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Report No. 07-27

High School Completion Rate Increased Slightly After FCAT Graduation Policy Implemented

at a glance

While there have been concerns that the FCAT graduation policy would result in greater high school dropouts, this has not occurred. After the policy was established that students must pass the 10th grade FCAT to receive a standard diploma, the percentage of first-time 9th graders who went on to complete high school has increased slightly, while the proportion of students who demonstrate acceptable performance in the 10th-grade Sunshine State Standards in math and reading has almost doubled.

Students who do not meet the state's FCAT achievement standards generally have more difficulty with reading than math, and do not utilize all retake opportunities. While there are five retake opportunities prior to their scheduled graduation date, these students took the test an average of three times. Of the students who did not pass the FCAT before they were scheduled to graduate, 44% did not complete a Florida public high school program within four years.

Scope

As directed by the Legislature, we examined the requirement that Florida students must pass both the math and reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in order to receive a standard high school diploma.¹ We focused our review on four questions.

- What effect has the graduation requirement had on high school students?
- What parts of the FCAT are more challenging to students?
- Are students using all opportunities to pass the FCAT?
- Do students who do not pass the FCAT complete high school?

To address these questions, we analyzed FCAT and graduation data for four groups of students. The first group entered 9th grade during the 1998-99 school year—the year prior to the FCAT graduation policy, and was scheduled to graduate in 2002. The remaining groups entered 9th grade during each of the three years after the FCAT graduation policy was implemented, with the last group scheduled to graduate in 2005.²

We tracked each of these groups for four years until their class was scheduled to graduate from high school, and compared these groups' overall student performance on the FCAT. We also conducted interviews with teachers, principals, and district administrators to evaluate how school districts responded to the new requirement.

¹ Sections 1003.43 and 1008.22, *F.S.*

² For a full explanation of how these cohorts were selected please see Appendix A.

Background

Florida has required high stakes testing at the high school level since the 1970s. The 1976 Educational Accountability Act required high school students to pass a state administered functional literacy test in order to receive a high school diploma.³ The graduation requirement was not enforced until 1983 due to ongoing litigation. After 1983, students who met all other requirements but did not pass the test received a certificate of completion.

In 1994, the state instituted the High School Competency Test, which was a criterion-referenced test that assessed revised performance skills set at an 8th-grade level. Students were required to pass both the communications and math sections of the test to earn a diploma.

In 1996, the State Board of Education approved the Sunshine State Standards for Pre-K through 12th grade as a basis for setting student achievement expectations. The department subsequently developed the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) based on these academic content standards.

Starting with the graduating class of 2003, students are required to pass the FCAT to receive a high school diploma. The FCAT assesses students' reading and math abilities on a 10th-grade level, and also includes a norm-referenced section that measures student performance against national standards.⁴ Students are given six opportunities before they are scheduled to graduate to pass both the FCAT reading and math portions or use a concordant score identified by the Department of Education.⁵ Students who complete all required coursework for a traditional standard diploma, but are unable to meet the FCAT requirement receive a certificate of completion.

School districts are required to provide students who do not meet specified FCAT performance levels with additional diagnostic assessments to determine the nature of the difficulty.⁶ Districts must also provide remedial or supplemental instruction to students who continue to exhibit deficiencies until the performance levels are met or the student graduates from high school. This remedial instruction cannot take the place of any English or math courses required for graduation.

Findings

The percentage of students leaving high school prior to their fourth year, and the percentage of students receiving traditional standard diplomas have not substantially changed since the FCAT graduation policy was implemented. Sixty-six percent of the class scheduled to graduate in 2005 met the state's FCAT graduation requirement. Students who did not meet the state's FCAT requirement generally did not take advantage of all retake opportunities. About one-third of these students did not complete high school within four years.

What effect did the new graduation requirement have on high school students?

While there was concern that the FCAT graduation policy would increase high school dropouts, this has not occurred. Most students who leave a Florida public high school leave for a variety of reasons.⁷ Since the graduation policy went into effect, the proportion of high school students who demonstrate acceptable performance in the Sunshine State Standards portion of the FCAT in both math and reading has almost doubled, and the percentage of students who leave the public school system prior to their fourth year of high school has declined slightly. Although receiving a traditional standard diploma is dependent upon

³ In 1978, the test was renamed the State Student Assessment Test, Part II (SSAT-II).

⁴ The norm-reference section of the FCAT is not part of the test used to determine eligibility for a standard diploma.

⁵ Starting for the graduating class of 2003-04, concordant scores on either the SAT or ACT would qualify a student for graduation after the student has attempted the FCAT three or more times (s. 1008.22(9), F.S.).

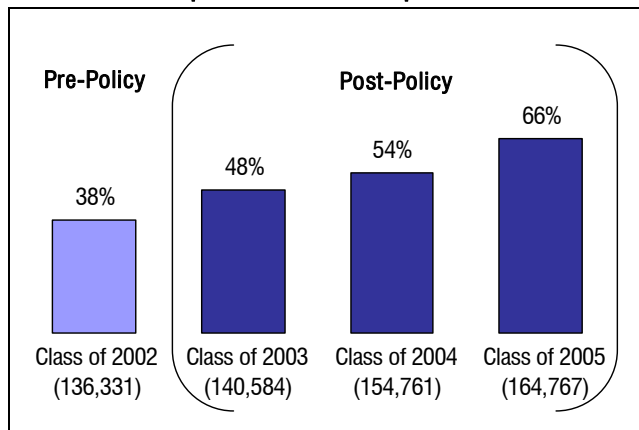
⁶ Section 1008.25, F.S.

⁷ Non-high school completers include students who completed 9th grade but did not receive a high school completion award or complete at least four years of high school and did not transfer to a non-public school, adult education program, or elect to be home schooled. Of the dropouts from the 2005 class, 75% (24,759 of 33,118) had a Department of Education withdrawal code of 'unknown' or 'missing'. Other dropout reasons include non-attendance, expulsion, medical, and other personal reasons.

passing the FCAT, the percentage of students who receive standard diplomas has not substantially changed. This is because the FCAT is only one requirement that students must meet to earn a standard diploma.

The percentage of students passing the FCAT increased after the graduation requirement went into effect. Exhibit 1 shows that the proportion of students passing both the reading and math portions of the FCAT increased substantially after the graduation requirement was implemented. While only 38% of the class of 2002 passed the reading and math portions of the FCAT, 66% of the class of 2005 passed these tests even with the increased passing score requirement of 300 (up from 287 in Reading and 295 in Math).

Exhibit 1
The Proportion of Students Passing Both FCAT Tests Almost Doubled in the Three Years After the Graduation Requirement Was Implemented



Note: The percentages in the exhibit represent the percentage of the entire group of students from the class that was scheduled to graduate in each respective year. The percentage is the pass rate of the entire class and not just pass rate for test takers.

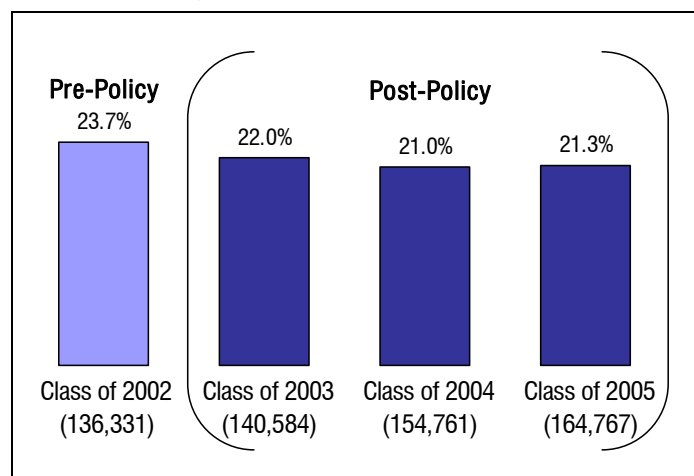
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

This improved performance may be due to improved instruction focused on meeting the Sunshine State Standards, more students retaking the tests, and/or schools providing additional remedial services. Districts reported providing additional remedial services including

frequent monitoring, intensive tutoring, intensive remediation math and reading classes, and after-school assistance. These remedial classes are provided in place of elective courses for the lowest-performing students who score level 1 on the FCAT. Districts also reported that some schools shifted the focus of summer schools from making up missed credits to providing remedial services to struggling students. Additionally, some schools have allocated resources for FCAT preparation as well as for math and reading coaches.

The proportion of students leaving high school prior to their fourth year has declined. The percentage of students leaving the public high school system before their fourth year decreased slightly after the FCAT graduation policy took effect, falling from 23.7% to 21.3%. (See Exhibit 2.) Among the 35,063 students in the 2005 class who left the Florida public school system, 33,118 (94.5%) dropped out of school. The remaining students entered a non-public school (1,050), opted for home education (597), or attended an adult school (298). The percentage of these students choosing a non-public school option has increased slightly since the FCAT requirement was implemented. Prior to the FCAT policy 4.7% of the students who left school continued their education in a non-public setting, compared to 5.5% of the 2005 students who left public schools.

This outcome addresses the concern that the graduation policy would result in more students leaving high school early because they could not pass the required test. Potential explanations for this outcome are that students received more academic support from districts and/or that students who do not meet the FCAT requirement are already struggling in school; requiring students to pass the FCAT to receive a diploma thus may not create a larger hurdle than that already posed by the existing requirements to pass specified courses and maintain a 2.0 grade point average.

Exhibit 2**The Percentage of Students Leaving Florida Public High Schools Before Their Fourth Year Has Declined Slightly, But Remained Over 21%**

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

The proportion of students receiving a traditional standard diploma has remained constant. Although higher percentages of recent graduating classes passed the FCAT compared to the class of 2002, the proportion of students receiving a traditional standard diploma remained relatively constant. Exhibit 3 shows that both before and after the FCAT graduation requirement, approximately 57% of students entering the 9th grade received a traditional standard diploma within four years. However, the percentage of students who received a non-traditional standard diploma that does not require passing the FCAT (e.g., FCAT waiver for qualifying disabled students and students passing the GED tests) has increased from 1% to 3.3%.

Also, the percentage of students receiving a certificate of completion, which only certifies that the student attended high school, has increased slightly from 2% of the 2002 class to 2.8% of the 2005 class. About 35% of the students from each graduating class did not receive a Florida public high school credential within four years. Some of these students left the Florida public school system prior to or during their fourth year, while others remained in school an additional year and may have eventually earned a diploma.

Exhibit 3**The Percentage of Students Earning Standard Diplomas Did Not Change Significantly After the FCAT Policy Was Implemented**

	Pre-Policy 2002	Post-Policy		
		2003	2004	2005
Total Number of Students	136,331	140,584	154,761	164,767
Completed a Florida Public High School Program	62.9%	64.9%	66.2%	65.0%
Traditional Standard Diploma ¹	57.1%	57.6%	57.2%	56.6%
Non-Traditional Standard Diploma ²	1.0%	2.4%	3.3%	3.3%
Special Diploma	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	2.3%
Certificate of Completion	2.0%	2.1%	2.9%	2.8%
Did Not Complete a Florida Public High School Program Within Four Years	37.0%	35.1%	33.8%	35.0%

¹ Traditional Standard Diploma requires students to earn 24 credits in certain courses, earn a 2.0 or higher grade point average, and pass both the reading and math portions of the FCAT.

² Non-Traditional Standard Diplomas are earned by students with disabilities who qualify for an FCAT waiver, or students who earn a GED and are awarded a standard diploma by the state of Florida.

Note: For each of the four cohorts, less than 1/10 of one percent of the students received a Special Certificate of Completion.

The percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

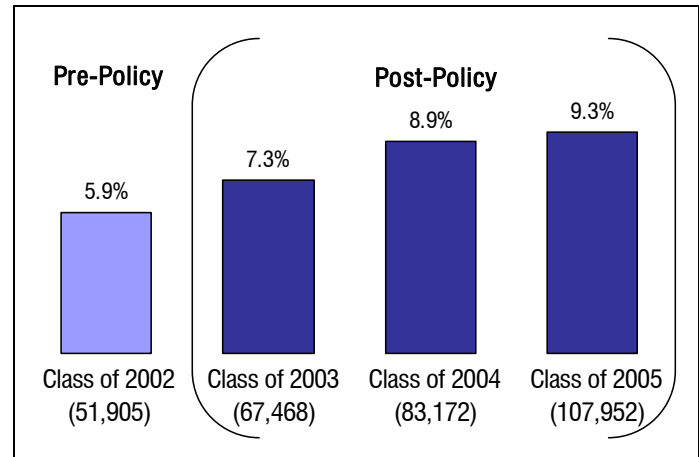
A likely reason why the proportion of students earning a traditional standard diploma in four years did not substantially increase as a result of improved FCAT performance was because the test is only one requirement for earning a traditional standard diploma. Students must also pass specified classes such as four years of English, accumulate at least 24 credits, and earn at least a 2.0 grade point average (GPA). Students who pass the FCAT and do not earn a traditional standard diploma are unable to meet one or more of the other graduation requirements. For example, almost 10% of the students from the graduating class of 2005 who passed the FCAT did not meet the minimum GPA requirement for graduation. Exhibit 4 shows the percentage of students who pass the FCAT but are unable to meet the GPA requirement has increased over time.

What parts of the FCAT are most challenging?

Students who never meet the FCAT requirement generally have difficulty passing the reading portion of the test. For the 2005 graduating class, 19% of the students who took the FCAT did not meet the state's FCAT graduation requirement.⁸ Exhibit 5 shows that 41% of these students passed the math portion but did not meet the required standard on the reading portion of the test. In contrast, only 11% passed the reading portion of the test without passing the math test.

Exhibit 4

An Increasing Percentage of Students Who Pass the FCAT Are Unable to Meet the GPA Requirement

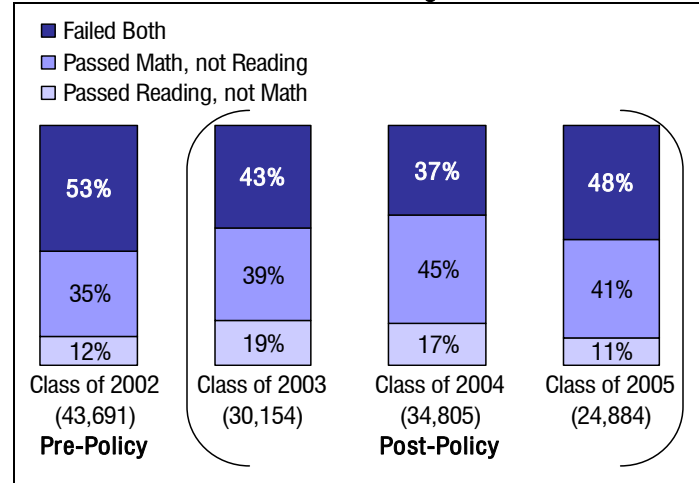


Note: The denominator in the above exhibit only includes those students who passed both the math and reading portions of the FCAT and also had a reported GPA. For the class of 2005, 99.8% (107,952 of the 108,108) students who passed both tests also had a reported GPA.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Exhibit 5

Students Who Did Not Pass the FCAT Were More Likely to Pass the Math Than the Reading Portion of the Test



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

⁸ Nineteen percent of the 132,992 students took both the math and reading FCAT.

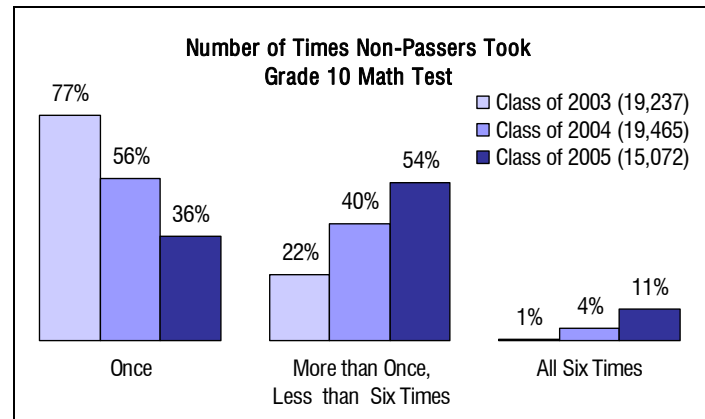
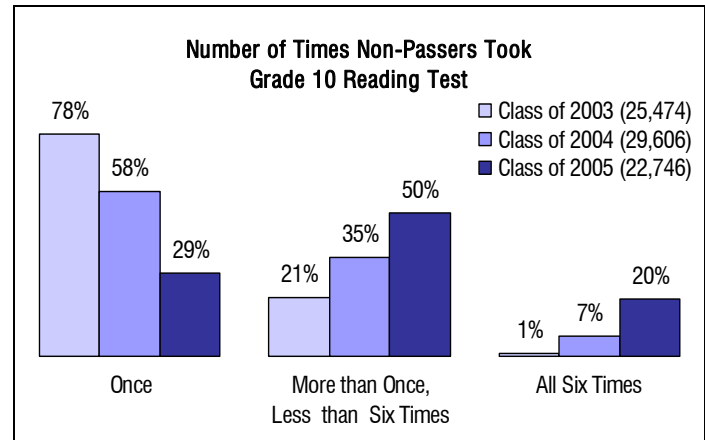
Are students using all opportunities to pass the FCAT?

Students who do not meet the FCAT requirement do not take advantage of all test retake opportunities. While the percentage of students who retake the FCAT has increased since the graduation policy was implemented, students generally do not retake the test as frequently as it is offered. Students have the opportunity to take the Grade 10 Reading and Math FCAT six times before the end of 12th grade. In the most recent group of students we could examine (those scheduled to graduate in 2005), Exhibit 6 shows that 11% of the students who did not meet the FCAT requirement took the FCAT Math test all six times it was offered. On average, students who did not meet the FCAT requirement took the test three times.

Schools report that they are taking steps to inform students about all six test administrations. Many schools hold an 'FCAT night' each year, informing families of what is required for graduation, including the six opportunities students have to pass the tests before the end of their senior year. Schools also send notices home stating that the student did not pass the required tests. In most schools taking the test during each administration is voluntary.

Exhibit 6

While an Increasing Percentage of Students Who Do Not Meet the FCAT Requirement Take the Test Multiple Times, Most Do Not Take It Every Time It Is Offered



Note: Students have six opportunities to pass the FCAT before they are scheduled to graduate.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Do students who do not pass the FCAT complete high school?

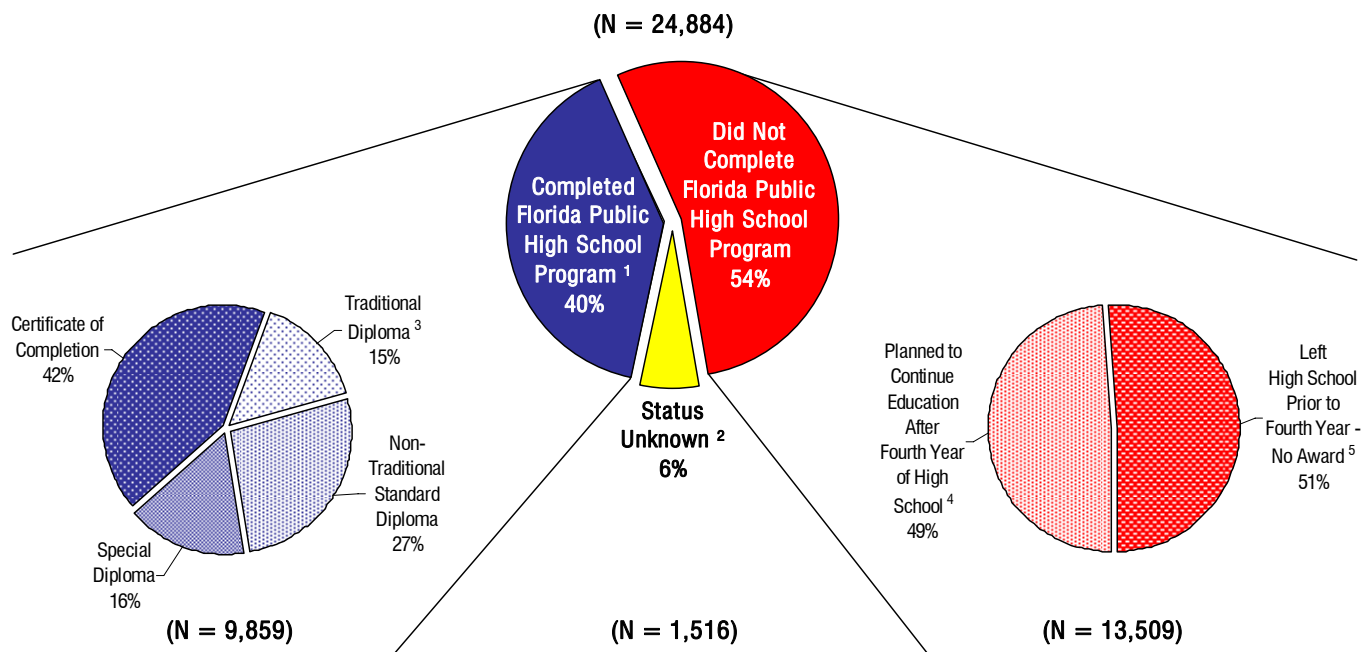
About 54% of the students who do not meet the FCAT requirement do not complete high school. Exhibit 7 shows that 54% of the students who took both tests from the 2005 class did not complete high school within four years, with slightly over half leaving the Florida public high school system before their fourth year. The students who did complete a Florida public high school program (40% of those that did not pass the FCAT) received one of several high school awards: a certificate of completion, a special diploma, a diploma that did not require passing the FCAT, or a traditional standard diploma without a reported passing score on the FCAT.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Department of Education to review and respond. The department did not provide a written response to this report.

Exhibit 7

Over 50% of Students from the 2005 Class Who Did Not Pass Both the Reading and Math Portions of the FCAT Did Not Complete High School in Four Years



¹ Less than 1% of the Class of 2005 received a Special Certificate of Completion.

² A total of 2.7% of all records from the entire graduating class of 2005 did not have a reported withdrawal reason or high school award at the end of the fourth year of high school.

³ Students who did not pass both the math and reading portions of the FCAT or have a concordant score should not have received a traditional standard diploma, which stipulated meeting the FCAT or concordant requirement.

⁴ Sixty-eight percent of these students planned to reenroll in a public high school (Florida or other state); 1% planned to be home schooled, 5% planned to enroll in a private school; 26% planned to enroll in an adult program.

⁵ Two percent of these students left prior to Year 4 to be home schooled; 4% left prior to Year 4 to a private school; 17% left prior to Year 4 to an adult program; 77% left prior to Year 4 (no continuation).

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Appendix A

Methodology

Data sources

To assess the effects of the high school graduation policy as outlined in s. 1008.22, *Florida Statutes*, we analyzed Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) results for four cohorts of students. We based our analysis on Survey Five end-of-year student-level data provided by the Florida Department of Education Data Warehouse, which included the following separate files: enrollment, attendance, demographic, FCAT, final GPA, and high school awards. This student-level data included all public school 9th grade students for each beginning cohort year and all available 10th grade math and reading FCAT scores.

Data analysis

We were directed to examine what effect the FCAT graduation requirement had on high school students, especially those students who did not pass one or both subject tests. Because a minimum of four years of data was needed for each 9th grade cohort, the most recent group of students we could examine was those entering 9th grade in 2001-02 and scheduled to graduate in 2004-05. Final data on students entering 9th grade in 2002-03 and graduating in 2005-06 was not available until after our fieldwork was completed.

The four cohorts included all first-time 9th graders who were in 9th grade the entire year.

- Class of 2002 Pre-Policy: Students who were first-time 9th graders during the 1998-99 school year (prior to the FCAT requirement) and scheduled to graduate in 2002.
- Class of 2003 Post-Policy: Students who were first-time 9th graders during the 1999-00 school year (first graduating class affected) and scheduled to graduate in 2003.
- Class of 2004 Post-Policy: Students who were first-time 9th graders during the 2000-01 school year (second graduating class affected) and scheduled to graduate in 2004.
- Class of 2005 Post-Policy: Students who were first-time 9th graders during the 2001-02 school year (third graduating class affected) and were scheduled to graduate in 2005.

Table A-1 shows the number students in the first-time 9th grade cohorts used in the analysis compared to the total student membership of 9th graders during Survey-2 of the beginning cohort years as provided by the department. The differences exist between the two sets of data because total membership includes all students who were enrolled in 9th grade anytime during the school year, including students who changed grades midyear and those who were retained in 9th grade for a second year. The first-time 9th grade cohorts only include students who were enrolled for the first time in 9th grade and who had appropriate grade level assignments for the previous years of data.

Table A-1
First-Time 9th Graders Compared to Total Number of 9th Graders

Ninth Grade Year	Total Ninth Grade Students for 67 School Districts	Ninth Grade Non-Promotions	Graduating Class	Cohort of First-Time Ninth Graders
1998-99	214,427	37,529	2002	136,331
1999-00	224,236	49,639	2003	140,584
2000-01	238,968	59,339	2004	154,761
2001-02	248,784	49,648	2005	164,767

Sources: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Appendix B

Supplementary Demographic and Performance Data

Table B-1 shows the students, by demographic group, who took both the reading and math portions of the FCAT and those students who passed both portions for each of the first three cohorts of first-time 9th graders that are affected by the new FCAT graduation policy. Since the policy went into effect, a greater proportion of first-time 9th graders are taking the 10th-grade tests required for graduation. In addition, a greater percentage of students are passing both portions of the test.

Table B-1
A Greater Proportion of First-Time 9th Graders Pass Both the Reading and Math Portions of the FCAT

Demographic Groups		Class of 2003 (1999-00 – 2002-03)			Class of 2004 (2000-01 – 2003-04)			Class of 2005 (2001-02 – 2004-05)		
		Total Students	Percentage of Students		Total Students	Percentage of Students		Total Students	Percentage of Students	
			Took Both Tests	Pass Both Tests		Took Both Tests	Pass Both Tests		Took Both Tests	Pass Both Tests
Gender	Female	70,332	73%	50%	77,109	79%	55%	82,130	84%	69%
	Male	70,252	66%	46%	77,652	73%	52%	82,637	78%	62%
Race / Ethnic Characteristic	Black	30,625	66%	28%	33,425	75%	37%	36,329	79%	51%
	Hispanic	23,345	69%	43%	25,945	75%	49%	29,301	80%	62%
	Other	3,578	78%	61%	4,372	81%	65%	5,322	85%	75%
	White	83,036	71%	56%	91,019	77%	61%	93,815	82%	72%
Socio-Economic Status	Not Free or Reduced Lunch	92,471	73%	57%	102,726	79%	62%	106,902	84%	74%
	Free or Reduced Lunch	48,113	62%	31%	52,035	71%	38%	57,865	75%	51%
Exceptionalities (ESE)	No Exceptionality	112,918	73%	53%	124,274	80%	58%	132,540	84%	72%
	Gifted	6,087	88%	88%	6,940	92%	90%	7,549	94%	94%
	Learning Disability	12,698	53%	15%	14,412	63%	22%	14,983	67%	31%
	Other	8,881	35%	11%	9,135	42%	13%	9,695	47%	17%
Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	Prior or Current LEP Student	18,530	69%	37%	21,093	75%	44%	23,964	80%	57%
	Awaiting Testing	178	61%	38%	172	65%	47%	172	64%	54%
	Not LEP Student	121,876	70%	50%	133,496	76%	55%	140,631	81%	67%
Total		140,584	69%	48%	154,761	76%	54%	164,767	81%	66%

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Table B-2 shows the students who took the reading portion of the FCAT during each year and the students who passed during that year. Most students from each cohort took the reading portion of the test during their second year of high school. Over three-quarters of the students who took the test eventually pass the test by the end of their fourth year in high school.

Table B-2

Over 75% of the Students Who Take the Reading Portion of the FCAT Eventually Pass the Test

High School Cohorts (Class of)	Number of Students Who Took the Reading Test ¹	Number of Students Who Passed the Reading Test	Passers as a Percentage of Students Who Took Test	Passers as a Percentage of Total Cohort
2003 (140,584)	100,032	74,558	75%	53%
Year 1 – 1999-00	23	6	26%	0%
Year 2 – 2000-01	90,548	67,416	74%	48%
Year 3 – 2001-02	6,991	2,974	43%	2%
Year 4 – 2002-03	10,125	4,162	41%	3%
2004 (154,761)	120,282	90,676	75%	59%
Year 1 – 2000-01	20	6	30%	0%
Year 2 – 2001-02	105,519	67,322	64%	44%
Year 3 – 2002-03	36,784	17,899	49%	12%
Year 4 – 2003-04	14,918	5,449	37%	4%
2005 (164,767)	134,091	111,345	83%	68%
Year 1 – 2001-02	22	6	27%	0%
Year 2 – 2002-03	124,830	92,211	74%	56%
Year 3 – 2003-04	34,630	15,692	45%	10%
Year 4 – 2004-05	14,301	3,436	24%	2%

¹ Since students may take the test more than once, the sum of students over the four years will not equal the total number of unduplicated students.

Note: Due to a large number of students retained in 9th grade, the number of students from the cohort who took the Grade 10 Reading test during the 2nd year (Class of 2005 - 124,830) is 42,566 less than the number of all students who took the test during the same year (167,396).

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Table B-3 shows the students who took the math portion of the FCAT during each year and the students who passed during that year. Most students from each cohort took the reading portion of the FCAT during their second year of high school. Over 80% of the students who took the math portion of the test eventually passed before the end of their fourth year of high school.

Table B-3

Over 80% of the Students Who Take the Math Test Eventually Pass the Test

High School Cohorts (Class of)	Number of Students Who Took the Math Test ¹	Number of Students Who Passed the Math Test	Passers as a Percentage of Students who Took Test	Passers as a Percentage of Total Cohort
2003 (140,584)	99,538	80,301	81%	57%
Year 1 – 1999-00	24	7	29%	0%
Year 2 – 2000-01	90,506	72,986	81%	52%
Year 3 – 2001-02	6,743	3,187	47%	2%
Year 4 – 2002-03	8,995	4,121	46%	3%
2004 (154,761)	119,313	99,848	84%	65%
Year 1 – 2000-01	19	9	47%	0%
Year 2 – 2001-02	105,325	82,070	78%	53%
Year 3 – 2002-03	27,120	14,905	55%	10%
Year 4 – 2003-04	9,418	2,864	30%	2%
2005 (164,767)	133,611	118,539	89%	72%
Year 1 – 2001-02	22	6	27%	0%
Year 2 – 2002-03	124,466	104,262	84%	63%
Year 3 – 2003-04	23,528	11,175	47%	7%
Year 4 – 2004-05	8,952	3,096	35%	2%

¹ Since students may take the test more than once, the sum of students over the four years will not equal the total number of unduplicated students.

Note: Due to a large number of students retained in 9th grade, the number of students from the cohort who took the Grade 10 Math test during the 2nd year (Class of 2005 - 124,466) is 41,158 less than the number of all students who took the test during the same year (165,624).

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

The Florida Legislature

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