

Education Reform for 2010 Session

Calls for comprehensive end-of-course exams in a wide variety of subjects to replace the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)

Wednesday December 16th, 2009

TALLAHASSEE -- With a focus on children instead of high-stakes tests, Florida House Democrats are proposing bold initiatives to increase public school accountability and prepare every student to compete in the global economy. House Bill 473 by Rep. Dwight Bullard (D-Miami) calls for comprehensive end-of-course exams in a wide variety of subjects to replace the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) as the nearly exclusive tool to determine student and school performance.

The bill expands the way school accountability is determined by focusing on the entirety of students' work throughout the year in addition to their end-of-course exam scores. The ability for schools to prepare students for promotion and their successful use of innovation and technology in teaching would be taken into account in the new accountability formula.

In most grades, accountability is currently entirely based on the FCAT, a standardized test that offers only a snapshot of students' performance. The FCAT covers core-curriculum subjects such as reading, math, and, to a lesser extent, science and writing, but ignores important subjects such as civics, geography, world history, humanities and the arts.

The specifics of implementing these reforms would be developed over the next three years by a panel of education professionals, parents, teachers, community leaders and research experts. All of the reforms would take effect in the 2014-2015 school year. That will give the state and school districts adequate time to train classroom teachers on the new standards before they are put into practice.

"Our bill puts children first by giving parents, school professionals and the education community the power to work out a plan that everyone can buy into," said Representative Bullard, the House Democratic Ranking Member on K-12 education policy matters. "The problem with education reforms of the past decade is that ideas were dreamed up in Tallahassee then hammered into the schools, teachers and children whether or not those ideas made sense.

"This plan will help bring Florida's public school system into the 21st Century." Elementary schools would also see the FCAT phased out in the 2014-2015 school year and replaced with subject area assessment tests under the plan. Like middle and high schools, elementary schools would also be assessed on the entirety of students' work throughout the year.

Realizing that students must reach higher to compete in the new global economy, the plan requires students to pass Geometry, Algebra II, Biology I and an additional high-level physical science to graduate. To help students who will struggle to meet these standards, the bill uses diagnostic tests to assess students in the sixth, eighth and tenth grades. Those who are not on track to meet the standards would be directed toward intervention programs to help them succeed.

Intervention services will be paid for by redirecting money now used to reward high performing schools toward programs to help all struggling students. Highperforming schools would continue to be rewarded for excellence by being liberated from certain state mandates and would get more flexibility to develop and fund innovative education programs.

Republicans and Democrats united in 2008 to create a new grading formula for high schools that deemphasized the FCAT and placed more focus on graduation rates, success in advance placement programs and success in preparing students for college. This bill builds on the spirit of those reforms.

"Expanding accountability needs to go beyond high schools," said Rep. Martin Kiar (D-Davie), the House Democratic Ranking Member on education funding issues. "It's time to begin assessing elementary and middle schools on everything students are doing, which would provide our children with a better and well rounded education.

"Lawmakers may not agree on everything. But I believe this plan opens the door again for bipartisan education reform," said Kiar.

State Sen. Dan Gelber (D-Miami Beach) has agreed to sponsor the bill in the Florida Senate.

BILL SUMMARY

Florida House Democratic Education Reform
HB 473 by Rep. Dwight Bullard

- Increases Accountability and Academic Standards
- Improves College and Career Preparation with Rigorous Academic Standards
- Replaces the FCAT with End-of-Course Exams and Student Progress Measures
- Incentivizes School Success

I. INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY BY REFORMING THE FLORIDA COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT TEST

Florida House Democrats propose implementing a new strategy of school accountability that ends reliance on the FCAT, a high-stakes test, as Florida's sole public school accountability tool.

We propose:

- Requiring schools to use end-of-course exams in grades 6 through 12 and a new subject area assessment test for grades 3 through 5 to measure student performance in both core and non-core curriculum.
- Ending use of the FCAT as the state's primary assessment tool, to determine whether to retain third grade students, or as a factor in preventing students from receiving a high school diploma.

Accountability also will be measured through:

- Students' overall academic performance (i.e.: GPAs and/or student portfolios),
- Schools' ability to prepare students for promotion to the next grade and careers,
- Schools' successful use of technology and innovation in the classroom.

The grading formula for grades 3 through 8 will be based 25 percent on end-ofcourse exams or subject area assessment tests and 75 percent on overall student performance, student preparedness and schools' use of technology and innovation.

The plan gives the State Board of Education power to expand the grading formula to other measures that are valuable indicators of student progress.

Under this model, students who make adequate academic progress throughout the year but perform poorly on the assessment tests will not be denied promotion or

graduation based solely on their test scores. The Department of Education will form a panel of education stakeholders, experts and community leaders to design the assessment formula, which would be in place by the 2014-2015 school year. The plan does not alter the new grading formula for high schools, which is based (starting this year) 50 percent on students' FCAT performance and 50 percent on other factors, such as schools' graduation rate, success in offering advanced courses and other factors. The plan requires the state to incorporate the entirety of students' work, as determined by their GPA, student portfolios, or other measures, into the high school grading formula by the 2014 school year.

II. RAISING THE BAR

- Readiness for College and Career
- Better Graduation Rates
- Intervention for Low Performing Schools

A. The academic standards for students to graduate high school should be enhanced to ensure that more graduates are adequately prepared for college and to compete in the global marketplace.

We propose:

- **Adding Algebra II, Geometry, Biology I and high-level physical sciences to Florida's high school graduation requirements.**

To achieve higher standards and to keep students on track toward graduation, schools must begin preparing students in the early grades. Students should be diagnostically tested in the 6th, 8th and 10th grades to ensure they are on track for graduation. To help struggling students succeed, intervention programs will be mandatory for those who are deemed to not be on track for meeting these standards.

B. The state needs more resources and a greater focus on helping low performing schools and students. Florida has one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the country, according to independent analysts, including

the authors of Education Week magazine's 2009 "Diplomas Count" study. Additionally, Florida has been identified by Johns Hopkins University as suffering from a severe "dropout crisis."

We propose:

- **Ending the practice of giving high-performing schools cash awards from the state's school recognition fund.**

- School recognition funds should be used for intervention programs to assist underperforming students and schools.

- High performing schools can be rewarded with more budget flexibility that gives school boards and principals the autonomy to use dollars to fund innovative programs, teacher bonuses and unique needs and programs.

