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Conservative Report Applauds Bush And Progress Of Florida Schools

By Patricia Hawke

The Koret Task Force is a group of Hoover Institution scholars and conservative think tank. The group released a nine-month review report in September that commends Governor Jeb Bush on his efforts to reform the Florida schools.

The results were formally announced at an Orlando Hotel with the members of the Task Force and Bush present, as well as Representative Ralph Arza, a Republican from Hialeah and chairman of the House Pre K-12 Committee.

Paul E. Peterson, the editor for the report, commended Bush's implementation of voucher programs, especially the McKay Scholarship and Corporate Tax Credit programs, both of which pay for students to attend private schools (McKay covers disabled children and the Corporate program covers impoverished children). He called the programs "trendsetters" for the rest of the nation. Peterson also praised the newly implemented merit-based pay system for Florida schools teachers, the first statewide program of its type in the United States.

The report encouraged the state legislature to restore the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the Florida schools, which the Florida Supreme Court ruled as unconstitutional in January. The program enabled students who had attended Florida schools graded as "F" twice within four years to use state money to attend private schools.

The report stated that Florida schools students had made "impressive" gains in reading and math on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (F-CAT) since 1998. The Florida schools also are better than the national average in closing the achievement gap between minority students and whites.

The Task Force recommends that the Florida schools accountability system should place more emphasis on student growth, rather than overall performance. Another recommendation is for a less centralized control of Florida schools with more room for individual schools to decide how to spend classroom funding.

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The report supports Bush's efforts to repeal the class size reduction amendment, passed by voters in 2002. Besides being too costly for the Florida schools, Peterson stated that very little evidence supported its benefits and recruiting enough experienced teachers is difficult.

Though the study was intentionally conducted by academics in order to distance it from political views that frame the current educational debate, many question the validity of the report. Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the state's teacher union, particularly took issue with the report's recommendation to make the probation period for Florida schools teachers five years versus three, noting that it takes away more teacher involvement. As to the other results found by the report, he said they were exactly what the Union expected, with Bush supporters funding it.

The \$250,000 report was privately funded with the aid of two Republican donors -- Outback Steakhouse founder Chris Sullivan and Ft. Lauderdale cardiologist Dr. Zachariah P. Zachariah. Both men have donated extensively to GOP causes, including Bush's campaigns.

Representative Arza said he would fight to protect the governor's reforms, as well as to implement the recommendations of the task force to the legislature, including the repeal of the class size reduction amendment for the Florida schools.

"We have made progress in this state over the last eight years," noted Bush at the ceremonies. "We know, because we measure. It's one of the guiding principles of what we do."

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K-12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K-12 schools. For more information on Florida schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Florida/index.html>

Florida Schools Flying High On Last Year's Middle Schools Success

By Patricia Hawke

The 2005-2006 school year was a tremendous success for the Florida schools, especially at the middle school level. The Florida schools' educators across the state worked hard to improve student academic achievement levels and were rewarded for their efforts. The state of Florida awarded grades of A or B to 75 percent of its public schools. Not only did this show extraordinary progress for the Florida schools, but it also was a new record for the state.

The strongest gains were made in the middle schools. For example, Lake County has nine middle schools. Seven earned a grade of A last year, with the other two earning Bs. One of the B schools missed receiving an A by only one point. Osceola County has ten middle schools of which six earned an A, three earned a B, and one received a C grade.

Middle school is a crucial stage of academic achievement for students. It is the time when students transition from developing the basic skills learned in elementary school to learning how to put them into

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practice. Here, students begin to learn more in–depth content in order to develop the foundation that is needed in high school. Secondary education then builds on the foundation by digging deeper into the content and using it to help students develop their minds and become well–rounded adults.

If the middle Florida schools do their jobs right, as they did last year, then students will achieve a greater success in high school, be more likely to go on to college, and have a better chance to obtain and excel in a good career.

The major problems facing all middle Florida schools' educators are the hormonal changes that youth experience at this age and the intense peer pressure students must deal with on a daily basis. These challenges make it easy for middle school students to get off track.

Florida schools' educators are working hard to divert the students' attention away from these problems by getting them more focused on learning. Many Florida schools are looking at last year's strategies to review what worked and what did not. They plan to duplicate last year's success, with the hopes of doing even better this year.

Seminole County schools, for example, improved the reading scores of struggling students by incorporating two research–based programs into its reading curriculum. They encouraged their Florida schools to use small reading groups with frequent monitoring of progress and goal setting for each student. This year, they plan to use this successful technique with their math curriculum.

Another example is Volusia County schools. Last year, they mapped their curriculum to set specific goals for each grade level and then assessed student progress based on achieving the goals.

It is obvious that educators in the Florida schools are committed to building this year on the progress they made last year. As with public schools across the nation, there will be no shortage of challenges facing the Florida schools. Unlike many public schools across the nation, the Florida schools are making progress for the youth of their state.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and

private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more information on Florida schools visit

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