

Failure Is No Longer an Option

**Florida's Decade of Education Improvement
Proves Reform Works**

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Executive Summary

In 1998 Jeb Bush campaigned to become governor of Florida on a platform of K-12 education reform. Once elected, he set clear goals for both top-down and bottom-up education reform.

Starting in 1999, Florida lawmakers passed a series of reforms — including real standards and accountability for public schools, parental choice options for students in failing schools, tuition scholarship programs, the termination of “social promotion,” the institution of instructional reforms and the addition of merit pay to reward quality teachers.

The results over the last decade have been dramatic. In 1998, nearly half of Florida’s fourth graders were scoring “below basic” on the NAEP reading test. By 2007, the state had dramatically increased reading performance, and 70 percent of students scored basic or better on the reading test.¹

In less than a decade Florida’s fourth-grade reading proficiency went from near the bottom of the 50 states to well above the national average. The gains in reading proficiency have been most beneficial for Florida’s Hispanic and African-American low-income students. So dramatic have the results been that Florida’s Hispanic student population outscores student averages for not only Nevada, but also Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia. If the trend continues, Florida’s African-American student population will outscore the average of all Nevada’s students by 2011.

Florida’s educational improvement has been remarkable. This study examines the meaning of Florida’s successes for Nevada’s K-12 students and their needs.

Introduction

“Together, let’s send an unmistakable message for our children — in Florida, failure is no longer an option.”²

— Florida Governor Jeb Bush
1999 State of the State Address

To date, no state has been more ambitious than Florida in seeking to reform education, and as a result, no state has seen greater improvement in the educational achievement of its students.³ Florida’s reforms were both top-down and bottom-up. They included establishing high academic standards, creating student-centered testing policies, terminating “social promotion,” increasing early intervention, creating alternative means of teacher certification, improving compensation for quality teachers and offering parents greater school-choice options.

Florida’s reforms drastically improved the performance of fourth- and eighth-grade students on the reading and math exams of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Their gains exceeded those of student averages all across the nation.⁴ Greatest gains occurred among

African-American and Hispanic children, significantly reducing the achievement gap in Florida between minorities and white students.⁵

This paper will use the NAEP fourth-grade reading exam as the basic measure for examining growth in student achievement over time. The nation's most highly respected source of K-12 testing data, NAEP administers exams to random student samples in order to allow cross-state comparisons.

We focus on fourth-grade reading for a simple reason: Reading and reading comprehension are critical in early years. Students who fail to read at grade level in early years have a higher likelihood of struggling in other subjects in later years and a higher than average likelihood of becoming high school dropouts. Improving literacy is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for improving educational achievement levels throughout a student's education.⁶

Policymakers in Nevada should examine Florida's reforms as a guide toward improving educational achievement in the Silver State. The rapid improvement in low-income and minority students in Florida proves that the minority or income status of certain students can no longer be used as an excuse for public education's failure to improve over recent decades.

Compared to Nevada, Florida has a lower average household income and roughly the same student demographic challenges, while spending just slightly more per pupil than Nevada. The similarities between the two states suggest that duplicating Florida's reforms would significantly improve student achievement in Nevada. This paper recommends that Nevada's policymakers abandon the "pay-more-now — then-wait-and-see" approach and embrace comprehensive education reforms.

K-12 Education in Nevada

Nevada's economic troubles mean the state has little ability to increase public education funding. Although Nevada's per-pupil spending has tripled since 1960, rising to approximately \$10,000 per student (including capital outlays and school debt), many residents still believe that K-12 education faces disaster without more funding.⁷

Based on public-school performance, they have real reason for concern. In 2007, the NAEP revealed that 43 percent of fourth graders and 37 percent of eighth graders in Nevada cannot read at a basic level (see Figure 1, below).

Reading proficiency by ethnicity demonstrates that the situation is worse for Nevada's minority student population. Today, only 47 percent of fourth-grade African-Americans and just 42 percent of Hispanic students currently read at grade level (see Figure 2, below). As Nevada's Hispanic population continues to grow, the achievement gap between Hispanics and whites may continue to increase if reforms are not implemented. Since 1998, reading scores for white students in Nevada have improved by 5.2 percent, above the national average. Scores for Hispanic students have only improved by 3.7 percent, well below the national average of 7.9 percent.⁸

When examining student poverty rather than ethnicity, 58 percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunches (low-income students) cannot read at a basic level. Low-income students defined in this study are students who are eligible for the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program.⁹

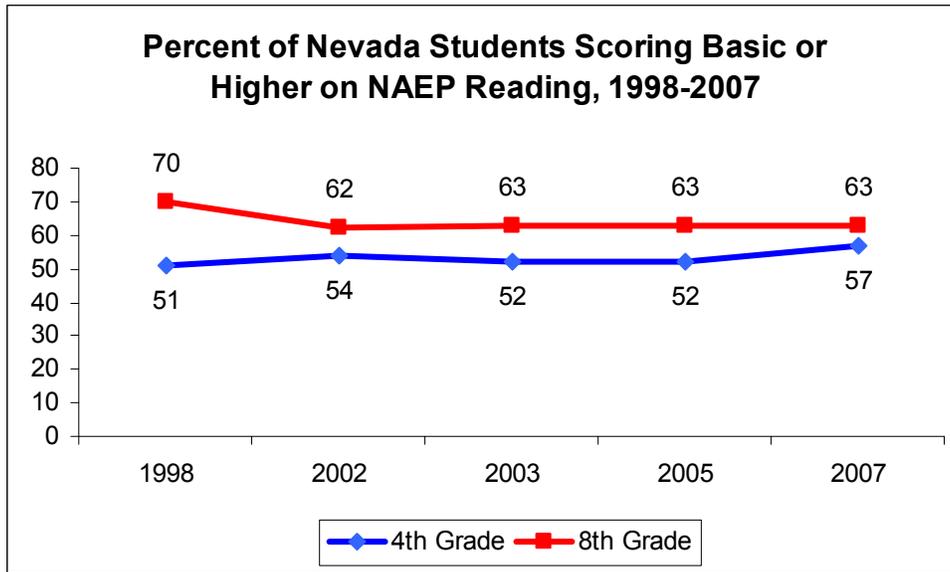


Figure 1. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

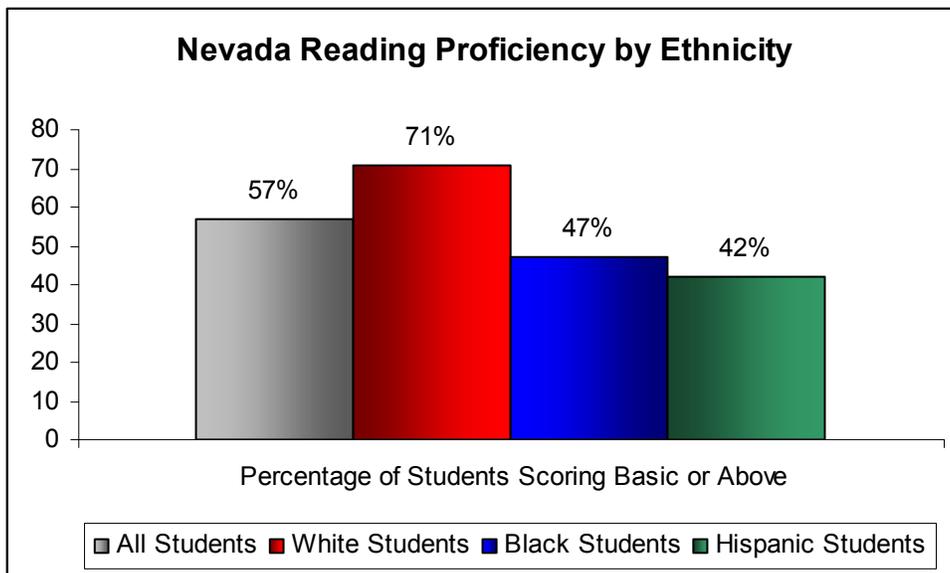


Figure 2. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>. Fourth-grade reading exam.

K-12 Education in Florida

Florida, like Nevada, began the 1990s with low NAEP fourth-grade reading scores. Florida's NAEP reading scores dating back to 1992 demonstrate that student achievement was relatively flat throughout the 1990s. The state's comprehensive education reforms began in 1999, but no NAEP reading test was given to Florida's students until 2002. We then see a sizeable increase in student achievement from 1998 to 2002, after which the trend continues upward. This suggests that something meaningful occurred in Florida's education system between 1998 and 2007. Nevada reading scores, of course, remained virtually flat over that decade.

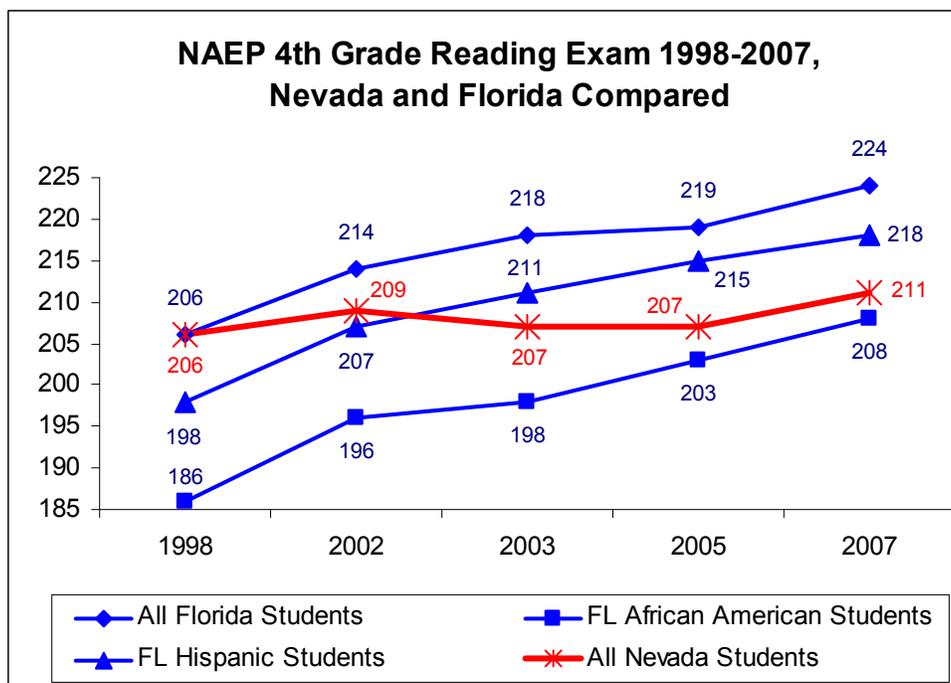


Figure 3. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>. The NAEP fourth-grade reading exam was not administered in Nevada prior to 1998.

Florida's education challenges were quite comparable to those of Nevada. In 1997-98, prior to the reforms, Florida was spending \$6,183 per student while Nevada was spending \$5,758 — a difference of just \$425.¹⁰ By 2006, Florida's per-pupil spending increased to \$7,759 compared to Nevada's \$7,345 — a difference of \$414 per pupil (not counting capital outlays and school debt).¹¹ While spending is comparable, Nevada increased per-pupil funding slightly faster than Florida.

Demographics are similar, too. Today Florida's population is 61.3 percent white, 15.8 percent African-American and 20.2 percent Hispanic. In Nevada, whites made up 58.9 percent of the population, African-Americans 7.9 percent and Hispanics 24.4 percent.¹² Student language hurdles are virtually identical, as 23.1 percent of households in both states report speaking languages other than English at home.¹³

Despite those similarities, Florida, on a per-capita basis, is less wealthy than Nevada. Median household income in 2004 was \$47,231 in Nevada but just \$40,900 in Florida. Poverty levels in 2004 were also slightly lower in Nevada: 11.1 percent versus 11.9 percent in Florida.¹⁴ In some respects, Florida faces arguably more difficult education challenges than does Nevada.

Comparison between Florida and Nevada

Despite those challenges, Florida students of all ethnic groups outstrip national averages by a wide margin. Table 1 (below) compares percentage growth in raw scores on the NAEP fourth-grade reading and math exams between Nevada, Florida and the national average.

Table 1: Percentage Gains in NAEP Fourth-Grade Reading and Math Scores from 1996-2007

Ethnicity	Reading			Math		
	National	Nevada	Florida	National	Nevada	Florida
White	3.1%	5.2%	6.9%	6.9%	8.0%	10.1%
African-American	6.8%	10.4%	11.8%	12.1%	12.8%	16.6%
Hispanic	7.9%	3.7%	10.1%	9.7%	8.7%	14.4%
All Students	3.8%	2.4%	8.7%	7.1%	6.4%	12.0%

Table 1. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>. Note: Reading exam administered between 1997 and 2008. Math exam data collected between 1996 and 2007. Florida did not administer the math exam in 2000.

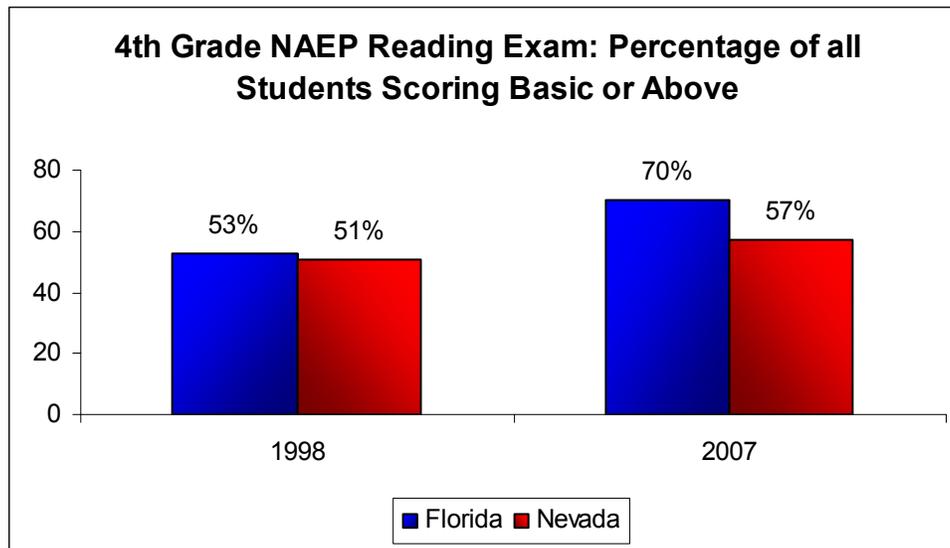


Figure 4. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

Florida and Nevada had similar reading proficiency levels in 1998. As Figure 5 (above) shows, Florida’s improvement was considerably more dramatic over the following decade.

Even low-income students in Florida saw significantly larger gains over the last decade when compared to their Nevada counterparts. Students eligible for Free or Reduced Lunches in Florida went from 37 percent scoring basic or better on the reading exam to 59 percent. This means that *low-income* students in Florida are more likely to read at basic or above than the average of *all* Nevada students.

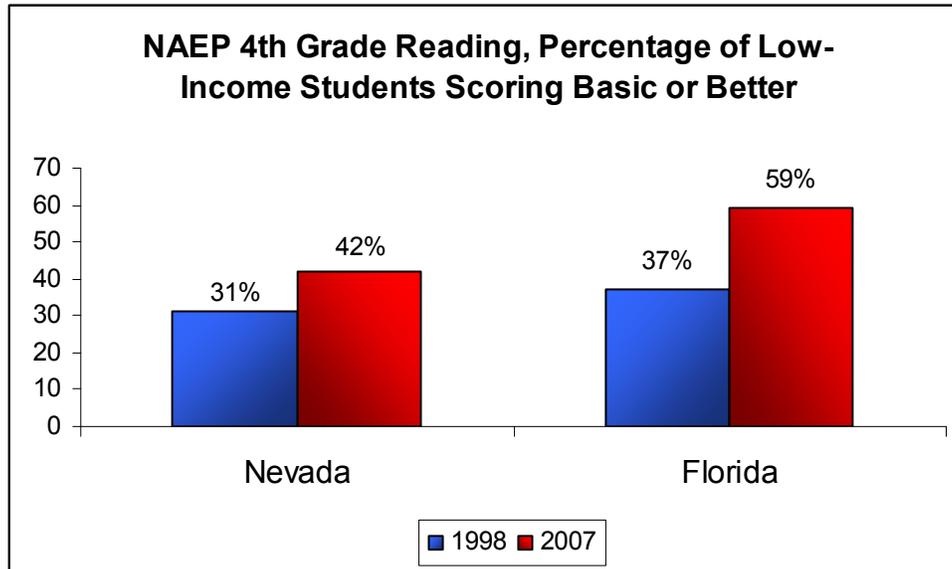


Figure 5. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

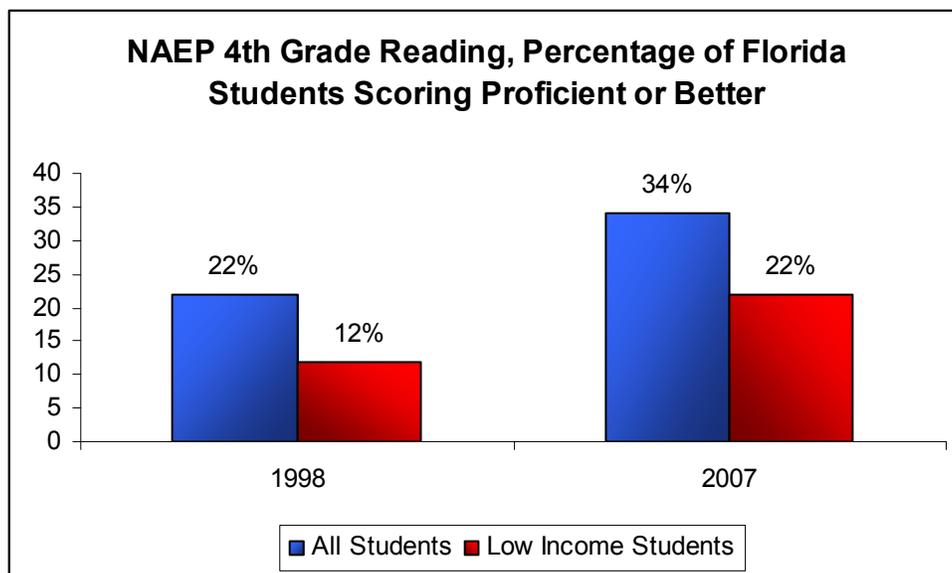


Figure 6. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.¹⁵

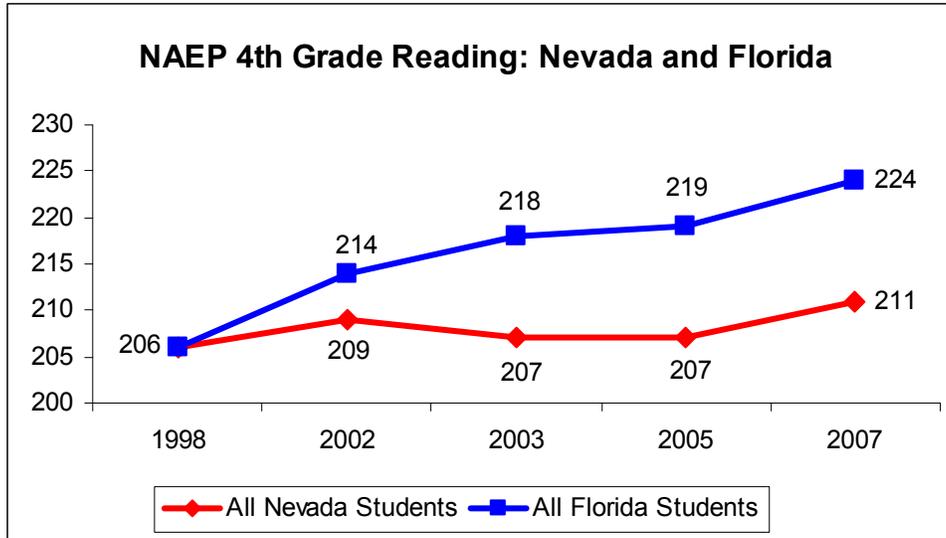


Figure 7. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

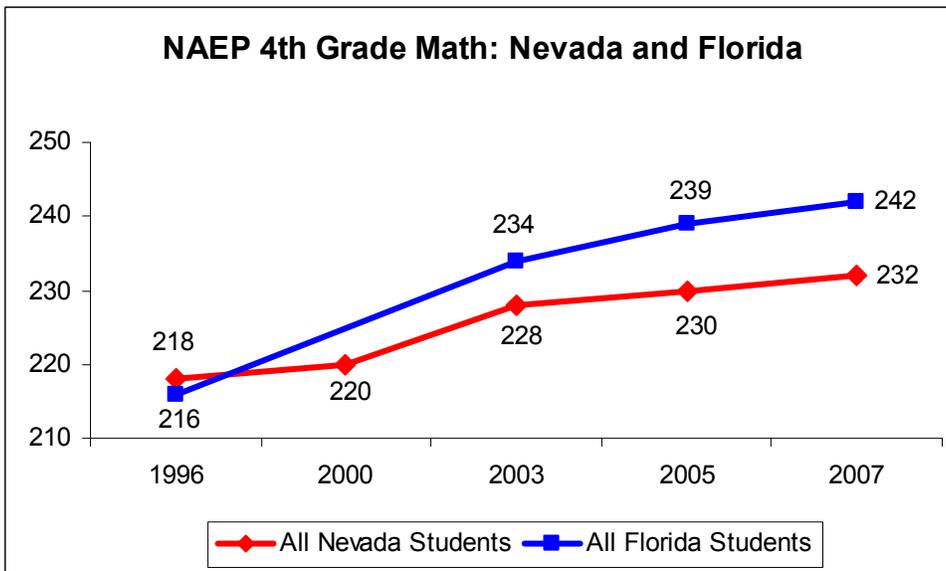


Figure 8. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

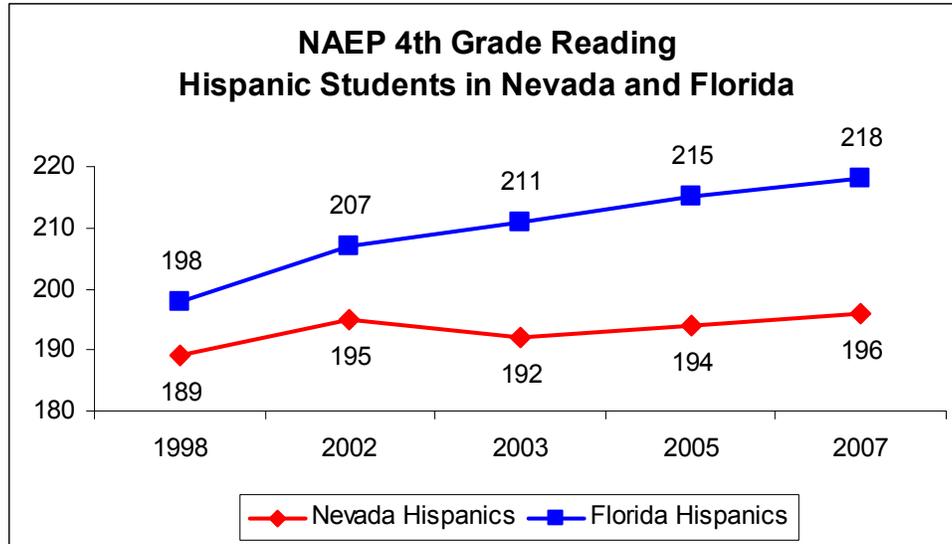


Figure 9. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

Figures 7 and 8 (above) demonstrate that Florida's gains have exceeded Nevada's in both math and reading on the fourth-grade NAEP exam. Figure 9 (above) demonstrates that Nevada's Hispanic population has seen little improvement compared to Hispanic students in Florida. Education improvement in Florida has improved enough that even low-income Hispanics in Florida (students in a family of four with an income of less than \$38,000 a year) now outscore the average of all Nevada's students (see Figure 10, below).

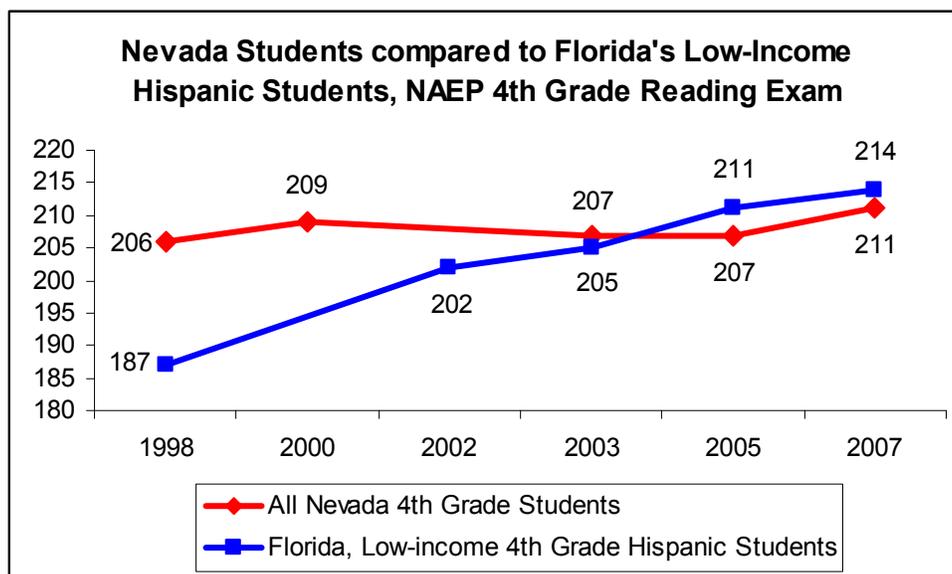


Figure 10. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>. Low-income students are classified as students eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch program.

When looking just at Florida's low-income students, regardless of ethnicity, the average low-income student in Florida has a NAEP reading score that is virtually identical to the average

student in Nevada. This is particularly troubling for Nevada because students who qualify for Free and Reduced Lunches in Florida (low-income students) have a family income of under \$38,203 (for a family of four) compared to \$71,972 for the average family in Nevada (see Figure 11 below).¹⁶

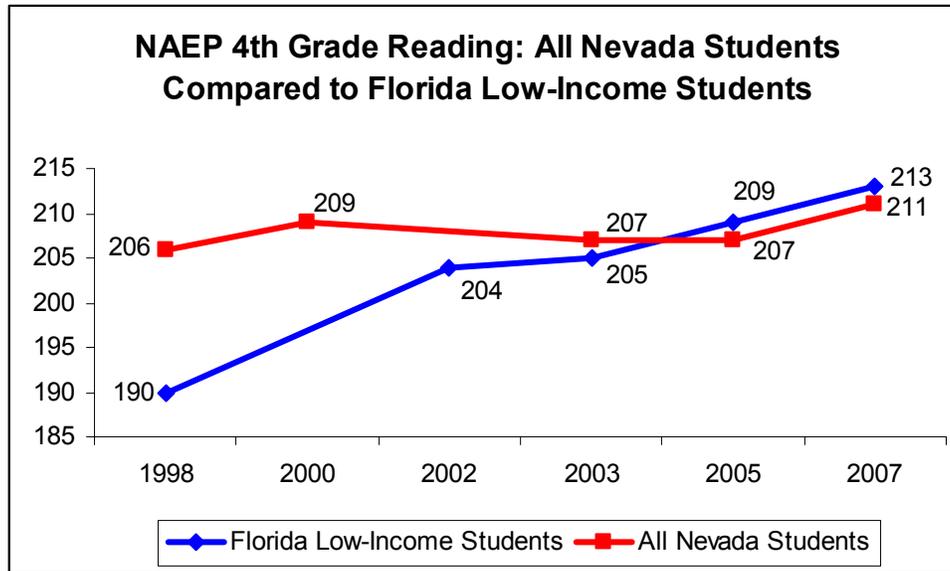


Figure 11. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>. Low-income students are classified as students eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch program.

Florida’s exceptional gains on the NAEP exam have also been verified through the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the Stanford 9 (2001-2004) and the Stanford 10 (2005-2007).¹⁷ This confirms that the gains on the NAEP exam are real.

Regional Outlook

The bulk of Nevada’s trade and migration comes from neighboring states, so it is important to compare Nevada’s educational outcomes with those of her neighbors. States with the best and most cost-effective educational programs stand to gain the most economic advantage, including better jobs and a higher quality of life for residents.

When compared to its neighbors, Nevada outperforms Arizona and California, the only states beside New Mexico with comparable demographics. However, Florida — with similar demographics to Nevada, Arizona, California and New Mexico — outperforms all of Nevada’s neighbors on the NAEP fourth-grade reading exam by raw scores. Only Idaho, which is 86.3 percent white, has a basic or better reading proficiency that matches Florida’s achievement.¹⁸ In fourth-grade math achievement, none of Nevada’s neighbors beats Florida in both raw scores and the percentage of students scoring basic or better.

Table 2: Student Demographics by State: Florida Compared to Western United States

State	Low-Income Students	Limited English Proficiency	Students with Disabilities	Non-white Population	Current Spending Per Pupil 2006	Fourth-Grade Reading % Basic or Better
Florida	45.8%	8.3%	14.9%	50.4%	\$7,759	70%
Nevada	41.3%	15.5%	11.1%	53.6%	\$7,345	57%
Arizona	45.0%	16.0%	18.0%	52.8%	\$6,472	56%
California	47.6%	24.4%	10.5%	70.2%	\$8,486	53%
Idaho	37.8%	6.9%	11.0%	17.0%	\$6,440	70%
New Mexico	55.7%	19.2%	19.7%	68.9%	\$8,086	58%
Oregon	41.8%	11.7%	14.2%	28.3%	\$8,545	62%
Utah	32.3%	9.8%	13.2%	18.2%	\$5,437	69%

Table 2. Source: <http://www.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html?src=gu>. Note: Current Spending Per Pupil excludes capital outlays, debt payment and teacher pensions. Nevada currently spends \$10,020 per pupil when including capital outlays and school debt.¹⁹ This figure also excludes adult education expenditures. Adult education represents a failure in traditional K-12 education to provide a proper education.

Arizona’s median household income is \$3,535 less than in Nevada, while Arizona spends \$873 per pupil less on education. Despite this, Nevada’s achievement levels on the NAEP reading exam are virtually indistinguishable from those of Arizona, a state with similar demographics. Florida also vastly outpaces several wealthier and whiter states in the region. In fact, Hispanics in Florida outperform the average of all students in Oregon, a state that is wealthier, whiter and spends \$786 more per pupil than Florida. In addition, Oregon is considerably whiter than Nevada, spends considerably more per student but barely outperforms Nevada.

Table 3: Demographics by State: Florida compared to Western United States

State	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Language other than English	Median Household Income 2004	Current Spending Per Pupil 2006	Fourth-Grade Reading % Basic or Better
Florida	61.3%	20.3%	15.8%	2.3%	23.10%	\$40,900	\$7,759	70%
Nevada	58.9%	24.4%	7.9%	6.0%	23.10%	\$47,231	\$7,345	57%
Arizona	59.7%	29.2%	3.8%	2.4%	25.90%	\$43,696	\$6,472	56%
California	43.1%	35.9%	6.7%	12.4%	39.50%	\$49,894	\$8,486	53%
Idaho	86.3%	9.5%	0.7%	1.1%	9.30%	\$40,509	\$6,440	70%
New Mexico	42.8%	44.0%	2.5%	1.3%	36.50%	\$37,838	\$8,086	58%
Oregon	81.0%	10.2%	1.9%	3.6%	12.10%	\$42,568	\$8,545	62%
Utah	82.9%	11.2%	1.0%	2.0%	12.50%	\$47,224	\$5,437	69%

Table 3. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/> and U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>. Note: Current Spending Per Pupil excludes capital outlays, debt payments and teacher pensions. This figure also excludes adult education expenditures.

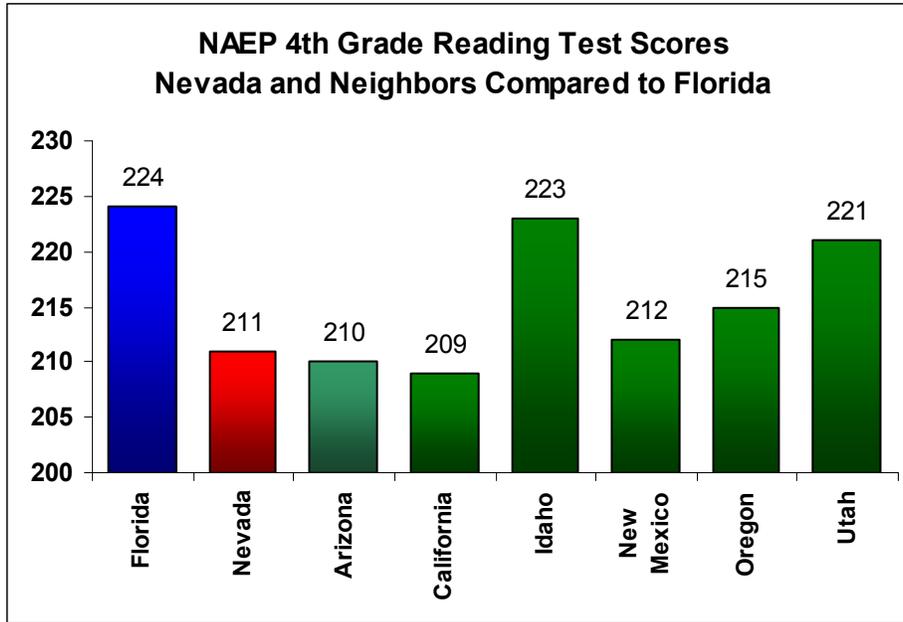


Figure 12. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

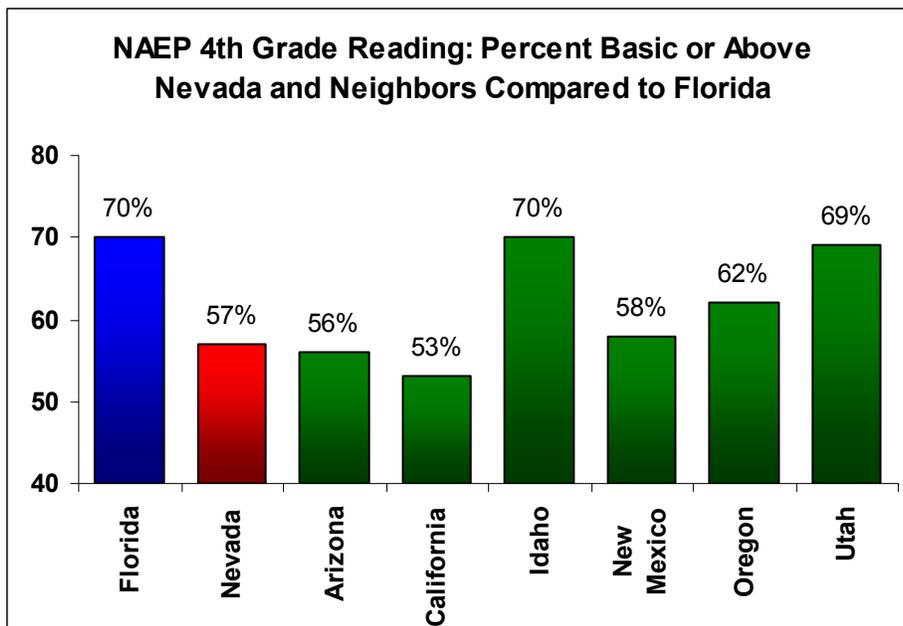


Figure 13. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

Florida’s education has improved to the extent that the average Hispanic fourth-grade student now outperforms the average of *all* students in 15 states (see Figure 14 below). Florida’s African-American population has also made tremendous gains in the last decade. In 1998, African-American students in Florida had the third-worst scores in the country.²⁰ By 2007, African-American students in Florida had the sixth-highest reading scores among African-American students across the country.²¹ Today, African-Americans in Florida outperform the

average of all students in Louisiana and Mississippi and are close to outscoring the average student in several other states.²² Assuming the trend in growth continues for Florida’s African-American students, they should overtake average Nevada scores by 2011.

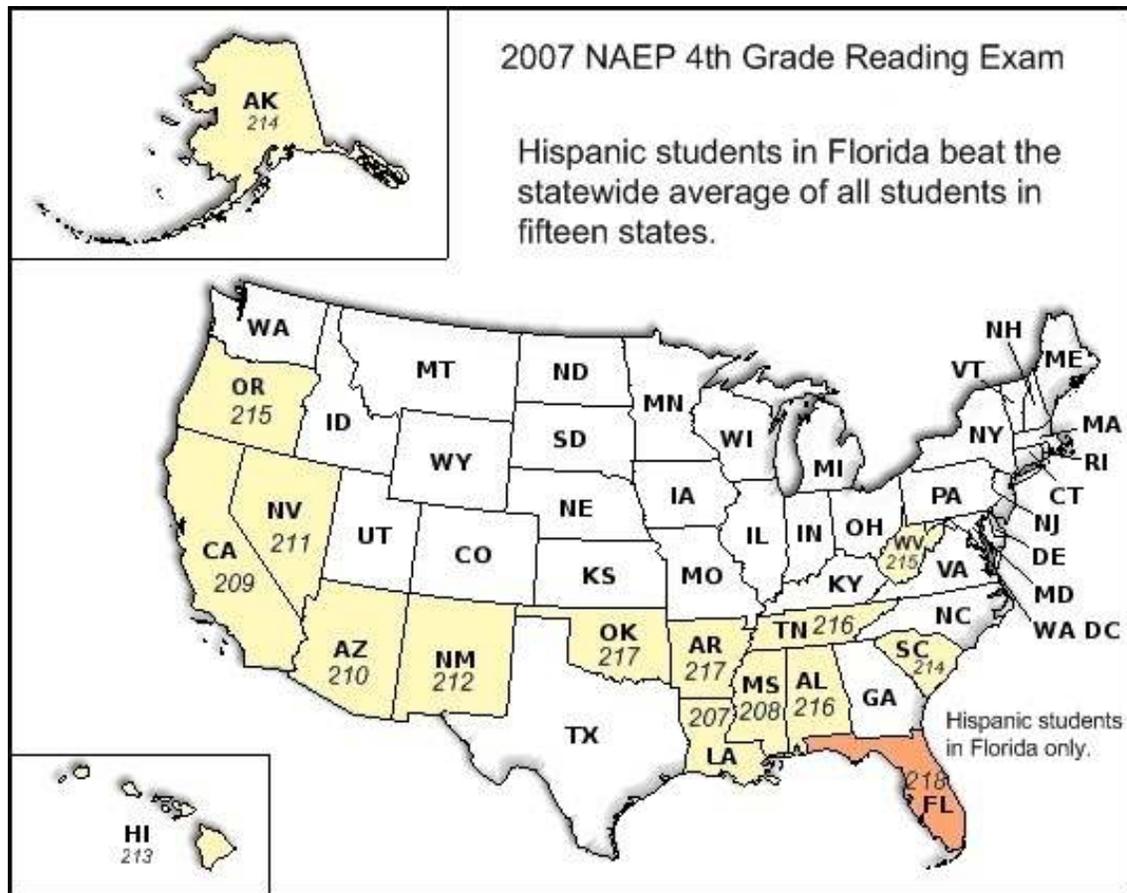


Figure 14. Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP Data Explorer, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde>.

What Would Florida Do?

What allowed Florida to improve student achievement so significantly? As always, many *possible* explanations have been offered — increased funding, fewer English-language-learner students, fewer students with disabilities, greater parental involvement, instructional reform, higher quality teachers and school-choice reform. But if any of these factors played a major role, which contributed the most to Florida’s achievement?

Unfortunately, this paper cannot directly demonstrate that any particular reform was the unique cause of Florida’s successes. We can, however, approach the issue indirectly, assessing the evidence that certain factors were most likely *not* the cause of educational achievement gains.

For example, some have argued that increasing per-pupil expenditures to afford high-quality teachers and materials necessary to educate students is necessary to improve education. But

while education spending climbed from \$6,183 per student before the reforms to \$7,759 by 2006, this represented only a \$112 per-pupil increase after adjustment for inflation.

If increasing spending were the key, we would expect any state that increased spending as much or more than Florida to see equally dramatic improvement in student test scores. But Florida's spending-per-pupil rank actually *dropped* between 1998 and 2007, falling from 28th to 38th in the nation. It is unlikely that Florida's modest increase in per-pupil spending caused the dramatic gains in student achievement.²³

Better pay for teachers is also an unlikely reason. According to the National Education Association, Nevada pays its teachers an average of \$780 more than Florida.²⁴ When adjustments are made for cost of living, teacher-pension contributions and teacher experience, compensation for Nevada's teachers is higher by \$4,745.²⁵

What about population changes in Florida? A change in Florida's demographics could drastically swing test scores one way or the other. For example, since low-income students generally average lower scores than their peers, a drastic decrease in low-income students in Florida could have caused the appearance of improvement over the last decade. U.S. Census Bureau data, however, shows that Florida's poverty increased modestly between 2000 and 2005.²⁶ Students eligible for free and reduced lunches also increased, growing from 43.8 percent of the student population in 1998 to 45.7 percent by 2005.

Shifts in student population could also mean a decrease in minority students. Since African-American and Hispanic students often score lower than white students, fewer minority students would skew test results upward. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1998, 44.7 percent of Florida's children attending public schools were minority students. By 2005, the number of minority children attending public schools had increased to 50.4 percent.

Changes in the way tests are administered might also skew test results. Did Florida exclude children with disabilities or increase the number of accommodations for English language learners at rates higher than the national average? With more exclusions and accommodations, Florida could have seen its test scores increase more than average. The report "Demography Defeated," by Matthew Ladner and Dan Lips, notes statements by the Florida Department of Education that exclusions for special-education students were near the national average, but that accommodations were higher than the national average. Looking more closely, the researchers found that Florida excluded more ELL students than the national average, while providing fewer accommodations than average.²⁷ Was this behind the dramatic increase in Florida's test scores?

Ladner and Lips tested this hypothesis by conducting a cross-tabulation of fourth-grade reading scores from 1998-2007 for ELL students and children with disabilities. They observed that test scores for children without disabilities and non-ELL students matched the overall gains for all students. Thus, they concluded that Florida's students made real gains, regardless of exclusions or accommodations for students with disabilities or ELL students.²⁸

Increases in per-pupil funding, shifts in population or changes in testing methods and administration are all, therefore, unlikely causes of Florida's dramatic improvement in student

achievement. We can therefore reasonably assume that it was Florida's reforms, many of which began in 1999, that caused the noticeable increase in student achievement.

Florida's Education Reforms

Florida's reforms were comprehensive. Governor Bush's administration implemented annual testing in grades three through 10 and ranked schools based on achievement. Social promotion — the practice of promoting children to the next grade based on age rather than on ability to comprehend the subject matter — was ended. Florida also sought to tie funding for public schools to achievement, rewarding successful schools with additional money and autonomy while providing scholarships to children in failing schools and allowing them to go elsewhere.

Testing and Accountability

Florida enacted the "A+ Accountability Plan" in 1999. It required students in grades three through 10 to be tested annually in reading and mathematics on the FCAT.²⁹ Florida tracked student progress from year to year, ranking schools "A" through "F" based on student performance each year. Schools receiving an F twice over a four-year period were required to implement state-designed reforms.

Students were required to meet standards on the FCAT before being promoted to the next grade. Remedial instruction was provided to students failing the FCAT. By 2003, students were required to pass the FCAT in order to graduate high school.

Jay P. Greene and Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas found that students who were retained made significant gains in reading relative to students who were socially promoted.³⁰ Greene and Winters concluded that students who were retained were able to catch up with their peers on basic reading skills.³¹

School Choice Options

Also under the A+ Plan, students attending schools that received two F grades in four years were granted scholarships to attend another public or private school of their choice. However, in 2006 the Florida Supreme Court ruled that the A+ scholarship program violated the state's constitution, and the program was canceled.³² Since then the state legislature passed a law that allowed children previously enrolled in A+ the opportunity to participate in "Step Up for Students," a scholarship program for low-income children.

Before the A+ voucher program was cancelled, the Manhattan Institute conducted a study on the effects of the program on public schools. Since students in failing schools could receive scholarships to attend schools of their choice, failing public schools lost a portion of their funds when students departed. This created a strong incentive for failing schools to improve in order to retain students. The study found that "Public schools currently facing voucher competition or the prospect of competition made exceptional gains on both the FCAT and Stanford-9 tests compared to all other Florida public schools and the other subgroups in our analysis."³³

A study in 2007 by the Urban Institute found similar results, but it also found that schools labeled “F” then focused more time and energy on low-performing students — while giving teachers more resources and more control over their classrooms.³⁴

In 2008, Greg Forester of the Friedman Foundation evaluated the performance of the schools before and after the A+ program’s cancellation. He found that in the period after the program began but before A+ vouchers were given, schools made modest gains. However, once the voucher program began, schools where students were offered vouchers drastically increased their performance. Unfortunately, once the voucher program was declared unconstitutional, those gains virtually disappeared.³⁵

In 2000, Florida implemented the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities, which awards scholarships for children with disabilities to attend a private school. By 2007, more than 18,000 children were receiving scholarships averaging \$7,206 to attend private schools of their parents’ choice.

Florida offered a corporate tuition tax credit program in 2001 called “Step Up for Students.” It allowed corporations to make donations to non-profit scholarship organizations and receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits for their donations. The tuition scholarship program provides up to \$3,950 for low-income students to attend private schools of their parents’ choice or \$500 to pay for transportation to a different public school. Today the program serves more than 23,000 students.³⁶ More than 70 percent of the scholarship recipients are minority children.³⁷

Charter Schools

Florida has one of the strongest and largest charter school programs in the country. Today, 379 public charter schools in Florida educate more than 100,000 students.³⁸ Public charters in Florida agree to meet performance standards set by the state, but are generally free of most of the bureaucratic rules and regulations that burden traditional public schools. This allows unique educational methods to be offered, differing between one charter school and the next. Florida’s charter schools also outperformed district schools on the 2007 fourth-grade reading NAEP, with 77 percent of students scoring basic or better compared to 70 percent statewide.³⁹

Virtual Schools

Florida’s virtual education program allowed 52,000 students to learn online during the 2006-07 academic year.⁴⁰

Strong Curriculum and Academic Standards

A major centerpiece of Florida’s education reforms was curriculum reform. Implemented in 2002 was “Just Read, Florida!” — a program to improve reading instruction. The program allowed for the hiring of reading coaches, retrained teachers in reading instruction, and provided remedial instruction for students in grades six through 12.⁴¹

Improving Teacher Quality

A popular myth in education circles claims that education can be improved simply by paying teachers more money to attract high-quality teachers. Research by Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky suggests this is untrue. They found that teacher quality — whether measured by SAT scores or class rank in college — did not significantly improve as pay was increased. Rather, education establishments simply paid more to recruit from the same pool of applicants. Unfortunately, public education, as currently organized, faces serious institutional resistance to processes that would identify high-quality teachers and reward them.⁴²

Sometimes it is asserted that teacher quality can be increased through rigorous certification requirements that require years of study through four-year colleges of education, testing and a semester of student teaching. However, research has shown that there is virtually no difference between the effectiveness of certified teachers and uncertified teachers.⁴³

Research by Paul Peterson, of Harvard University and the Hoover Institution, found that states with real alternative teacher certification programs not only saw significant gains in student achievement but also an increase in the percentage of minority teachers.⁴⁴ States with real, not symbolic, teacher certification pathways see a teacher population that is more reflective of state demographics. Florida was no exception. About half of all new teachers in Florida today are alternatively certified.⁴⁵

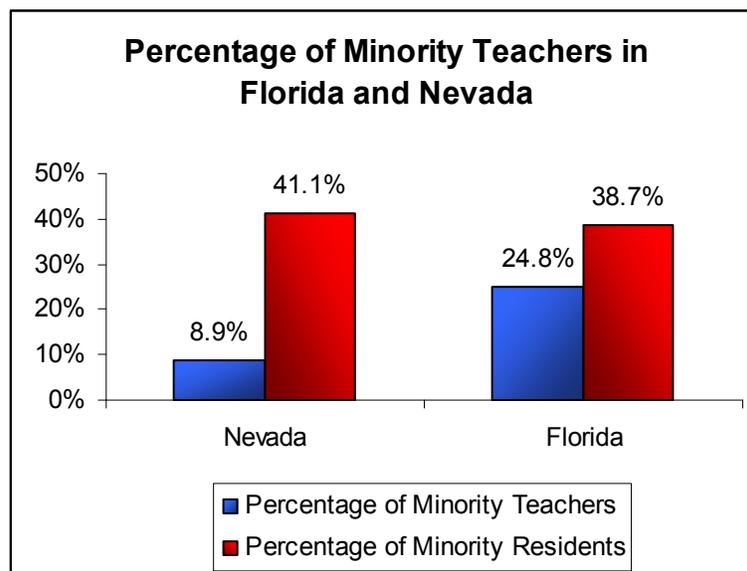


Figure 15. Source: Peterson, Paul E. “*What Happens When States Have Genuine Alternative Certification?*” *Education Next*, Hoover Institution, Winter 2008. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/34564684.html>.

Florida’s approach to improving teacher quality was to first create real alternatives to teacher certification. This allowed the state to attract high-quality professionals who otherwise would not have considered teaching as a career choice, given the large and expensive barriers to entry into education that otherwise exist. Professionals with real experience in subjects such as math and science could attend “Educator Preparation Institutes” that helped them transition into a career in

teaching; no degree in education was required.⁴⁶ School districts were also required to set up alternative teacher certification programs.

Finally, Florida implemented a performance-pay plan. Traditionally, teacher pay increases are based on seniority rather than the effectiveness of the teacher. This leads to situations where young teachers who may be highly effective receive half the pay of more senior teachers, even when those senior teachers are less effective. In Florida, highly effective teachers receive a bonus up to 10 percent of their pay.⁴⁷ Bonuses are awarded based on the measurable academic achievement of their students, rather than by seniority.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to ascertain which reforms produce the absolutely best results, it is clear that simply increasing funds for public education will not bring about the successes Florida achieved. We now also know that traditional excuses for public school failure — blaming English language learners, students with disabilities, minority students or poverty — are merely that: invalid excuses.⁴⁸

Since 1999, comprehensive educational reforms enacted by Florida have included parental choice options, incentive-based reforms and instructional reforms. The result has been to drastically increase student achievement in math and reading. Importantly, the reforms allowed minority students to close the achievement gap. Low-income students saw increases in student achievement as well.

Both students and teachers were held accountable for learning achievement. Students who failed were held back or given remedial education. High-quality teachers were rewarded for their efforts. Schools, too, were held accountable by empowering parents with more control over their child's education while schools were ranked "A" through "F" based on their demonstrated ability to educate students.

No other state with the same challenges in poverty, demographics and English language learners has seen Florida's gains in student achievement. The improvement in Florida's education, notwithstanding the challenges, finally lays to rest many of the excuses educators and policymakers have offered over the years as to why schools "cannot" improve student achievement.

Since there is little difference between Florida and Nevada in terms of poverty rates, language barriers, demographics or funding, we have little doubt that comprehensive reforms of the nature implemented by Florida could improve math and reading achievement levels in the Silver State, or any other state, as well.

Florida's successes, especially with low-income and minority children, should inspire policymakers throughout the country to replicate the state's reforms. They demonstrate what can be achieved against all the odds and how to do it. They also prove that failure is no longer an option.

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