






## Don't Implement Reforms Based on a Struggling Model Reject Senate Bill 795

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

-  Education policy changes designed to improve early childhood literacy should be modeled after policies employed in states that perform best on early childhood literacy outcomes rather than on Florida's failing reform efforts.
-  Retaining students solely on the basis of one standardized test score increases the dropout rate and does not improve early childhood literacy.
-  The proposed school grading system would unfairly label schools as failing on the basis of standardized test scores without providing the requisite support for these schools to improve.

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS is a great way to avoid making serious mistakes. So as the NC legislature considers Senate Bill 795 (The Excellent Public Schools Act), it would be wise to look at the effects of similar legislation passed in Florida.

Beginning in 2002, Florida adopted a series of reforms on which Senate Bill 795 is modeled. There were some initial gains on standardized test scores for students, but recently it has become clear those gains were more likely the result of changes to the state's proficiency standards than actual student progress. Looking at the National Assessment of Educational Progress—a longstanding test that is given to children around the country and cannot be manipulated—we see that Florida's scores have not improved at all in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

The North Carolina Senate's version of the Florida reforms would unfairly retain students solely on the basis of standardized test scores, label schools as failing without providing adequate support to help them succeed, and make North Carolina less attractive to highly qualified teachers.

### Student Retention

Senate Bill 795 would require that third graders who do not pass their end-of-grade reading tests be forced to repeat the grade, except in a few narrowly defined situations. In the first year Florida implemented this retention policy, *13.2% of third graders were retained*.<sup>2</sup> This year, only 56% of Florida's 3rd graders demonstrated proficiency on the end-of-year writing assessment, meaning that almost half of all 3rd graders are now in serious jeopardy of being retained.

This decision—based on one test score—will harm some of these children for the rest of their lives. Virtually all empirical studies on retention demonstrate that students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school, which in turn means they are less likely to have good-paying jobs and are more likely to need

public assistance throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the Department of Education all agree that no decision of serious consequence in a child's life, including retention, should be made on the basis of a single test score.<sup>4</sup>

### **“Grades” for Schools**

Senate Bill 795 would assign letter grades to schools, but it would not provide any additional resources to schools with poor grades. In Florida, state education administrators project that this year, *the number of ‘A’ schools will drop from 1,636 to 1,086, and the number of ‘F’ schools will more than triple from 38 to over 130.*<sup>5</sup> To avoid chaos and growing outrage from parents, the state is lowering state standards to make it easier to demonstrate proficiency and will not allow schools to fall more than one letter grade in its grading system.

### **Doing Away with Career Status**

Senate Bill 795 makes attracting highly qualified teachers more difficult by doing away with career status for teachers and putting all new teachers—and even some experienced teachers—on one-year contracts. Given that teachers earn about 15% less than other members of the workforce with similar education and work experience,<sup>6</sup> policies such as career status for teachers are needed to recruit the best and brightest to the profession.

### **Conclusion**

Florida is now paying a serious price for these shortsighted policies as proficiency scores plummet. *Fourth-grade writing proficiency rates declined from 81% last year to 27% this year.*<sup>7</sup> Less than half of students in all grades were proficient in writing. Florida’s state superintendent predicts further declines in test scores because the state previously did not include all students in its testing regime.

The reforms pursued in Florida are a poor model for improving North Carolina’s schools. Florida’s policies employ more sleight of hand to improve test scores on paper than they do substance to improve the quality of instruction that students receive in the classroom.

If North Carolina’s leaders are looking for states on which to model its education policies, they should consider Massachusetts, Maryland, and New Jersey. These states have the highest 4th grade reading scores on the NAEP. On average, states that do the best on the 4th grade NAEP reading assessment also have higher per-pupil expenditures.<sup>8</sup>

1 National Center for Education Statistics. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2011/2012454FL4.pdf>

2 “Florida Formula for Student Achievement: Lessons for the Nation”. Foundation for Excellence in Education. Presentation given by Patricia Levasque to the NCGA House Education Committee, February 8, 2012.

3 “Why Students Drop Out and What Can Be Done”, Paper prepared for the Conference, “Dropouts in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know about Intervention and Prevention?” Harvard University, January 13, 2001.

4 “The Grade Retention Fallacy”, Harvard/UCLA Civil Rights Project. Available at <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/testing-and-assessment/the-grade-retention-fallacy/?searchterm=retention%20drop%20out>.

5 “After FCAT Scores Plunge, State Quickly Lowers the Passing Grade”, Miami Herald, May 15th, 2012. Available at <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/05/15/2800698/schools-wont-be-held-accountable.html>.

6 “The Teaching Penalty”, Economic Policy Institute, 2008. Available at <http://www.procon.org/sourcefiles/epi-teacher-pay.pdf>

7 Florida Department of Education, Division of Accountability, Research, and Measurement. Available at <http://www.fldoe.org/arm/>.

8 Federal Education Budget Project, New America Foundation. “4th Grade Reading: State NAEP Performance 2011.” Available at <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12/rankings/naep4read>