



# **NEWS**

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**CONTACT:** Harvey Bennett  
Communications Director  
850-222-5052

## **CLOSING THE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAP** ***Substantial Gaps Exist Among Counties and Among Ethnic Groups***

**CORAL GABLES** — Florida is making significant progress but has a significant distance yet to go before student achievement is at a level that is competitive in a national and global context. That's the conclusion of "Student Achievement in Florida", the first in a series of Florida TaxWatch reports on the status of education in Florida.

The report found that while student achievement continues to rise, gaps remain among individual counties and among students of different racial backgrounds. For example, 69 percent of Santa Rosa and Okaloosa Counties students performed at grade level or above in math, while in Jefferson County only 24 percent reached this level. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade math, 67 percent of Florida's White students scored at grade level or above, while less than half as many Black students (33 percent) met the same threshold, and only 48 percent of Florida's Hispanic students achieved this basic level.

"Florida's Sunshine State Standards and the FCAT test have undoubtedly helped to raise student achievement. But we must not be complacent based solely on the results of our state tests," said Dominic M. Calabro, President and CEO of Florida TaxWatch at a news conference held in Coral Gables May 17<sup>th</sup>. "The future of Florida's economy depends on the ability of our public schools to produce graduates who can compete nationally and internationally," he said.

Calabro was joined at the news conference by former Lt. Governor Frank Brogan, now president of Florida Atlantic University, and by former state GOP chairman Tom Slade. Both serve on the advisory committee to the TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance & Accountability, which was holding its quarterly meeting.

"It's important to recognize that we're making progress," said Brogan. "Our job is to stay the course and look for new and innovative ways to improve and TaxWatch has taken up that purpose."

In this report, Florida TaxWatch examines the rapidly expanding volumes of data on student achievement and compares Florida students' achievement among the counties in the state, among the states in the nation, and among the countries of the world.

Rather than report achievement results by averages, where the exceptional performance of high performing students can mask the poor performance of other students, this report describes student achievement on state, national, and international assessments by achievement levels.

Florida's economic and technological competitiveness depends upon the success of our local schools and how favorably they compare to other states and to other industrialized countries. In its report, Florida TaxWatch examines the state's 2003 student achievement test scores and compares Florida's performance among the counties in the state, among the states in the nation, and among the countries of the world.

A future report will compare the state's 2004 student achievement data with 2003 within-state data and with 2004 national assessment data, as those national data become available.

## **LET'S START WITH HOW FLORIDA'S COUNTIES COMPARE**

In 1996 Florida created content and performance standards (THE SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS) targeted at boosting student achievement in the state. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the state's own assessment instrument, measures progress toward meeting these standards. The A+ PLAN is the vehicle that gets things done.

2003 FCAT results indicate the following:

- There is wide achievement variation among Florida's districts.  
For example, 69 percent of Santa Rosa and Okaloosa Counties students performed at grade level or above in math, while in Jefferson County only 24 percent reached this level.
- Substantial gaps in achievement exist among White, Black and Hispanic students.

For example, in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, 73 percent of Florida's White students scored at grade level or above, but only 41 percent of Black students met the same threshold, and only 51 percent of Florida's Hispanic students achieved this basic level.

In 4<sup>th</sup> grade math, 67 percent of Florida's White students scored at grade level or above (level 3+), while less than half as many Black students (33 percent) met the same threshold, and only 48 percent of Florida's Hispanic students achieved this basic level.

- In reading, 50.3 percent of Florida's students scored at or above grade level.
- In mathematics, 50.7 percent of Florida's students scored at or above grade level.

FCAT results indicate that the A+ Plan is moving Florida toward its stated goals of education excellence. Florida's lowest performing students are progressing from the lowest to higher performance levels, albeit at a slow pace.

Overall, there are indications that scores are improving for many students. From 2001 to 2003 the percentage of students scoring at grade level or above in reading and mathematics increased 3.9 percent and 2.3 percent respectively.

As I've said, although scores are inching upwards, high performance eludes many of Florida's students. A much smaller percentage of Florida's students perform at the highest levels of achievement, which are considered to be above grade level—than at lower levels.

## **LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW FLORIDA COMPARES TO THE FIFTY STATES AND THE NATION**

***The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandates that, by the year 2014, all students will reach the "proficient" level in reading and math, as measured by NAEP, which is the acronym for National Assessment of Educational Progress.***

***It's the federal government's standard of measuring student achievement. The feds have said that States must close the achievement gaps among students of different subgroups or lose federal education funds.***

NAEP results indicate the following encouraging news:

- Florida's students have historically scored well below the national average. However, in 2003, in reading, 32 percent of Florida's 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored at or above the proficient level compared to 30 percent nationally.

This is the first time that Florida students have surpassed the national average in any subject area.

In mathematics, 31 percent of Florida's 4<sup>th</sup> graders demonstrated proficiency—right at the national average.

- Eighth graders still failed to reach the national average. Only 27 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders reached the proficiency level in reading, compared to 30 percent nationally. In mathematics, only 23 percent of Florida's 8<sup>th</sup> graders reached the proficient level, below the national average of 27 percent.

There are wide achievement gaps among White, Black and Hispanic students. Some educators claim that this is due to lowered expectations for minority groups or students of low socioeconomic status and can be overcome programmatically.

The "No Child Left Behind Act" stipulates, that by 2014, ALL students will reach "proficient" level in reading and math, as measured by NAEP. However, care must be taken in comparing N.A.E.P. levels with FCAT levels. They do not readily correspond. That's why you hear one week that Florida is ranked such and such among states in the nation...and the next week you hear that we rate much worse.

For example, NAEP (the federal) results indicate that 32 percent of Florida's 4<sup>th</sup> graders can read at the "proficient" level. However, according to 2003 FCAT results, 60 percent of Florida's

students perform at grade level. This indicates that performing at the proficient level on the NAEP is a tougher benchmark than performing at grade level on the FCAT.

When Florida TaxWatch equally compared similar qualities between the national and FCAT test levels, we found that FCAT results more closely aligned with the lower national reporting of scores.

When we changed the benchmark for grade level performance on the FCAT, then 29 percent of Florida's 4<sup>th</sup> grade students would have reached that goal in reading, which more closely aligns with the NAEP report that 32 percent of Florida's 4<sup>th</sup> graders read at a proficient level. Such discrepancies are found across all grade levels in both reading and math.

## **LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW THE U.S. COMPARES TO OTHER COUNTRIES**

International comparisons of student performance are becoming increasingly critical, as the U.S.

In 1999, the Third International Math and Science Study-Repeat (TIMSS-R) measured the achievement of 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 13 states, nine school districts, and five regional consortia of districts across the United States, comparing it against the performance of 23 countries.

Miami-Dade participated as one of these school districts, the only Florida school district to do so. The TIMSS-R results indicated:

- Singapore's mathematics performance was the best among all participating entities—46 percent of their students reached the highest achievement level. Only nine percent of U.S. students reached this level, and only two percent in Miami-Dade reached this level.
- No U.S. district, state or consortia scored below Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Miami-Dade's mean scale score was 421. This score was lower than that of Cyprus (476), Romania (472), Chicago Public Schools (462), Rochester City School District NY (444), and Iran (422).

The Miami-Dade School District is to be commended for seizing the opportunity and courageously stepping forward, and their willingness to take a hard look at how their students perform within the global context.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- ***Florida policymakers must begin collecting data that will be useful in assessing Florida's relative national and international educational standing***
- ***Florida policymakers must determine what it will take to raise student achievement in Florida to high-performing levels.***
- ***Florida policymakers must engage in sustained efforts to raise student achievement and rise to the challenge of leaving no child behind.***

The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability will continue to examine these issues of accountability and achievement in the months and years to follow.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute supported by homeowners, small businesses, corporations, professional firms, labor unions, associations, individuals and philanthropic foundations -- representing a wide spectrum of Florida's citizens. The organization is dedicated to improving taxpayer value, government accountability and citizen understanding and participation in their state and local government fiscal policies. On the web at [www.floridataxwatch.org](http://www.floridataxwatch.org)