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We're No. 10? Not So Fast What an 'Education Quality' Study Really Said

Recent news reports and comments by state legislators during the budget-cutting special legislative session maintained that, as the St. Petersburg Times put it,

Florida ranks No. 10 among states in education quality, according to the latest annual report card from the highly regarded Education Week newspaper.

A State Board of Education member echoed the point last week when he "pointed out Florida's ranking as 10th in the country for quality of education by Education Week".

So after recording dismal rankings among the states for years in comparisons of education success, how is Florida suddenly 10th best in the nation?

Unfortunately, it's not. That's not even what Education Week said, and furthermore, a definitive grade of "education quality" is impossible to determine anyway.

While it's tempting to adopt the shorthand phrase, "education quality", to explain the Education Week report, its use confuses and masks problems in Florida education. Such shorthand allows some to maintain, as they did during the legislative session to excuse education budget cuts, that Florida's education system is achieving high quality regardless of funding levels.

In fact, Education Week avoids the "education quality" label. Instead, it characterizes its study only as "evaluating particular aspects of quality", as noted by a senior researcher on the project:

The grades are based on a variety of measures of education policy and performance. These policies and performance indicators are considered to be important in evaluating the quality of a state's education system. Research from experts in the field suggests that these measures contribute to academic success or tell us something important about the quality of education in a state.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that there are varying definitions of education quality. If education quality is defined in terms of the policies a state has put in place and the

test scores and graduation rates of its students, Quality Counts examines that. We evaluate a wide range of policies and performance indicators. While our report is comprehensive, it's still evaluating particular aspects of quality. We aren't able to (and aren't trying to) evaluate all potential factors that contribute to education quality.

"In the end," the researcher said, "education quality is somewhat in the eye of the beholder."

In other words, no matter how much the Education Week work is respected, it doesn't claim to provide a definitive measure of "education quality".

Policies Are in Place, But Money Isn't

So what did the report indicate about Florida's K-12 education system?

The magazine used several dozen sets of data on six "key dimensions of educational policy and performance": Chance for Success; Transitions and Alignment; School Finance; Teaching Profession; K-12 Achievement; and Standards, Assessments, and Accountability. The first three incorporate new data for this year's report, while the others carry forward data from the 2008 Quality Counts report.

In three cases, the evaluation considers simple "process indicators" only -- whether or not the state has a policy in place. In other cases, hard data is used: high school graduation rates, per-student funding or scores on National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, for example. Even when hard data is used, because of the lag in compiling comparable data for all states, some information is not current, relying on data a few years old.

Florida's overall grade of B-, the source of the claim that the state ranks 10th in "education quality" among the states, is the average of the scores in the six "key dimensions", some using current information and some relying on 2008 data.

Among Southern states, Virginia, Georgia and West Virginia scored higher than Florida, and Arkansas tied Florida with an identical 79.6 score on a scale of 100.

In the categories using fresh 2009 information, Florida achieved no higher than a C+ grade:

- C+ in Chance for Success, equal to the average state score;
- C+ in Transitions and Alignment, better than the C average;
- C- in School Finance, below the average C+ of all the states.

Chance for Success relies on an index of 13 indicators designed to reflect how well a state performs in "helping young children get off to a good start, providing youths with a quality education during the schooling years, and offering adults significant opportunities for rewarding careers".

On those 13 measures Florida ranks 33rd among the states, recording a state ranking as high as 9th in percentage of three- and four-year-old children enrolled in prekindergarten and as low as 44th in high school graduation.

Transitions and Alignment measures 14 “process indicators” -- whether or not a state has adopted policies that some school reformers believe essential to higher student achievement. Education Week ranked Florida 15th in this area, finding its early childhood policies excellent and workforce policies slightly better than the state average, but college readiness policies worse than average. Florida was faulted in the college readiness area for the lack of such policies as aligning high school assessments with postsecondary institutions and requiring college prep courses to earn a high school diploma.

It is in funding that Florida records its lowest grade in the Education Week calculations. Its overall **School Finance** grade of C- is raised by an A grade for **Equity** of funding across school districts. The high grade in equity is due to the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP), widely regarded as a model of equalized funding since its adoption.

However, in education **Spending**, Florida flunks. Its 51.7% score earns an F grade. In subcategories measuring the level of funding, Florida ranks no better than 38th among the states and as low as 44th. On expenditures for K-12 schooling as a percent of state taxable resources, Florida ranks 42nd. On per-pupil expenditures adjusted for regional cost differences, Florida is 41st -- more than \$1,500 per pupil less than the national average.

Grades for the other three “key dimensions” rely on older data, reported a year ago in the 2008 Education Week study. Florida received an A-, 12th in the nation, for **Standards, Assessment and Accountability**, a grade based on process indicators such as clarity of subject-matter standards, components of state tests and a school accountability system. That Florida has adopted these policies is hardly surprising after the heavy emphasis in the last decade on Sunshine State Standards, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and the “A+” program.

Similarly, Florida is graded B, 4th in the nation, for adopting policies believed to improve the **Teaching Profession**. These process measures include teacher evaluation measures and alternative certification possibilities.

Finally, Florida receives a C grade, 7th in the nation, on the Education Week **K-12 Achievement** Index, which relies primarily on data reported last year from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. NAEP periodically tests samples of fourth-, eighth- and twelfth-graders. Florida students’ scores in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math rose more than most states between 2003 and 2007 while the achievement gap between poor and other students narrowed. On the negative side of the achievement ledger, Florida ranked 45th in high-school graduation rates.

While the Education Week report may represent a snapshot of selected indicators of education progress, it’s not an endorsement of Florida’s education work. It’s far from a justification for shortchanging Florida’s schools and children.

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