

# FLORIDA

## Overview

In 1996, Florida’s legislature charged the state board of education with implementing an accountability system and intervening in low-performing schools. In the decade and a half since, Florida’s widely-lauded accountability system has continued to evolve as governors and other state officials have worked to identify more effective accountability measures—and as accountability has expanded to include both students and adults in the system. This is a state that, according to an education department staffer, was “focused on accountability far before [it received] a national spotlight or attention from other states.”

One element that sets Florida’s accountability system apart from the rest is its focus on the progress of students across the achievement spectrum. Their performance is gauged through both proficiency and individual-growth measures; in addition, the Sunshine State tracks the progress of the lowest-performing quartile of students in each school. At the same time, Florida continues to re-evaluate the system’s expectations and raise the bar for performance, maintaining tension in the system. Its focus on academic improvement for all students and its willingness to keep pressure on the system may be behind the state’s recent successes, including its progress in shrinking both “achievement gaps” and “opportunity gaps.”<sup>46</sup>

Florida also ensures that individuals are held to account and are rewarded for strong performance. Students must meet promotion and high school graduation requirements, and the top 20 percent of each graduating class is eligible for automatic admission into one of Florida’s eleven state universities. Teachers in Florida’s school system are also accountable for their performance and that of their pupils via annual evaluations tied to student learning, the elimination of tenure, and layoffs based primarily on evaluation results, not seniority.

Florida’s focus on accountability is palpable throughout the system. The Sunshine State’s governing bodies are intent on ensuring that education remains a top priority on the political agenda: Candidates for state office are implicitly expected

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<sup>46</sup> See National Center for Education Statistics, *Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, June 2011), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2011459.pdf>; National Center for Education Statistics, *Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, July 2009), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2009455.pdf>; and “The Opportunity Gap: Is Your State Providing Equal Access to Education? Educational Access in Florida,” ProPublica, June 2011, <http://projects.propublica.org/schools/states/fl>.

to make education a top campaign priority in order to have any chance of being elected.

Below, we map Florida's progress against six key components of strong state accountability systems.

### **1) Adoption of demanding, clear, and specific standards in all core content areas, and rigorous assessment of those standards**

With its adoption of the Common Core, Florida has in place strong state standards in reading and mathematics. Unfortunately, the state's standards in U.S. History and science lack the content and rigor needed to ensure quality instruction in those subjects.<sup>47</sup>

Since 1975, Florida has required annual testing of all students in select grades and subjects. Today the state's assessment system, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), mandates continuous testing in grades three through ten in both reading and mathematics, as well as science in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades, and writing in fourth, seventh, and tenth grades.

Florida is in the process of transitioning to the FCAT 2.0, which is aligned to the state's latest installment of state standards and will come online in 2011-12. The new assessment system will introduce end-of-course tests in high school for math, science, and history courses, in addition to high school-level reading and writing assessments. (Florida will likely replace the FCAT 2.0 for reading and math with Common Core assessments in the future.) In anticipation of the transition, the state board of education voted in December 2011 to raise the assessments' proficiency cut scores for reading and math at every grade—for the first time in a decade.<sup>48</sup> Pressure to "raise the bar" is a common thread that runs throughout the Florida accountability system.

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<sup>47</sup> In an analysis conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in 2010, the Common Core reading and math standards earned grades of B-plus and A-minus, respectively. In similar analyses, Florida's U.S. History standards earned a C, as did its science standards. See *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011*, and *The State of State Science Standards 2012*, at [www.standards.educationgadfly.net/](http://www.standards.educationgadfly.net/).

<sup>48</sup> Raising proficiency cut scores is a strong step forward for Florida. In a 2011 analysis, the state's cut scores for reading and math for both fourth and eighth grades were found to equate to the *basic* level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. See National Center for Education Statistics, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Variation and Change in State Standards for Reading and Mathematics, 2005–2009* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, August 2011), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011458>.

## ***2) Reporting of accessible and actionable data to all stakeholders, including summative outcome data and other formative data to drive continuous improvement***

Florida presents a variety of data on its state department of education website. Users can break out FCAT results by district, school, and subgroup, as well as by five proficiency levels. An easy-to-navigate tool allows users to populate and compare results for multiple schools at once. In addition, the state provides a “performance report” tool that provides data on proficiency levels in addition to school performance designations, graduation and dropout rates, AYP, and more. However, this tool only allows users to view data by legislative district, a curious and relatively unhelpful choice.

For those who are willing to dig, the state does provide data on its website for a number of other indicators, such as attendance and non-promotion rates, staff experience and demographics, enrollment totals, SAT/ACT score averages, and more. Whether or not the data are disaggregated by district, school, or subgroup depends on the particular indicator.

## ***3) Annual determinations and designations for each school and district that meaningfully differentiate their performance***

Under the leadership of former Governor Jeb Bush in 1999, Florida implemented a school and district grading system, the *A+ Plan*, to which many attribute the Sunshine State’s impressive progress in recent years. District representatives report that the accountability system enjoys widespread support due to its long-standing credibility.

The *A+ Plan* is comprised of four components: standards, assessment, progress reporting, and consequences. Undergirding the structure is an intuitive A-to-F grading scale for schools and districts, which bases final grades on both proficiency and individual-student growth measures. (Proficiency is measured against FCAT scores in reading, math, writing, and science, while growth is measured against reading and math.<sup>49</sup>) Individual-student growth is calculated both for all students and for the lowest-performing quartile. At the high school level, the A-TO-F grades also incorporate other factors such as graduation rates (both for an entire student body and for a school’s at-risk students) and performance and participation rates in AP, IB, dual enrollment, Advanced International Certification of Education, and industry certification courses.

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<sup>49</sup> A state representative reported that Florida will likely decrease the influence of writing scores as it transitions to the Common Core standards, partly because the writing results are more prone to error.

School and district grades are translated as follows:

- A = Excellent progress
- B = Average progress
- C = Satisfactory progress
- D = Less than satisfactory progress
- F = Failing to make adequate progress

Marks like these set the standard for easy-to-understand grading systems across the nation. Still, as explained below, the structure of consequences and supports that builds off of the grading system is not equally straightforward. In addition, because the grading system does not incorporate measures of AYP, schools and districts can score high on the state scale and low on AYP, or vice versa. As one district representative put it, “Parents remain confused by a system that can rate a school well and poorly at the same time.”

Florida has set an example, however, for continually setting higher expectations for student achievement. In May 2011, the state board of education passed “automatic trigger” regulations mandating that, in the case that 75 percent or more of all schools earn A or B grades, the scores required to earn those grades must automatically be increased. The state has also raised the cut score for its writing assessment twice since *A+ Plus* began. As one stakeholder put it, this constant pressure increases student achievement: “If we had just kept our original accountability system in place and not ‘raised the bar’ on expectations or other criteria, we would have plateaued in performance long ago.”

#### ***4) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the school and district levels***

##### Rewards

Florida's incentives program is designed, according to a state staffer, “to incentivize high or improved performance as much as it is designed to differentiate between low- and high-performing schools.” Through the Florida School Recognition Program, schools earning A grades, as well as those that improve a letter grade from one year to the next, receive grants totaling \$75 per full-time student. Schools are required to use their awards for any or all of the following: (1) awarding faculty and staff bonuses; (2) purchasing educational equipment and materials; and (3) hiring temporary personnel to assist in maintaining or improving student performance. If the school doesn't use the money within a certain timeframe, the funds automatically go toward teacher bonuses. Still, district representatives weren't ecstatic about these incentives, relaying that incentives provide little motivation beyond the existing expectation that schools

should be high-performing. One district representative noted that “school grades and AYP proficiency are strong drivers at the district level,” not the incentives.

### Sanctions

The state uses both school grades and AYP results to determine the degree of technical assistance and intervention provided to its lowest-performing schools. This combination of accountability systems to distinguish between low- and high-need schools is known as Florida’s *Differentiated Accountability* model. The state signed on to a federal pilot project to implement the model in 2008; in brief, it allows the state some flexibility in aligning state and federal accountability systems to reduce redundancy and confusion. The state and federal structures continue to operate independently of each other, but the model allows the state to streamline what schools and district are asked to do under both systems so that they are implementing cohesive improvement strategies—not overlapping or conflicting ones.

Schools not required to participate in *any* improvement strategies are those elementary and middle schools that receive A, B, or C grades and those high schools with FCAT performance scores of 435 or higher; in addition, these schools must have made AYP for at least two consecutive years. All other schools are placed into one of the following categories:

- Prevent I
- Correct I
- Prevent II
- Correct II
- Intervene

These designations are not nearly as intuitive as Florida’s A-to-F performance scale. One district representative reports that “the public pays more attention to school grades” and that “parents don’t really understand the distinctions under *Differentiated Accountability*.”

The Intervene category entails the most state intervention and support. While the criteria used to determine the different classifications are complex, a school generally enters Intervene status if it receives repeated D or F grades and its percentage of proficient students in reading or math diminishes over five years. Intervene schools must implement one of four options, selected by the district, during the following school year: (1) convert school to a district turnaround school; (2) reassign students and monitor the progress of the reassigned students; (3) close

and reopen as a charter school;<sup>50</sup> (4) contract with an outside entity to run the school.<sup>51</sup>

### Support

Florida's system does not allow the state to manage or take over any public schools, but the state and districts share in monitoring schools and providing on-site supports. The specific actions that schools and districts undertake together to improve performance vary with the *Differentiated Accountability* categorizations, but can include school improvement planning, evaluating and replacing ineffective administrators, evaluating a school's instructional programming, and monitoring the progress of improvement efforts.

District representatives report that state supports for low-performing schools are often lacking. Despite following state education department protocol to improve and restructure schools, one district representative described the funds and resources that trickle down from the state as "very limited." Districts also face a dearth of available talent. As another representative put it, "Even if we wanted to remove principals from low-performing schools, the pool of administrators is low, so it is difficult to bring in new principals or other staff members."

### **5) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual student level**

Through its collection of student-centered policies, Florida places responsibility for student achievement on the shoulders of students themselves. Third graders in Florida must earn a Level 2 or higher on the state reading assessment in order to be promoted to fourth grade. ("Level 3" is considered "proficient," or "on grade level.") Those students who fail to do so can also be promoted by demonstrating an equivalent level of performance on an alternative, state-approved test, or by demonstrating adequate reading mastery through a student-performance portfolio.

In addition, Florida high school students are required to pass state assessments in order to receive high school diplomas. More specifically, as the FCAT 2.0 is phased

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<sup>50</sup> A 2010 Fordham Institute study found that in Florida, 7 percent of all low-performing district schools and 23 percent of all low-performing charter schools closed between 2003-04 and 2008-09. The study did not report whether these closures were due to low performance or for other reasons. See David Stuit, *Are Bad Schools Immortal? Turnaround and Shutdowns in Both Charter and District Sectors* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010), <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/are-bad-schools-immortal.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Schools that persistently fail AYP, but achieve A, B, or C grades under the Florida grading system, are placed in the category above Intervene (known as "Correct II"). So in practice, while the options outlined for Intervene schools parallel NCLB sanctions, schools that repeatedly miss AYP but earn strong grades under state accountability measures are *not* required to implement these most intrusive interventions.

in, students will have to pass the FCAT 2.0 tenth-grade reading test (beginning in 2010-11), the end-of-course Algebra I test (beginning in 2011-12), and end-of-course tests in biology and geometry (beginning in 2012-13). Students can retake the tests as many times as they like until they pass; they can also enroll for a free thirteenth year of public education if they need additional instructional time to pass the assessments. In addition, students can graduate by receiving concordant scores on the ACT or SAT, as determined by the state. The required scores for reading (verbal) increased between 2009-10 and 2010-11, while required scores for mathematics decreased somewhat.<sup>52</sup>

One stakeholder remarked that the state faces a political disadvantage in mandating that students pass assessments for high school graduation: Florida sees fewer students graduate high school than it otherwise would, and thus doesn't post graduation rates as high as some other states. The state's commitment to student accountability, however, overshadows such concerns.

As an incentive to strive for high performance, Florida high school students can earn automatic admission into one of Florida's eleven state universities if the student is in the top 20 percent of his or her class and completes all graduation requirements and core course requirements for state university admission. These students are considered a priority for the awarding of funds from the need-based Florida Student Assistance Grant.

Beyond incentives and consequences, Florida provides extensive options to support individual low-income students and students in low-performing schools—far more options than offered by most other states. The Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) offers students in low-performing schools the option of transferring to a higher-performing school in the same district or in another district (space permitting).<sup>53</sup> Like many other states, Florida also offers school choice through its many charter and magnet schools, but it is one of only a handful of states that offer the option of full- or part-time virtual schooling to every child in the state through a state-level online program, the Florida Virtual School (FLVS).

And in Florida, options extend beyond public schools alone: The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program (FTCS), established in 2001, provides tax credits for organizations to encourage them to support nonprofits that offer private school scholarships for low-income students. In 2010-11, almost 35,000 students enrolled

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<sup>52</sup> Required scores for the ACT and SAT reading assessments have grown from 410 to 420, and from 15 to 18, respectively. The required score for the SAT mathematics assessments has declined from 370 to 340; that for the ACT has remained the same at 15.

<sup>53</sup> Low-performing schools are defined as those with school grades of D or F under the *A+ Plan*, and those in either Correct II or Intervene under *Differentiated Accountability*. At its inception in 1999, OSP permitted students to transfer to participating private schools as well, but this option was declared unconstitutional by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006.

in over 1,000 participating private schools through the program. Similarly, the McKay Scholarship program offers private school vouchers to students with disabilities.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Florida also requires that districts adopt “controlled open enrollment” policies, which must include parental preference as a large determining factor in student assignments. Taken together, Florida makes plain that it expects its students and parents to take active roles in schooling, both by striving to meet standards, and by choosing the educational environments that best meet student needs.

### ***6) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual teacher and administrator level***

In Florida, teacher and administrator accountability are now key parts of the state’s accountability strategy. With the passage of the Student Success Act in spring 2011, Florida ended teacher tenure, established performance pay, and made student learning—as measured by state assessments—the chief criterion in teacher and principal evaluations.

Under the new system, districts may design their own teacher evaluation and compensation systems, but these systems must adhere to state criteria and be approved by the state. Teachers must be evaluated annually (and new teachers, biannually) against four performance categories: highly effective, effective, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. Tenure decisions—i.e., moving from probationary to non-probationary status—are to be informed by evaluations, not seniority. However, since the state now also mandates one-year contracts for teachers, tenure is essentially eliminated. Teachers rated as “unsatisfactory” must be placed on an improvement plan; those who fail to meet the plan’s outlined criteria are eligible for dismissal. Finally, Florida now requires that layoff decisions be based on evidence of student performance, not on seniority.

Districts must also now base salary schedules on teacher performance, not on seniority (beginning in 2014). So, while districts may design their own salary scales, these must ensure that only highly effective and effective teachers are eligible for salary increases. Teachers can also earn additional compensation by teaching certain subjects or teaching in Title I schools or Correct II or Intervene schools.

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<sup>54</sup> All together—including students participating in OSP, FLVS, FTCS, and McKay Scholarships, and those enrolled in charter schools—Florida saw about 473,000 students take advantage of choice options in 2010-11, or about 18 percent of the total student body. (Author’s calculation, based on enrollment trends drawn from the Florida Department of Education website. Note that this figure may be slightly inflated, as some students that participate both in charter schools and in FLVS, for example, may be counted twice.)

As at-will employees, Florida’s principals have no tenure rights. As one stakeholder described, this strengthens the accountability surrounding not just principals, but superintendents as well: “Since Florida grades schools in a clear manner (A-to-F), there is great pressure on superintendents to make wise decisions on principal placements and selection since the grade of the school reflects on the entire district.” The state now mandates annual evaluations of principals and requires that student achievement be the main criterion in those evaluations. Principals, like teachers, are only eligible for salary increases if they are rated as highly effective or effective.

### ***What are the strengths and limitations of Florida’s accountability system?***

#### ***Strengths***

**Comprehensive evaluation of school performance.** Florida provides a comprehensive look at academic performance by evaluating schools on the basis of both proficiency and individual student growth. The state’s focus on student achievement rates, student learning gains in mathematics and reading, and improvement for the lowest quartile of students is superior to most states’ focus on proficiency rates alone.

**Emphasis on improving the performance of low-achieving students.** As indicated above, an important strength of Florida’s accountability system is its focus on the performance and growth of the lowest-performing quartile of students at every school.

**Strong system of sanctions and incentives to drive school and district performance.** Florida’s accountability system provides concrete incentives for schools to perform at high levels, and consequences for schools that perform poorly. While the efficacy of these components is questioned by some districts, others describe them as being “incredible drivers” for improving school and student performance.

**Strong focus on student accountability.** Florida sets standards for individual students, incentivizes them to meet those standards, and ties consequences to falling short of those expectations. In addition, students benefit from numerous educational options.

**Exemplary teacher and principal accountability policies.** With the passage of the Student Success Act in spring 2011, Florida ushered in a new era of individual adult accountability in its schools. By requiring annual evaluations, linking them to objective measures of student learning, and eliminating teacher tenure, Florida has ensured that teachers and principals

are responsible for their own performance—and face consequences if they do not perform up to par.

### *Limitations*

**Confusing school and district accountability categories.** As straightforward as Florida’s A-to-F rating system is, the state introduced confusion into its accountability system by combining the A-to-F ratings with AYP measures to determine school and district intervention categories—and then exacerbated the problem by naming those categories Prevent I or II, Correct I or II, and Intervene. Florida would do well to establish intervention categories that are as straightforward and comprehensible as its A-to-F performance categories.

### *Final Word*

Florida’s accountability system can boast a number of strong features: measurement of both student proficiency and growth; a focus on the lowest-performing students; a system that includes both sanctions and rewards for low- and high-performing schools; and strong student, teacher, and principal accountability measures. In addition, Florida continually raises the bar for student expectations, so as to avoid plateaus in performance.

Information on Florida’s education-accountability system was primarily drawn from interviews with state representatives, district representatives, and local stakeholders, as well as from the Florida Department of Education website at [www.fldoe.org](http://www.fldoe.org) and the website’s school choice sister site at [www.floridaschoolchoice.org](http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org). Additional information was drawn from the Florida Virtual School website at [www.flvs.net](http://www.flvs.net) and the National Council on Teacher Quality’s 2011 *State Teacher Policy Yearbook*.