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Improvement In Florida Schools Libraries Boosts Fcat Scores And Students Reading

Abilities

By Patricia Hawke

The purpose of any school library is to promote reading and improve reading and research skills.

Educators have long agreed that good libraries are essential to academic success, since students must be able to read by third grade in order to learn other subjects, such as history and science.

A study by Donna Baumbach, professor and director of the Instructional Technology Resource Center at the University of Central Florida, has found there is a direct link between professionally-staffed libraries and the number of Florida schools students reading at grade level or above.

The year long study analyzed more than 1,700 Florida schools libraries and found that well-stocked libraries had a direct correlation to better students FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) scores. The elementary schools had increased FCAT reading scores of nine percent. The middle schools improved by three percent, and the high schools by 22 percent. The study also showed that FCAT scores were even higher at Florida schools with certified media specialists running the libraries.

The study found two aspects to a good library — (1) A well-stocked library with current selections, and (2) a certified media specialist in charge.

Need for Newer Books

A few years ago, the Orlando Sentinel did a story on the shape of Florida schools libraries. Their findings were gloomy at best. They found that most Florida schools libraries were full of antiquated collections of books and run by untrained clerks. The publicity gave the libraries a tremendous boost in unexpected funding. Generally, half of a school library's annual budget comes from book fairs, parent organizations, candy sales and profits from school supply sales.

Though state funding of Florida schools libraries remained at its previous \$15 million, the Sentinel story encouraged Florida community groups, businesses, charities and churches to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars for library improvement across the state.

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Yet, the Florida schools libraries still have fewer books per student than the national average. The state buys more books than the national average, but the Florida schools are not keeping up with the influx of new students each year.

The counties of Orange, Lake, Volusia and Polk have one out-of-five books published before 1980. Osceola County had the best book collection with 11 percent published since the year 2000.

Baumbach's study indicates a desperate need for fresh library resources for the Florida schools.

Need for More Certified Media Specialists

The second half of the equation is the need for more certified media specialists. The study showed that Florida schools libraries with these professionals had more books per student and more subscriptions to newspapers and periodicals. They had more students using the libraries, a greater circulation of

books, and more computers per student.

Certified media specialists bring to their positions knowledge and experience that Florida schools libraries with part-time help, teachers and clerks cannot provide. These specialists can actually supplement library funding by applying for grants. They take the books to the students by rotating books among classrooms, rather than leaving them sit on the shelves. They create reading incentive programs and provide multimedia instruction. They can even work with teachers to assess student test scores and determine areas of reading where some students may need further assistance.

The counties of Seminole and Volusia, however, have decreased these professionals over the past few years. The counties of Osceola, Polk, Brevard, Lake and Orange have shown an increase.

Florida schools are making improvements to their libraries, but not all Florida schools are equal. If you are determining which school is right for your child, be sure to take a look at the school library before making your final decision.

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 on Florida schools visit

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

Report Card On Florida Schools Policy To End Social Promotion

By Patricia Hawke

Though it is the fourth largest public school system in the United States, Florida Schools have consistently ranked close to the bottom on academic indicators, including high school graduation rates and national assessment of education progress test scores. For the past few years, Florida schools

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have been implementing programs to improve student scholastic achievement. Most have been well received and implemented with little-to-no resistance. The End Social Promotion policy, however, has received a lot of resistance from teachers and parents alike and is the most entrenched school custom in Florida schools.

Social promotion is the act of passing onto the next grade a student, who lacks the basic required skills. For many years in Florida schools, retaining or holding back a student has been viewed negatively by teachers, parents and students, placing a stigma upon the retained children and singling them out as abnormally different, inferior and destined to be a failures.

Study research has long held that retention does harm not good, with studies of retained students showing lower test scores in future years as compared to low-scoring students who were "socially" promoted onto the next grade. Such students were considered a high risk for dropping out of high school, as well.

Florida schools believe that part of this stigma is due to only a small percentage of low-scoring students being retained. If retained students are part of a large group, Florida schools believe the stigma will disappear and retention eventually will be viewed as a positive.

Many educators today believe that much of the previous study results were due to only students with the worse case combinations of skills and personal characteristics being held back, while other low-scoring students were promoted. If everyone in Florida schools sees retention as a beneficial step taken for the students, retained students could benefit from the increased positive attitudes, acceptance and learning atmosphere.

Slowly but steadily, school districts across the United States have begun to require students in particular grades to master basic skills for promotion to the next grade. Chicago was the first system in 1996 to implement a retention policy. Texas and Florida schools followed in 2002, with New York and Philadelphia joining in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Florida schools believe that schools do students no favor by promoting them to higher grades without the basic skills to succeed. The Florida schools End Social Promotion policy requires third grade students to score at a level two benchmark or above on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

After implementing its retention policy, Florida schools wanted a study to determine the scientific merits and costs (detrimental outcomes) of the retention program. Did attitudes and only specific students being retained influence the previous research? Is the Florida schools' End Social Promotion policy working? A study was undertaken.

The Florida schools' study compared 2001 low-scoring third graders (before the implementation of the retention policy) to the 2002 low-scoring third graders (the first students subject to retention). In 2001, only nine percent of the low-scoring third graders were retained, as compared to 60 percent in 2002.

The study analyzed test score improvements between third and fourth grade for each group. The tests used for comparison were the FCAT and the national Stanford-9. Both are administered at the same time to students. Since only the FCAT is used for the retention program, using the Stanford-9 test

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scores in the study would indicate if students were prepped only to meet the policy requirements. Additionally, only the FCAT's developmental scale scores were used to allow comparison across the two different grade levels.

The findings of the Florida schools' study showed that the performance gain of the retained students in 2002 exceeded that of the socially promoted students in 2001. The improvement gains were moderate in reading, yet significant in mathematics. The results were consistent in both the FCAT and Stanford–9 tests, showing the gains were due to student skill mastery rather than prepping.

The study provides valuable information on the short–term effectiveness of the Florida schools retention policy. Due to the short duration of the study, it neither shows all the possible future benefits a student gains from retention, nor does it address any possible long–range negative effects. However, it did provide a surprising result in the substantially improved mathematics scores.

Overall, the study shows that increased efforts by teachers and students to avoid a second retention does improve student proficiency. Whether the effects continue into the future for Florida schools, only time will tell.

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