics have alleged the improvement in 4th grade test scores was apparent, not real. They said the gains were inflated by the retention of low-performing 3rd graders after 2002, when Florida ended “social promotion” by requiring students who failed 3rd grade tests to repeat that grade.

Those claims are shown to be seriously overstated in an analysis of 3rd grade performance conducted by Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute and the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, which will be released by Education Next and will be available at www.educationnext.org. By looking at the individual test scores of each student in Florida, Winters is able to identify gains in performance at the 3rd grade level that were not influenced by the “anti-social promotion” policy.

Taking advantage of Florida’s detailed information on the student performance of all students, Winters isolates test scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) for those who are completing third grade for the first time. By doing so, he excludes from the analysis all those who remained at this grade level as a result of the new anti-social promotion policy.

Winters finds improvement gains in both reading and math, with the largest gains observed in math. While the gains among these initial 3rd graders are not as dramatic as the 4th grade gains which had captured national attention, Winters found “the gains among initial 3rd graders were very substantial,” about 0.36 standard deviations between 1998 and 2009, or roughly a full additional year of academic progress. The scores are “more than enough to justify Florida’s claims that its gains have outpaced those in most other states.”

Winters identified even greater progress by the most disadvantaged students. For example, those in the bottom decile (lowest 10 percent) improved by more than half a standard deviation, about a year and one half worth of improvement.
Several critics of Florida’s education reform policies have previously opined that Florida’s 4th grade scores were almost certain to shoot upward once low-performing students were retained in third grade. By looking at 3rd grade performances, Winters shows that these claims, while partially correct, are overstated. After adjusting Florida’s NAEP scores to account for the retention policy, only D.C. and Delaware made larger test score improvements. In 1998, Florida’s 4th grade NAEP reading scores were one grade level below the national average; by 2005, their adjusted scores were above the national average. It is those remarkable gains whose validity has been questioned.

As to possible explanations for the substantial test-score gains made by Florida students on FCAT and NAEP, Winters notes that studies have shown positive effects for each of the major accountability and school choice reforms introduced during 1998 to 2006 – such as implementing a school voucher program for use by students who have attended failing schools two years in a row and tax credits targeted for low-income students’ scholarships. Studies also have shown that the retention policy – the focus of those who charge that Florida’s exceptional gains are inflated – has itself “had a positive impact on the performance of students who were retained.”

Winters’s analysis, “Florida Defeats the Skeptics: Test scores show real progress in the Sunshine State,” will appear in the Fall issue of Education Next and will be available at www.educationnext.org.

About the Author
Marcus Winters is senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute’s Center for State and Local Leadership and an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. He is available for interviews.

About Education Next
Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, part of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. For more information about Education Next, please visit: www.educationnext.org.

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