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Report No. 08-42

The Department of Education Has Taken Initial Steps to Improve Student Progression Data

at a glance

Since the implementation of Florida's third grade retention policy, student performance has improved and fewer third graders have scored at the lowest level on the FCAT, level 1. In addition, third grade retention has decreased since the first year of the new retention policy.

The Department of Education has taken initial steps to ensure that progression data reported by the districts is complete and accurate. In 2005 the department implemented data edits to ensure that the data is complete and accurate. This will likely help resolve two of the three data issues noted in our previous report. However, the department has not added data elements such as information on mid-year promotions to help resolve the situations where there is not enough information to determine why retained third grade level 1 students took the fourth grade FCAT in the following year.

Scope

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 2006 OPPAGA report.^{1,2} This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department

has addressed the recommendations included in our report.

Background

To improve student performance, the 2002 Legislature required that third grade students must attain a specified score on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) to be promoted to fourth grade.³ FCAT scores are grouped into five levels, with one being the lowest level and five the highest. Students must score above level 1 on the reading portion of the third grade FCAT to be promoted to fourth grade unless they qualify for one of six good cause exemptions.

1. Students with limited English proficiency who have less than two years of instruction in an English for Speakers of Other Languages program.
2. Students with disabilities for whom participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate.
3. Students who demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment.⁴

¹ Section [11.51\(6\)](#), *F.S.*

² *Third Grade Retention Policy Leading to Better Student Performance Statewide*, OPPAGA Report No. [06-66](#), October 2006.

³ Section 1008.25, *F.S.*

⁴ As of May 2005, students can be promoted by scoring at or above the 45th percentile on the norm-referenced test portion (SAT-10) of the FCAT or parallel form of the SAT-10. In districts where the SAT-9 alternative assessment is administered, students must score at or above the 51st percentile for promotion.

4. Students who demonstrate, through a student portfolio, that they are reading on grade level (based on mastery of the Sunshine State Standards).⁵
5. Students with disabilities who were previously retained in grades K-3.
6. Students who were previously retained in grades K-3 for a total of two or more years.

Students scoring at level 1 may also be promoted to fourth grade if they can achieve the required reading level to be successful in fourth grade. Students can demonstrate this prior to the beginning of the next year or during the next school year. To be promoted to fourth grade mid-year, the students must demonstrate mastery of the third grade reading skills and beginning fourth grade reading skills. Students may demonstrate these skills through a standardized test or through a portfolio of the child's work compiled by their teacher.

Our prior report evaluated the FCAT performance of students affected by Florida's third grade retention policy during the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years and followed their performance through the 2004-05 school year. We concluded that student performance had improved since the adoption of the retention policy. While the number of students who repeated third grade after scoring at level 1 on the FCAT had increased, the subsequent performance of these students also improved. Sixty-two percent of the students who repeated third grade because they scored at level 1 on the FCAT subsequently improved their performance to level 2 or above. About two-thirds of these students maintained their improved performance into fourth grade.

We also noted that many students scoring at level 1 were promoted for one of six statutorily defined "good cause" exemptions. The subsequent performance of these students was generally lower than that of retained level 1 students. However, students who were promoted for an academically related good cause (alternative assessment, or a portfolio) performed

similarly in fourth grade as the level 1 students who repeated third grade.

Our 2006 report also noted that the data collected by the Department of Education was not sufficient to document the reasons why all third graders scoring at level 1 were promoted to fourth grade. We found three major types of data problems.

- School districts reported several thousand level 1 students as "academically promoted" instead of reporting a good cause exemption.
- Districts reported several hundred students who were promoted to fourth grade after scoring level 1 without a reported good cause exemption.
- Districts provided insufficient information to identify why about 2,000 students took the fourth grade FCAT even though they had been coded as retained at the end of the previous school year. These students could have received a mid-year promotion, been given the fourth grade test in third grade, or been assigned the wrong promotion code by the district.

The data quality improved during the second year of the policy, and the department was addressing some of data problems. We recommended that the department collect sufficient information to determine the timing and rationale for the promotion of all level 1 third graders to fourth grade. Specifically, we noted that the department needed to

- review districts' reported data to ensure it is complete and accurate;
- create data elements for the date and reason of a mid-year promotion for level 1 students coded as retained during the previous academic year; and
- annually match retained students from the previous academic year to determine if level 1 students were, in fact, retained by school districts.

⁵ Section 1008.25, *F.S.*, requires that the student's mastery of the Sunshine State Standards be equivalent to at least level 2 on the reading portion of the third grade FCAT.

Current Status

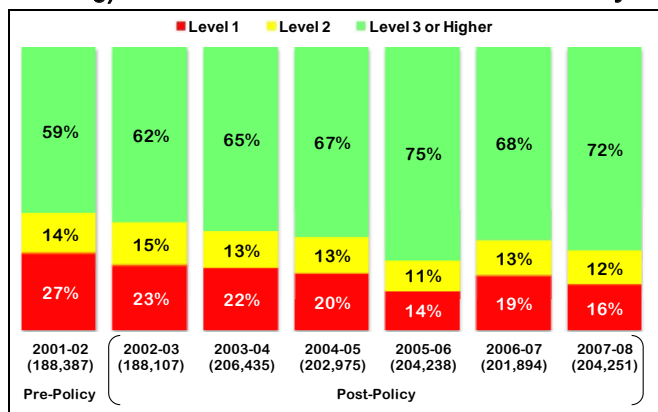
The academic performance of third grade students has continued to improve since the retention policy was implemented. Fewer third graders are scoring at the lowest level on the FCAT, and the rate of retention has declined. The department has taken some steps to ensure that data relating to the third grade retention policy is complete and accurate, but it has not yet added new data elements that are needed to allow it to know the date and reason why students are promoted mid-year.

Fewer third graders are scoring at level 1 of the FCAT Reading Test

As shown in Exhibit 1, the percentage of third grade students scoring at level 1 on the FCAT reading exam has declined substantially since the retention policy was implemented. In 2001-02, prior to the retention policy, 27% of third graders scored at level 1 on the exam. In contrast, only 16% of third graders scored at Level 1 in 2007-08. The percentage of students showing reading proficiency (level 3 or above) has increased from 59% to 72% over this period.

Exhibit 1

The Percentage of Third Graders Showing Reading Proficiency (Scoring Level 3 or Higher on FCAT Reading) Has Increased Under the Retention Policy



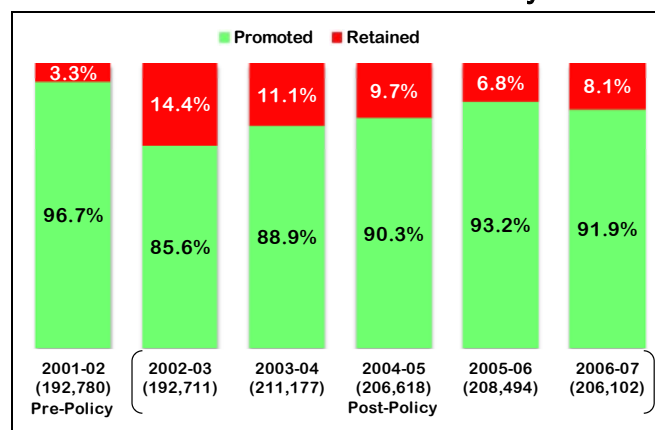
Source: Department of Education state level Third Grade FCAT results, 2001 through 2008.

Third grade retention has decreased since the policy was adopted

As shown in Exhibit 2, the percentage of students retained in third grade has declined over time. This percentage substantially increased when the policy was first implemented in 2002-03. Since that time, it has decreased from 14.4% to 8.1% in 2006-07.

Exhibit 2

Number of Students Retained in Third Grade Decreased Since the First Year of the Policy



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education reports.

The department has taken initial steps to ensure that progression data reported by the districts is complete and accurate

The department has taken steps to address two of the three data issues noted in our prior report. However, it has not yet added data elements to collect information on mid-year promotions, and it is not conducting data matches to determine whether students coded as retained are in fact, retained by districts.

The department has implemented edits to help ensure that data are complete and accurate.

The department has added edits to its student database to help ensure that districts accurately report student progression data. These edits should address two of the data problems noted in our previous report; instances where students who lacked a good cause exemption were nonetheless recorded as promoted, and cases where such students were erroneously coded as academically promoted. The department should analyze the effect of the edits to determine the extent to which the edits have eliminated the data errors.

The department has not taken the necessary steps to address data problems relating to mid-year promotion students.

The department has not added data elements to its student progression database to record mid-year promotions. As a result, it continues to lack information needed to determine why students who were coded as retained in third grade nonetheless took the fourth grade FCAT the following year. These students could have received a mid-year promotion, been given the fourth grade test in third grade, or been assigned the wrong promotion code by the district.

Only 52% of such students scored above level 1 on the fourth grade FCAT, significantly lower than the percentage of students who received a good cause exemption for academic reasons (70% - alternative test; 60% - portfolio) or students who were retained (65%). Since these students did not perform as well as students who were retained or promoted for an academic good cause, it is important for the department to monitor their performance. However, because the department does not specifically track mid-year promotions, it cannot readily determine the degree to which these students' poor performance reflects data errors or academic weaknesses. To address this problem, the department should add data elements to its student database to specifically record mid-year promotions and track level 1 students from year to year so that it can better assess the success of the state's mid-year promotion option.

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