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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 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

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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 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.

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>

Conservative Report Applauds Bush And Progress Of Florida Schools

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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.

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."

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