



Issue Brief

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Florida's Latest Education Ranking Deserves Closer Look

The recent high ranking that Florida received from a national education publication isn't quite the cause for celebration that it might seem at first. In fact, at the same time *Education Week* gave Florida high grades in some areas, it also pointed out glaring shortcomings which, if not addressed, threaten the state's economic wellbeing.

Education Week's latest annual Quality Counts assessment of American education awarded Florida an 80.3 percent grade overall, or a B-minus. The score ranked Florida eighth among the states. The announcement of the Florida grade led to celebratory statements by some public officials and assertions that it demonstrates that the state provides high-quality public education.

But it needs to be understood that the ranking **does not** mean that Florida's K-12 schools are eighth-best in the nation. Just as was the case last year when Florida was ranked tenth, the *Education Week* report evaluates selected **accountability and performance policies** but does not in any manner constitute a definitive statement of the quality or outcomes of a state's education system. (See "[We're No. 10? Not So Fast. What an 'Education Quality' Study Really Said,](#)" January 2009.)

So what does this year's report really say about Florida public education?

First, Florida has enacted almost all the accountability and performance policies recommended by the current generation of school reformers, earning an A grade in the standards, assessments and accountability category from *Education Week*. That's fine, as far as it goes. And it's not surprising, because school reform efforts in Florida since the 1990s have centered on the Sunshine State Standards, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), and various mechanisms like school grades designed to increase accountability.

But the fact remains that other results documented in the assessment by *Education Week* in Florida's latest ranking aren't superlative. They are, rather, deeply disturbing.

Three grades included in the report make the case:

- Student achievement (scores on national standardized tests): D-minus.
- Funding per student (compared to the national average): F.
- College readiness: F.

The assessment notes that Florida's high-school graduation rate is 45th in the country and that the state ranks below the national average in the percentage of young adults with a degree or enrolled in college. Furthermore, studies conducted by Florida's officials have found that more than half of students entering two-year or four-year colleges in Florida require remediation in mathematics, reading, and/or writing.

Similarly, the state receives a B grade on equity of spending, in contrast to the F grade in actual funding. In other words, Florida spent less on education than most other states, but at least divided the limited pot of dollars fairly evenly among the 67 school districts.

Of interest for the future will be whether the amount of state money devoted to schools shrinks. Florida's grade on funding reflects 2007 spending – before budget cuts due to the recession, use of federal Recovery Act dollars to prop up state K-12 funding, and shifting of a greater share of school costs to local school boards (and therefore to property taxes).

Policymakers, advocates and others interested in education improvement should take the Quality Counts report for what it is: one broad evaluation of selected policy and performance policies, not a judgment that Florida provides a high-quality K-12 education system that generates an adequate talent pool for our university system or for many businesses that want to expand and locate here. On that score, Florida still has a long way to go.

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