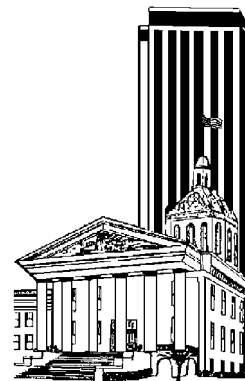


# oppaga Progress Report



June 2004

Report No. 04-41

## K-12 Accountability System and Student Achievement Improved, But Challenges Remain

### *at a glance*

Since the publication of our original report in April 2001, the Legislature and Department of Education have continued to implement components of the A+ Plan by expanding FCAT to all grades 3 through 10 and incorporating learning gains into the school grading criteria. Since the report's release, school grades and student performance improved. However, many students have not achieved proficiency in reading and math. Schools are implementing various strategies to improve performance in these subjects and the department has disseminated information on effective teaching strategies, particularly in reading.

The department also has improved program measurement and plans to expand current measures to assess the performance of programs such as vocational education that receive large state appropriations. However, the department's inspector general has not yet fulfilled his statutory responsibilities to independently verify that performance data is accurate and reliable.

Although Florida is considered to be on track in meeting many of the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), most Florida schools did not meet the federal adequate yearly progress criteria in 2003-04. Florida has set annual targets to meet the NCLB goal to have 100% of students proficient by 2013-14, but given the current rate of improvement, the state may not meet this goal.

### Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 2001 OPPAGA report.<sup>1,2</sup> This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our previous report.

### Background

The K-12 Public Education Program is intended to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to attain the highest levels of educational achievement, and to assist in preparing students to successfully participate in the workforce and pursue postsecondary education. Florida law requires that public education be a function and responsibility of the state, which has the responsibility for establishing minimum standards and regulations to ensure efficient operation of schools and adequate educational opportunities for all children. Each of the state's 67 counties constitutes a school district governed by an elected school board. During the 2003-04 school

<sup>1</sup> Section 11.51(6), *F.S.*

<sup>2</sup> *Justification Review: Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade Public Education Program, Department of Education, OPPAGA Report No. 01-22*, April 2001.

year, school districts provided public education to approximately 2.6 million K-12 students through a system of over 3,500 schools, 222 charter schools, and 7 university research schools. For Fiscal Year 2003-04, the program was funded with over \$17.6 billion and during the 2002-03 school year (the latest year data is available), school districts were staffed with 286,513 positions.

## **Prior Findings** —————

### ***Florida's education accountability system was evolving but needed improvements***

Our prior report assessed the state's educational accountability system, which was enacted in 1999 as part of the A+ Plan. We concluded that the A+ Plan did a reasonably good job of holding schools accountable, but needed further development. When the A+ Plan was developed, some components were implemented immediately while other components were intended to be implemented over time. At the time of our 2001 report, several planned components were not yet in place, including assessing learning gains, raising achievement standards, incorporating the FCAT into graduation requirements, and assessing other subject areas such as science.

Florida school performance grades had improved significantly over time, particularly for elementary schools and schools that formerly received a grade of F. Statewide writing and math scores had increased, while reading scores had shown relatively small gains. We noted that these performance gains were positive but needed to be interpreted with caution until the accountability system included individual student learning gains in student performance measures.

Our 2001 report also concluded that the Department of Education needed to do a better job in disclosing the effects of changes to the state accountability system. This would better enable the public and policymakers to know how increases or decreases in school grades were affected by adjustments to the way school grades were calculated.

In addition, we noted that the state's accountability system lacked measures for five major program areas: Exceptional Student Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Vocational Education, Fiscal Efficiency (district level), and Readiness between school levels. Developing measures in these areas would strengthen Florida's accountability system for education programs that receive large sums of state funding. Finally, we recommended that the department's inspector general take additional steps to ensure the accuracy and reliability of state performance data, specifically by making revisions to and implementing the department's data integrity monitoring plan.

### ***Schools were taking steps to improve, but several barriers needed to be overcome***

Our 2001 report found that while schools were responding to the A+ Plan, several school-level barriers needed to be overcome to improve student performance. Schools lacked readily available information identifying effective teaching strategies to improve student achievement, and often spent limited financial resources on learning materials and programs based solely on potentially biased research from vendors.

We also noted that the school improvement planning processes should be improved. We recommended that whenever possible, schools combine various improvement plans required by state and federal law as well as aligning these plans with their budgets. In addition, we noted that school districts needed to do a better job getting parents involved, and recommended that they measure the effect of local efforts to improve parental involvement. We also recommended that the department explore steps to release FCAT results earlier in the school year so that student performance information was available for school district planning processes.

***School districts poorly demonstrated that decisions they made and the programs they provided were efficient and effective***

Finally, our original report concluded that school districts' local accountability systems should be improved to better ensure that resources were used in the most efficient and effective manner. For instance, school districts that we reviewed generally had not established program-level goals, objectives, and measures, and did not routinely evaluate the performance and cost of the major programs and services that they provided.

## Current Status

***The accountability system significantly improved and is still being developed***

The Legislature and Department of Education have continued to develop the A+ Plan. Since 2001, the administration of FCAT has expanded to include all grades 3 through 10, and learning gains have been incorporated into the school grading criteria. The department also has adopted a norm-referenced reading and math test for all grades 3 through 10; incorporated the FCAT into high school graduation requirements; and administered a science test in grades 5, 8, and 10.

In addition, several other improvements to the state's accountability system are underway. In November 2003, the State Board of Education approved several changes to the school grading rule such as including all students (standard curriculum students, students with disabilities, and limited English proficient students) in the calculation of learning gains and the percentage tested, raising the expected student performance level for FCAT Writing over the next three years, and adding science as the seventh category to the school performance grading system in 2006-2007.

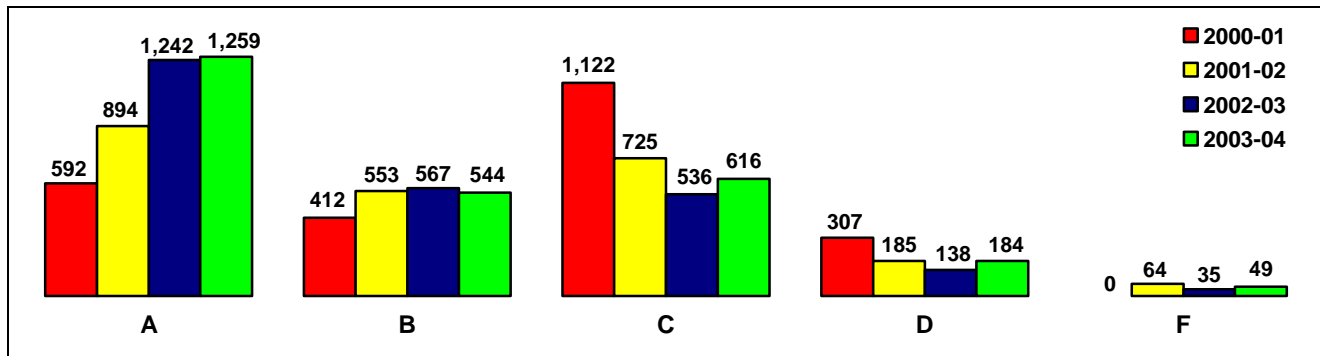
In December 2003, the State Board of Education also approved the K-20 Education Performance Accountability Task Force recommendations. As part of this initiative, the department created a return on investment system that links learning and costs that includes an efficiency index based on student learning gains and cost per student. The department plans to release its return on investment system on its website in June 2004.

Student performance has improved. Between 2000-01 and 2003-04, the number of A and B schools increased while the number of C and D, schools steadily decreased (see Exhibit 1). Since 2001-02 when learning gains were incorporated into the school grading criteria, the number of schools that have received a grade of "A" has increased 41%, from 894 to 1,259. It should be noted that some of the changes in school grades may be due to changes in the school grading criteria. However, according to Department of Education officials, given the nature of the changes to the school grading criteria, changes in grades during this period were likely due to increases in student performance.

Elementary school grades improved the most during this four-year period. As shown in Exhibit 2, the number of elementary schools that received a grade of "A" increased 65% from 580 to 959 between the 2001-02 and 2003-04 school years. Middle and high schools experienced smaller gains.

## Exhibit 1

### School Performance Grades Have Substantially Improved Between 2000-01 and 2003-04 <sup>1</sup>



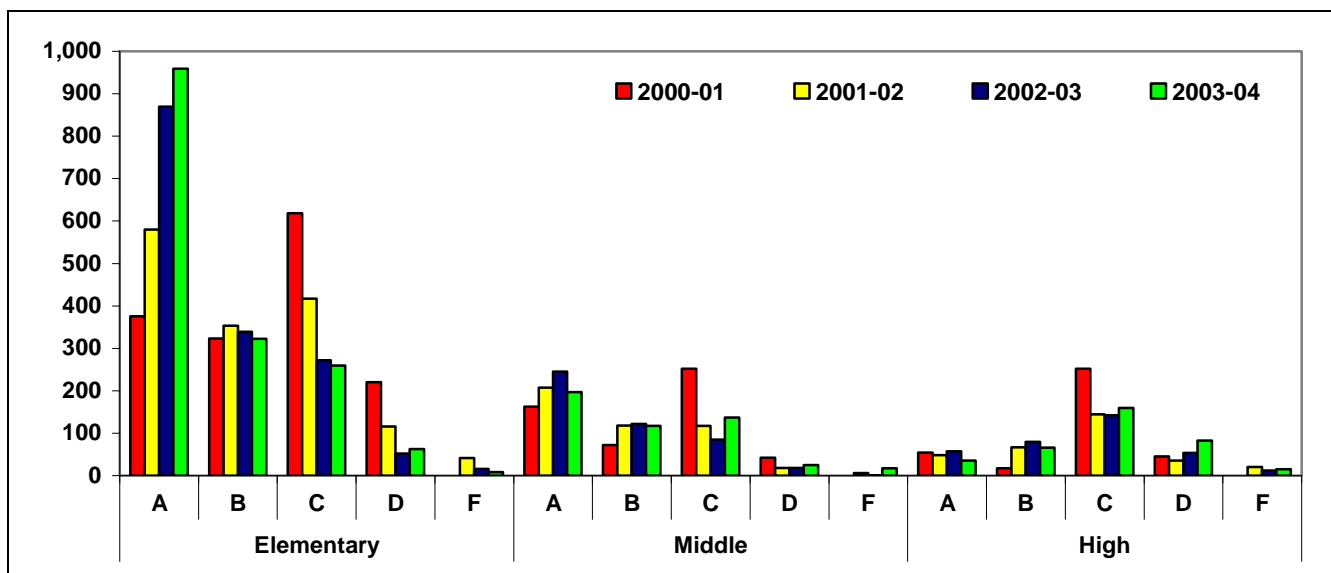
Note: Figures includes all curriculum groups.

<sup>1</sup> School grades included in the exhibit for 2003-04 (released in June 2004) are preliminary and subject to an appeals process that typically takes several months before they are final. Historically, these appeals have resulted in some grade changes.

Source: Florida Department of Education.

## Exhibit 2

### Elementary Schools Showed the Most Improvement Between 2000-01 and 2003-04



Note: Figures do not include combination schools.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education accountability reports.

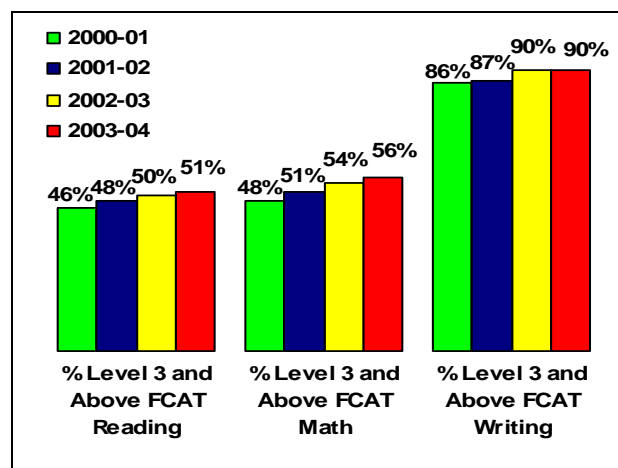
Student performance in reading, math, and writing increased modestly during the past four years. As shown in Exhibit 3, the percentage of students with FCAT scores demonstrating at least partial success in mastery of state academic standards (level 3 or above) increased by 8% in math between 2000-01 and 2003-04. Over the same four-year

period, students scoring at levels 3 or above increased by 5% in reading and 4% in writing.

However, almost half of Florida students continue to struggle to meet state academic standards in reading and math. For instance, in 2003-04 the FCAT scores of 49% of Florida students indicated limited to little success in mastery of state academic standards (i.e., levels

1 or 2) in reading, and 44% of students scored in level 1 or 2 in math.

### Exhibit 3 Percentage of Students with Partial Success in Reading, Math, and Writing Has Increased, But Many Children Do Not Meet State Academic Standards



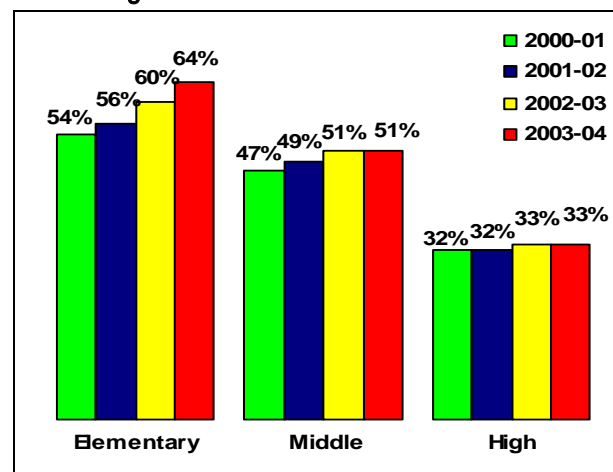
Note: Figures includes all curriculum groups.  
Source: OPPAGA analysis of FCAT results.

Reading achievement continues to be a challenge for older students. While math and writing scores are comparable across all school levels, significantly fewer high school students are proficient in reading compared to elementary and middle school students. As shown in Exhibit 4, in 2003-04 33% of high school students were proficient in reading compared to 51% of middle school students and 64% of elementary school students. High school student's performance remained relatively constant between 2000-01 and 2003-04.

To address these problems, Florida law requires retention of all third graders who do not score Level 2 or above on the reading FCAT or who do not meet good cause for exemption.<sup>3</sup> The legislative intent is to end social promotion so that no student will be promoted from grade 3 without demonstrating proficiency in reading. The department reports that addressing the needs of students in the third grade is easier and more effective than waiting until students are older. This is

because if students do not learn to read by the third grade they will be at high risk of falling behind in subjects, such as math and science, that require the ability to read to learn.

### Exhibit 4 Only 33% of High School Students Are Proficient in Reading



Note: Figures includes all curriculum groups.  
Source: OPPAGA analysis of FCAT results.

Changes in school grades should be interpreted with caution during years in which the school grading criteria is amended. When reporting school grades annually, information is not provided to the Legislature or general public on the extent to which changes in the grading formula may have accounted for increases or decreases in school grades. Since first assigning school letter grades, the criteria used to calculate these grades has changed several times. The department provides information to the State Board of Education on the potential impact of individual proposed changes to the school grading criteria before approving the changes. However, department officials indicate that it would be prohibitively time-consuming to run school data each year to determine the specific effect that formula changes have had on school grades. Without this information, policymakers and the general public, for instance, do not know the degree to which an increase in the number of schools receiving an "A" in a given year is due to actual increases in student performance.

<sup>3</sup> Section 1008.25(5)(b) and (6)(b), *F.S.*

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The department has improved program performance measurement and plans to expand current measures. The department developed reporting guidelines for a crosswalk between its system of alternative assessments for limited English proficient students and students with disabilities with FCAT achievement levels (1 through 5). The department reports the results of these alternative assessments as part of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.<sup>4</sup> The State Board of Education also approved including all exceptional student education and limited English proficient students in the calculation of school grades beginning in 2004-05.

As part of the State Board of Education's K-20 Performance Accountability System, the department is developing measures for secondary vocational education programs. The department plans to release these measures beginning August 2004.

The department's inspector general has not yet fulfilled his statutory responsibilities to ensure that performance data is accurate and reliable. The department's inspector general has not yet implemented our recommendations to assess the reliability and validity of performance data, primarily citing resource constraints. However, the department takes extensive steps to ensure data integrity including meeting with teachers annually, performing data edit checks, outsourcing third party data quality reviews, triangulating data checking results, and following strict guidelines to invalidate any suspect data. The inspector general's review is needed to independently verify that these efforts have been successful and that performance data is maintained and supported by agency records.<sup>5</sup> The department's inspector general plans to begin a limited review in June 2004 of measures with data reported for Fiscal Year 2002-03 in the department's legislative budget request.

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<sup>4</sup> With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school.

<sup>5</sup> See s. 20.055, *F.S.*, and s. 11.513(2), *F.S.*

## ***Schools are implementing various strategies to overcome challenges***

The department and school districts have taken steps to improve student achievement, especially in reading. The department has expanded its on-line research based resources through its Wave Research Series. This series is a set of successful teaching strategies addressing critical topics such as improving student achievement in reading and math. The department assessed and condensed information on research-based strategies to make accessing proven strategies easier for school improvement teams searching for ideas and strategies to implement.

In addition, in 2001, the department established Just Read, Florida!, a major statewide initiative that provides educators with online access to effective teaching and professional development strategies for reading.<sup>6</sup> Florida will receive approximately \$300 million over six years, begun in 2002 in federal Reading First funds, to assist school districts and schools implement proven methods of scientifically based reading instruction in classrooms in order to prevent reading difficulties in grades K-3. This competitive sub-grant process ensures that Florida school districts meet the eligibility criteria prescribed by the Reading First federal legislation and Florida's state grant application.

The department has provided planning assistance to schools, but more can be done. The department indicates that the delay in the release of FCAT scores experienced in the 1999-00 school year was due to unusual contracting circumstances. In each year since our review, FCAT scores have been released in May or June for all schools and grade levels tested. In addition, the department released FCAT scores in April 2004 for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students so that school districts could better use the results for promotions and graduation planning.

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<sup>6</sup> On September 7, 2001, Governor Jeb Bush signed Executive Order 01-260 designating Just Read, Florida! as a comprehensive and coordinated reading initiative.

The department continues to provide annual technical assistance to school districts on evaluating their school improvement process, and has expanded this technical assistance to include aligning required elements at the federal, state, district, school and classroom levels. However, despite these efforts, our reviews have found that several school districts need additional technical assistance in developing effective school improvement plans.<sup>7</sup> We suggest that the department, in a future Wave Series, give examples of how districts can strengthen school improvement plans and identify districts doing a good job in this area that could serve as resources for other districts.

The department has provided training and other information to help schools increase parental involvement. The Department of Education has taken several steps to address our recommendations to increase parental involvement in schools. Since 2002, the department has sponsored five regional and one statewide training session on using the national Parent Teacher Association standards for parent/family involvement programs.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the department recognizes exemplary practices that increase family involvement through its Five Star School Award and Parent Involvement Awards. The department also disseminated information on effective parent involvement strategies used by school districts in its Sparkplugs 2003 for Parent Involvement: Exemplary Practices.

***In 2003-04, most state schools did not meet adequate yearly progress criteria under the federal No Child Left Behind Act***

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires states to evaluate the performance of all students in all public schools in order to determine whether schools, school districts, and the state have made adequate yearly progress. In general, Florida is

considered to be on track in meeting many of the requirements in NCLB.<sup>9</sup>

However, in the 2003-04 school year, 65 of 67 school districts in Florida did not meet the federal adequate yearly progress criteria.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, even though under Florida's A+ Plan over 90% of state schools received grades of C or better, 72% of these schools did not meet federal adequate yearly progress criteria.

This outcome is largely due to differences in the way the state and federal accountability programs measure performance. Both the state's A+ Plan and NCLB measure student progress based on FCAT results. However, the two programs use different methods and, therefore, obtain different results.

The A+ Plan combines three measures of student performance with three measures of learning gains to create a total school score. By using this cumulative method, strong results in one area can compensate for a weaker area. Florida's implementation of NCLB includes three of the same measures of student performance as the A+ Plan (reading, mathematics, and writing); however, NCLB requires that a single snapshot of student performance be separately analyzed and reported for each of nine different sub-groups. By using this conjunctive method, that is, analyzing each group and criterion separately, a school can miss the mark in only one area and still be identified as not meeting the adequate yearly progress criteria. The NCLB system is more challenging for schools to meet and does not take annual learning gains of individual students into account.

Under NCLB, a series of consequences are applied if schools do not make adequate yearly progress for two or more consecutive years. These consequences only apply to schools that receive federal Title I funds and include being

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<sup>7</sup> As part of our school district reviews, we found 5 of 13 (38%) school districts still do not ensure that schools use effective planning and evaluation processes to improve student outcomes.

<sup>8</sup> Representatives from 50 school districts participated in this training.

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<sup>9</sup> More information on Florida's status in relation to the requirements of NCLB can be found on the Education Commission of the States website at: <http://nclb.ecs.org/nclb/>

<sup>10</sup> The Department of Education released preliminary adequate yearly progress results for 2003-04 in June 2004. These results are subject to an appeals process that typically takes several months before being final.



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identified as needing school improvement, developing a two-year “turn-around” plan, and providing students the option to transfer to a higher-performing public school in the district.<sup>11</sup> Based on preliminary results available in June 2004, the Florida Department of Education expects approximately 1,000 Florida schools to be subject to these consequences for not meeting the federal adequate yearly progress in both 2002-03 and 2003-04.

Furthermore, the state may not meet NCLB’s long-term goal of having 100% of students proficient by 2013-14. To reach 100% proficiency (i.e., Level 3 or above on FCAT), Florida has set intermediate goals for reading and math averaging 5% to 6% each year. Given the current rates of improvement of 1% to 2% more students proficient per year, however, the state may not meet the goal of having all students proficient in reading and math by 2013-14.

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<sup>11</sup> NCLB also holds school districts accountable for adequate yearly progress applying similar consequences.

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Project supervised by David Summers (850/487-9257)

Project conducted by Mark Frederick (850/487-9251)

Jane Fletcher, Staff Director

Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Interim Director