

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #21

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## Grading Schools

A fundamental problem in education today is that the simple act of measuring educational outputs has become a substitute for reform. The latest fad is grading schools and districts based on gross measures of output, such as graduation rates and student test scores. Measuring these outputs provides us with data but does nothing to actually improve student performance. A more meaningful form of accountability also would include internal measures of what we know will help children learn, such as class size, the percent of highly credentialed teachers, and the prevalence of specialists (see *Research Brief #22*). Because a child's in-school education is primarily determined by his or her experience *in the classroom*, processes internal to the schools need to be weighed and assessed. Ideally, state accountability systems would include both internal and external indices, where we measure processes, services and resources (inputs) that we know help children succeed, while also reporting test scores and other school outputs.

### How does Florida grade schools?

A good example of one-sided (outputs only) accountability is the grading system used in Florida to label schools on a scale of A-F. The Florida system is analogous to current measures of Annual Yearly Progress, part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind). Instead of basing its system almost exclusively on state test scores, however, the Florida system includes more criteria to determine a grade. These criteria include: ACT and SAT test scores, Florida state assessments (FCAT), graduation rates, the number of students in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Bachelorette (IB) classes, and growth on these measures. Specific targets also are established for at-risk students for many of these indices. Each of the measures is weighted with a maximum possible score—graduation rates are 200 points, accelerated course work 175 points, and so on. A school district's score on each of these items is then totaled to determine its grade.<sup>1</sup>

The grading system consists almost exclusively of outputs. One exception is advanced coursework, where schools are given one score for student participation in addition to a second score for rate of completion. Counting the number of students entering a class, however, does little to identify the nature of course work, or to determine whether or not the class has a quality teacher, or a robust curriculum. Nor is there anything to gauge the

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extent to which schools might simply re-name existing courses as “accelerated” in order to boost their letter grade.

## **Is Florida’s grading system reliable?**

Florida just experienced a significant decline in the number of schools receiving A’s, even though districts report no change in what they are doing. Florida’s Department of Education asked consultants to investigate school district concerns that technical problems with the tests might cause a drop in scores. Average scores in reading and math dropped 21 points for elementary schools between 2009 and 2010. As a result, many schools once receiving A’s saw their grades drop. Although the report found that the drop in scores was due to random variations that normally occur year-to-year, the phenomenon brings into question the relationship between letter grades, school effort, and factors which schools cannot control.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the Lee Charter Academy, which received A’s for three straight years, saw its grade plummet to an F in 2011, suggesting even more instability in the grading system. This school had been a show piece, highlighted by then Gov. Charlie Crist when he signed a bill that allowed the department of education to shut down low performing schools and convert them to charters. Between 2008 and 2010, between 61 percent and 65 percent of students at Lee Charter Academy met reading standards; in 2011, only 39 percent met those same standards, leading a local paper to state: “Violent fluctuations in the grades raise questions about whether testing is being administered properly, or whether the testing system, itself is reliable—or both.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Consequences, “reforms” and the corporate agenda**

One reason Florida may be receiving so much attention is that many of the “reforms” it promotes once a school is labeled with a low grade closely follow a corporate check list of proposals, increasingly pushed nationally.

Consequences include financial incentives (schools receiving an A get additional funding), grade retention for low performing students, incentive pay for teachers, creating a new teacher evaluation system based on test scores (which is yet to be implemented), and expanding voucher and charter school options for students, including a voucher program for special education students.

It is important to note that *none of these consequences brings additional resources or services to children at low-performing schools*, such as tutoring or the assistance of specialists.

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Instead, the reforms are generally market-based incentives that are unproven, or strategies to expand privatization, where taxpayer supported schools are run by private companies.

Because scores on standardized tests are higher in more affluent areas, schools that are already better off receive the financial awards, doing nothing to ameliorate significant funding inequities that are well documented in Florida.<sup>4</sup>

Grade retention, where students are held back, helps to boost short-term test scores because students have an extra year to learn the same material, but a large body of research consistently shows that such policies have a detrimental long-term effect on academics, including significantly increased dropout rates (see *Research Brief #18*).

Incentive pay, or merit pay, also has a history of failure, and recent studies in Tennessee and New York show that it does nothing to improve student achievement on standardized tests (see *Research Brief #21*).

And voucher and charter schools also have a track record of under-performance. A major national study by Stanford found that the majority of charter schools are no better than or under-perform public schools. It is ironic to note that one-half of schools labeled as failing in Florida are charter schools, the very reform strategy that is being promoted as a cure for “failing” public schools (see *Research Brief #10*). In short, none of the proposed “reforms” has a track record of success.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Accountability systems should not be used as a means to privatize public education or introduce other unproven market incentives. Counting the number of kids in AP classes, or simply reporting test scores does nothing to improve education. True reform is based on identifying what in-school variables affect achievement, and then bringing to schools the additional resources, staff development, curricular changes, and other strategies needed to address the specific weaknesses identified.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Florida Department of Education, “Guide Sheet to 2011 School Grades,”

<http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/pdf/1011/Guidesheet2011SchoolGrades.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hill, “Report on Florida’s School Grade Scores,” Center for Assessment, August 2010:

<http://www.fldoe.org/pdf/FloridafinalreportCenterforAssessment.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> News-Press, Fort Myers, Florida, “Find Why School’s scores Plunged,” July 1, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> William Mathis, Review of Florida formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation, University Colorado Boulder, June 2011.

<sup>5</sup> *Orlando Sentinel*, “Charter Schools’ Many F’s give Ammunition to Critics,” July 17, 2011.