

# Demography Is Still Not Destiny

*A Policy Brief by Vicki E. Murray, Ph.D., and Matthew Ladner, Ph.D.*





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## Executive Summary

Florida began a comprehensive public-education reform effort in 1999 combining accountability, transparency, and parental choice with other far-reaching K-12 reforms such as alternative teacher certification and financial incentives for school success. Florida pursued those reforms from the top down through state testing and from the bottom up through parental choice. Overall, Florida's approach emphasized standards for schools, transparency for parents, and immediate options for students most at risk, including children trapped in chronically failing schools, from low-income families, from the foster-care system, and children with disabilities.

In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education released the 2009 reading results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. The new results show just how successful Florida's reforms have been. They also reveal how California's failure to enact similar reforms is putting students at a comparative disadvantage.

In 1998, the year before the Florida reforms began, four NAEP scale-score points separated California and Florida, 202 and 206, respectively. These scores ranked near the bottom, with Florida ranked 34th out of 40 states participating in the NAEP reading assessment, and California ranked 37th. After a decade of comprehensive reform, Florida fourth graders rank among the country's highest performers. Meanwhile, the reading performance of California fourth graders remains stuck near the bottom.

In 2009, the average Florida fourth grader scored 16 points higher than the average California fourth grader on the NAEP reading assessment, more than one full grade level ahead. Florida fourth graders also now tie with peers in five other states for the fourth-highest NAEP reading score. From 1998 to 2009, Florida fourth graders achieved gains equivalent to two full grade levels in reading ability, 20 NAEP scale-score points. In contrast, California fourth graders gained eight points, not quite one full grade level. Despite this gain, California tied with one other state for the country's fourth worst fourth-grade NAEP reading score.

Most impressive is that on the NAEP reading assessment Florida's low-income, Hispanic, and black fourth graders now outperform *all* California fourth graders, as well as *all* fourth graders in a growing list of states:

- ✎ With a 13-point advantage, Florida's Hispanic fourth graders are the equivalent of nearly one and a half grade levels ahead of *all* California fourth graders in reading, and they outperform *all* fourth graders in 26 other states—up from 15 states on the 2007 NAEP reading assessment.
- ✎ Low-income Florida fourth graders turned a 12-point NAEP reading deficit compared to *all* California fourth graders in 1998 into a *seven-point advantage* in 2009, and they also outperform *all* fourth graders in 12 other states.
- ✎ Low-income, Hispanic Florida fourth graders now outperform *all* California fourth graders in NAEP reading by eight points, the equivalent of nearly one full grade level, and they outperform *all* fourth graders in 14 other states.
- ✎ On the 2009 NAEP reading assessment, black Florida fourth graders surpassed all California fourth graders by one point, and they now outperform or tie *all* fourth graders in California and seven other states.

Two additional sub-groups of Florida fourth graders are also poised to surpass the NAEP reading performance of all California fourth graders.

- ✎ Just five NAEP reading scale-score points now separate fourth grade English language learners in Florida from *all* fourth graders in California, compared to 22-point deficit in 2002.
- ✎ A single NAEP reading scale-score point separates Florida's low-income, black fourth graders from *all* California fourth graders, compared to 21 points in 1998, and they now outperform all fourth graders in two other states.

Florida education reforms have not only improved elementary-level reading, they are also preparing a higher percentage of minority students for college. Florida leads the nation in the rate of Hispanic students passing Advance Placement (AP) exams, and the numbers of Florida's Hispanic and black students passing AP exams have both more than tripled since 1999.

## **Introduction: Nation's Report Card Reinforces Why California Should Follow Florida's Lead**

Like California, Florida has one of the largest and fastest growing Hispanic populations, and almost half of all students are low-income. In 2008 the Pacific Research Institute released *Demography Is Not Destiny: Reform Lessons from Florida on Overcoming Achievement Gaps*.<sup>1</sup> It documented the divergent reform paths embraced by California and Florida beginning a decade ago. As California began ratcheting up its rate of school spending, Florida maintained steady annual spending increases accompanied by a comprehensive reform strategy of accountability beginning in 1999. Florida pursued those reforms from the top down through state testing and from the bottom up, through parental choice. Overall, Florida's approach emphasized standards for schools, transparency for parents, and immediate options for students most at risk, including children trapped in chronically failing schools, from low-income families, from the foster-care system, and children with disabilities.

Thanks to its tough mixture of testing and parental choice, Florida reversed its downward student performance spiral—in less than a decade. In 1998, a stunning 47 percent of Florida fourth graders were scoring “below basic” on the fourth grade NAEP reading assessment. In 2007, however, 70 percent of Florida's fourth graders were scoring at basic or above on that assessment. The percentage of Florida children failing to master basic literacy dropped by 36 percent; while the percentage of fourth graders scoring “proficient” increased by 54 percent, and the percentage of fourth graders scoring “advanced” doubled, from four to eight percent.<sup>2</sup> Florida's turnaround was even more stunning when compared to California's fourth-grade reading performance.

California public schools receive about \$2,300 more in state per-pupil revenue than Florida public schools. California median household income is nearly \$12,000 higher than Florida's median income. More of California's adult population has a Bachelor's or advanced degrees compared to Florida's population. Yet as of 2007, the NAEP reading performance of California fourth-graders lagged 15 years behind their Florida peers. The fourth-grade NAEP reading performance of Florida's low-income and minority fourth graders from 1998 through 2007 was even more dramatic compared to the performance of all students in California and in many other states.

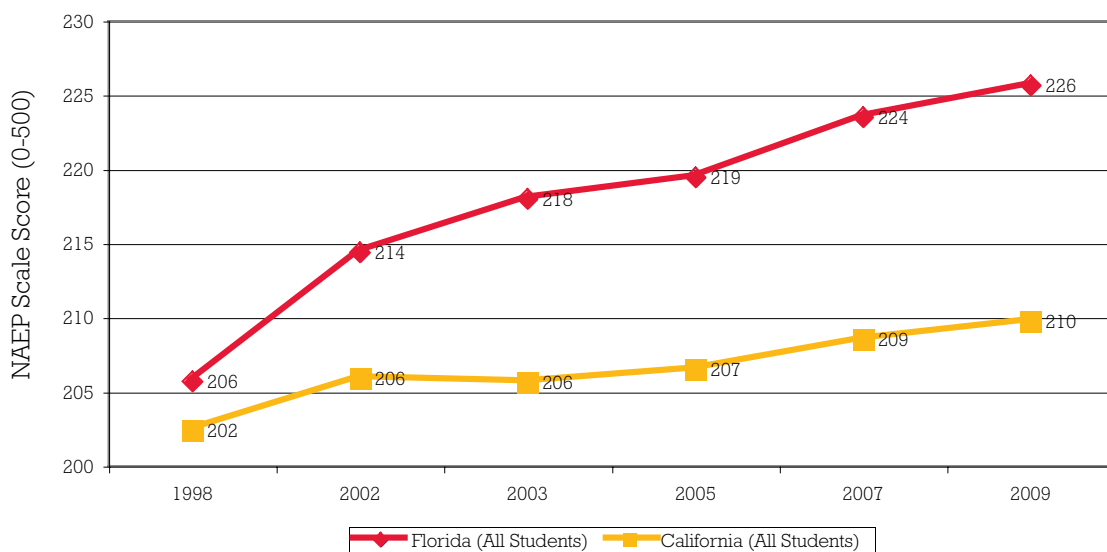
As California began ratcheting up its rate of school spending, Florida maintained steady annual spending increases accompanied by a comprehensive reform strategy of accountability beginning in 1999.

In just six years, from 1998 to 2005, low-income, inner-city Florida fourth graders turned an 11-point reading deficit into a two-point advantage over all California fourth graders. As of 2007, Hispanic fourth graders in Florida outscored not only all California fourth graders on the NAEP reading assessment but fourth graders in 16 other states as well. Likewise Florida's black fourth graders scored higher than all fourth graders in two states, and a single NAEP scale-score point separated them from the average California fourth grader.

In March 2010 the National Center for Educational Statistics released the reading results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. Of all the NAEP exams, education officials pay the closest attention to the fourth grade reading assessment. Literacy acquisition involves developmentally crucial periods and, like learning a foreign language, is easier when young. Educators summarize this with an expression: in grades K-3, you are *learning to read*. After third grade, you are *reading to learn*. If you cannot read, you cannot learn.

Figure 1 presents the fourth-grade NAEP reading scale-scores for both California and Florida between 1998 and 2009. For comparison purposes, a 10-point gain equals approximately one grade level increase in reading ability. In 1998, the year before the Florida reforms began, four NAEP scale-score points separated California and Florida, 202 and 206, respectively. These scores ranked near the bottom in 1998. Florida ranked 34th out of 40 states participating in the NAEP assessment, and California ranked 37th.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. California and Florida All Students: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**



Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.

Note: NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.

In 2009, the average Florida fourth grader scored 16 points higher than the average California fourth grader, more than one full grade level ahead. More impressive still, Florida fourth graders now tie with peers in five other states with the fourth highest NAEP reading score. From 1998 to 2009, Florida fourth graders achieved gains equivalent to two full grade levels in reading ability, 20 NAEP scale-score points. In contrast, California fourth graders gained eight points, not quite one full grade level, and tied with one other state for the country's fourth worst fourth-grade reading performance.

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Florida overcame the very obstacles to meaningful education reform policy makers in California believe are insuperable: money, politics, and challenging student demographics.

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The following section explores some of California's leading explanations for the Golden State's poor performance. As subsequent sections show, throughout the past decade Florida overcame the very obstacles to meaningful education reform policy makers in California believe are insuperable: money, politics, and challenging student demographics—three leading pillars of what may be called California exceptionalism.

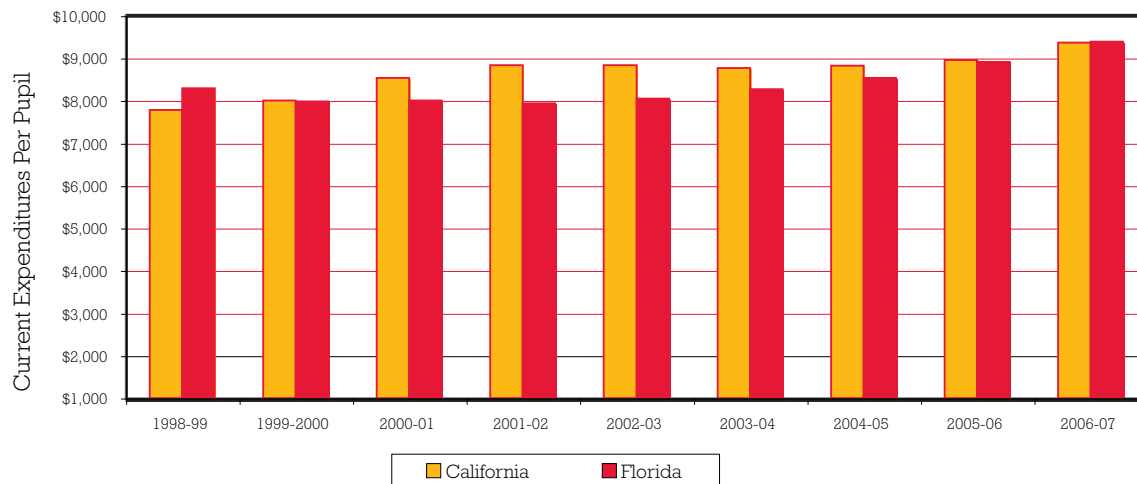


## Discussion: Breaking Free from California Exceptionalism

California exceptionalism comes in a variety of forms. Many of them are positive, from odes to California girls by the Beach Boys, David Lee Roth, and Katie Perry, to being internationally ranked among the world’s largest economies.<sup>4</sup> Yet in the context of education reform, California exceptionalism has been a status-quo enabler. Money, politics, and challenging student demographics are not unique to California. While this analysis focuses on the comparative NAEP reading performance of California and Florida fourth graders across socioeconomic student sub-groups, it is worth noting that neither money nor politics prevented Florida from reversing its decline in academic performance—and they should not block comparable improvement in California.

**Resources do not equal reform.** Conventional wisdom would attribute Florida’s superior performance to higher spending; but empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Using inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending figures reported by the U.S. Department of Education, in 1998-99 Florida actually spent more per-pupil than California, \$8,300 compared to \$7,800. From 1999-00 through 2005-06, however, California outspent Florida by an average of \$440 per student annually. As of 2006-07, both California and Florida spent nearly \$9,400 per pupil (\$9,364 and \$9,391, respectively).<sup>5</sup> Figures 2 and 3 summarize their comparative per-pupil spending over the past decade.

**Figure 2.**  
California and Florida Per-Pupil Spending, 1998-99 through 2006-07



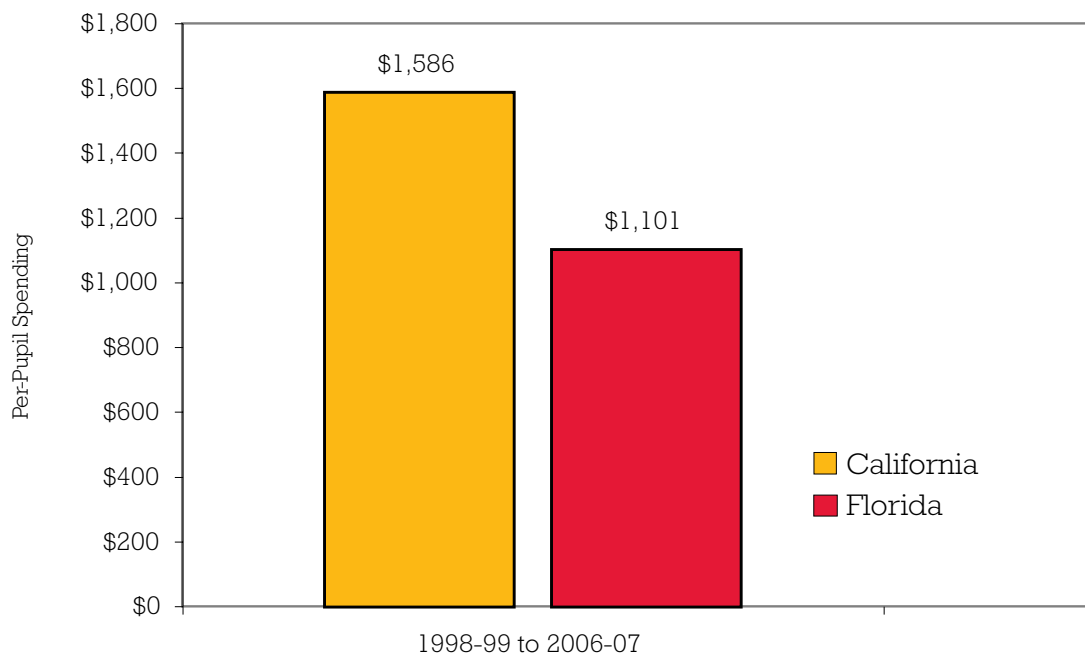
Source: Authors’ figure based on figures reported by the U.S. Department of Education

Notes:

1. Current expenditures are presented, which exclude capital construction and debt.
2. Figures represent inflation-adjusted 2007 dollar amounts.

Comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2, it becomes clear that California's fourth-grade reading performance was not improving at nearly the pace of Florida's—even though California was outspending Florida in most years. Figure 3 summarizes those states' spending increases over the past decade. Overall California's per-pupil spending increased nearly \$1,600 per pupil from 1998-99 through 2005-06, representing a 20 percent increase in real, inflation-adjusted terms. Meanwhile, Florida's per-pupil spending increased \$1,100, or 13 percent, over that same period.

**Figure 3.**  
**California and Florida Per-Pupil Spending Increase, 1998-99 and 2006-07 Compared**



Source: Authors' figure based on figures reported by the U.S. Department of Education

Notes:

1. Current expenditures are presented, which exclude capital construction and debt.
2. Figures represent inflation-adjusted 2007 dollar amounts.

These statistics suggest that Florida is doing something materially different than California to improve student performance. While money certainly does matter, how money is spent matters at least as much. In one of the most comprehensive analyses to date of the California public-schooling system, researchers from Stanford University concluded:

Past experience and the research we review here indicate with some certainty what will not work if our goal is to make dramatic improvements in student learning. It is clear, for example, that solely directing more money into the current system will not dramatically improve student achievement and will meet neither expectations nor needs. What matters most are the ways in which the available resources and any new resources

are used. The studies make clear that California’s education system is not making the most efficient use of its current resources. . . . To be clear, meaningful reform to meet student outcome goals may well require substantial new investments. . . . But financial investments will only significantly benefit students if they are accompanied by extensive and systemic reforms. Without accompanying policy reforms, the substantial gains in student outcomes that Californians need are unlikely to accrue. *To the point, there is no evidence to support the idea that simply introducing yet more new programs will produce the desired achievement gains. California already has far over 100 well-intentioned categorical programs, and there is no reason to think that adding one or two more will make much difference, no matter how carefully targeted or lavishly funded. The marginal impact of any new program will be small. Quite simply, the finance and governance system is broken and requires fundamental reform not tinkering around the edges.*<sup>6</sup> (original emphasis)

Close to half of all California public schools (46.2 percent) are in Program Improvement (PI). This means they are not meeting stipulated state and federal academic performance and progress benchmarks.<sup>7</sup> Schools that have not achieved an Academic Performance Index (API) target of at least 800 out of a possible 1,000 must meet annual performance growth targets established by the State Department of Education. As of the 2008–09 school year, just 42 percent of all California schools were at or above that target: 48 percent of elementary schools; 36 percent of middle schools; and 21 percent of high schools.<sup>8</sup> Under current annual growth targets, it would take decades for the lowest performing schools to improve.<sup>9</sup>

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From 1999-00 through 2005-06, however, California outspent Florida by an average of \$440 per student annually.

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At a time when California faces a \$19.1 billion deficit, in addition to \$69 billion in outstanding debt, the state, taxpayers – and most important six million students – cannot afford the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

***Use buckshot, not silver bullets, to advance reform.*** California policy makers regularly note the intractability of teacher-union leadership when it comes to education reform. They oppose reforms relating to accountability, certification, tenure, merit pay, pensions, and parental choice in particular. The National Education Association (NEA), the country’s largest teachers union, is a case in point. “We will attack on any grounds,” as Robert Chanin, former NEA general counsel, put it. “Our objective is not to establish lofty principles of constitutional law or to advance the state of constitutional jurisprudence. We will continue to challenge voucher and other choice programs under state constitutions on whatever grounds are available to us from lofty principles to church, state separation to Mickey Mouse issues such as the single subject rule.”<sup>11</sup> NEA state affiliates are no exception.

NEA affiliates typically represent the largest teachers unions in the states, including California and Florida, although precise membership figures are hard to nail down. Web sites of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the Florida Education Association (FTA) claim 325,000 members and 140,000 members, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Official NEA figures reported in

December 2009, however, are lower, showing a CTA membership of 301,237 (down 5,463 members or 1.8 percent since December 2008); and an FTA membership of 125,033 (down 4,479 members or 3.5 percent since December 2008).<sup>13</sup> Opposition by teachers unions to parental choice and other reforms is a matter of public record.<sup>14</sup> But California's chronic academic stagnation is unsustainable and union leaders' demands for more funding is unviable.

Advancing education reform begins with abandoning silver-bullet "solutions." Florida succeeded by adopting a comprehensive "buckshot" reform approach. Highlights of its ongoing, multi-faceted strategy include:

- ✎ Florida grades all district and charter schools based on overall academic performance and student learning gains. Schools earn letter grades: A, B, C, D or F, which parents can easily interpret.<sup>15</sup>
- ✎ Florida has the largest virtual-school program in the nation, with more than 97,000 students taking one or more courses online.<sup>16</sup>
- ✎ Florida has an active charter school program, with 411 charter schools serving nearly 138,000 students.<sup>17</sup>
- ✎ The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the country's largest, assists 27,000 students who are low-income and in foster care attend schools that work best for them—both private (tuition assistance) and public (transportation assistance for district-school transferees).<sup>18</sup>
- ✎ The McKay Scholarship Program is the country's largest scholarship program for students with special needs, sending over 20,000 special-needs children to public or private schools of their parents' choice.<sup>19</sup>
- ✎ Florida public-school students in or assigned to failing schools may transfer to performing public schools under the Opportunity Scholarship Program. More than 1,400 students exercised this option during the 2009-10 school year. Of those students, 91 percent were black and Hispanic.<sup>20</sup>
- ✎ Florida curtailed social promotion out of the third grade. If a child cannot yet read, he or she will repeat the grade until able to demonstrate basic skills, which can result in a mid-year promotion.<sup>21</sup>
- ✎ Florida created genuine alternative certification paths, in which adult professionals who desire to teach can demonstrate content knowledge. Half of Florida's new teachers now come through alternative routes.<sup>22</sup>

In their book *Liberating Learning*, Terry Moe and John Chubb detail a history of K-12 reform since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a federal report that famously warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” in American schools. *A Nation at Risk* went so far as to say that if a foreign power had imposed such ineffective schools on us, we would consider it an act of war.<sup>23</sup> While *A Nation at Risk* ostensibly served as a clarion call for reform, Moe and Chubb chillingly describe a game of “Whack a Mole” played by teachers unions, in which unions oppose any reform not involving increasing public school revenue and employment. Parental choice? WHACK! Charter schools? WHACK! Solid standards and testing? WHACK! Alternative teacher certification? WHACK! Ending social promotion? WHACK!

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The primary concern of teacher unions lies in protecting the employment interests of their members.

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The primary concern of teacher unions lies in protecting the employment interests of their members (through tenure and tenure-like contract provisions) and maximizing public school revenue. As Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers once put it, “When school children start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of school children.”

Teachers unions are multi-million dollar entities organized in every legislative district across the country. They hire lobbyists, give millions of dollars in campaign contributions, and have a built-in network of dues-paying volunteers to work on campaigns. The question is therefore not “how do teachers unions get to whack the moles?” but rather “how does anyone ever beat them?” The answer is while teachers unions quash most reforms most of the time, they do not succeed in whacking every mole every time. And strategically building on the success of one effective reform can proliferate into successive program expansions and additions—especially when the doomsday scenarios predicted by opponents never materialize. At that point, skeptical policy makers become supporters, swayed by tangible improvements made by students and schools in their own backyards.

Overcoming the barriers of California exceptionalism to education reform is the first step toward systemic improvement. Florida is an ideal case study given its similarities to California in terms of obstacles such as money, politics, and challenging student demographics. As the Stanford consortium of education researchers recently concluded,

Despite the development of challenging education standards and sustained attention to school improvement over the past decade, California continues to lag behind other states in achievement scores. The problem is substantial. On many different measures of achievement, California’s students fall far behind those in other states. . . Some suggest that California’s position simply reflects the large minority populations in the state, but the facts on achievement belie this. California schools do not do well for any group.<sup>24</sup>

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Thus Florida's Hispanic fourth graders are the equivalent of nearly one and a half grade levels ahead of all California fourth graders in reading.

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The following sections compare all California fourth graders to their Florida peers from a variety of socioeconomic subgroups. Turning conventional wisdom on its head, the very students usually blamed for poor statewide public-school performance actually appear to be fueling Florida's meteoric rise in reading performance.

## Closing Achievement Gaps: Florida versus California

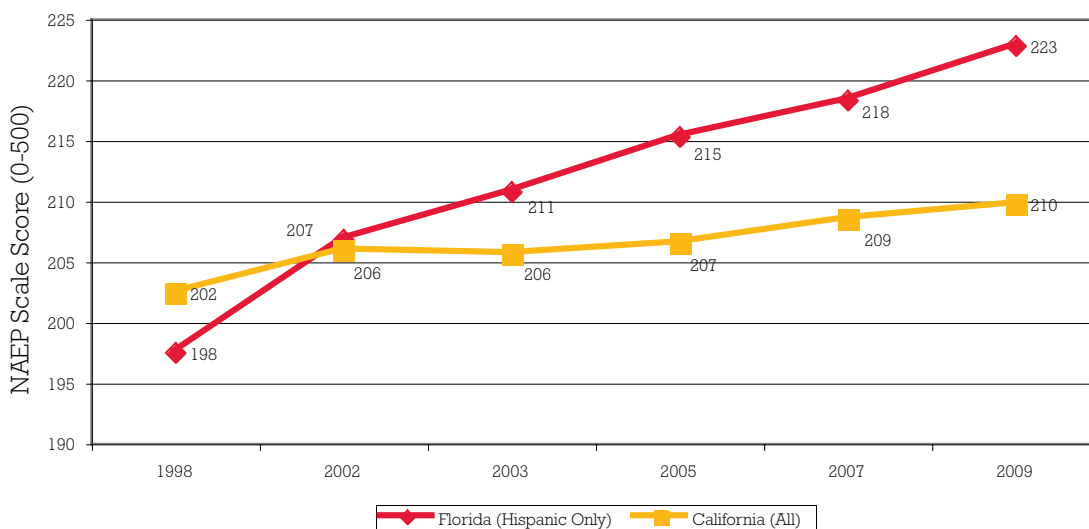
Across a variety of student subgroups, Florida fourth graders continue to outperform all California fourth graders on the NAEP reading assessment. This section takes a closer look at their comparative performance, beginning with Hispanic and low-income students—two of the largest socioeconomic subgroups in both California and Florida. As Figure 4 shows, compared to all California fourth-graders Hispanic fourth-graders in Florida turned a four-point NAEP reading deficit into a 13-point advantage in just over a decade, improving five points in the past two years alone. Thus Florida’s Hispanic fourth graders are the equivalent of nearly one and a half grade levels ahead of all California fourth graders in reading.

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Hispanic fourth graders in Florida now exceed the average NAEP reading performance of all fourth graders in 27 states, including California—up from 15 states on the 2007 NAEP reading assessment.

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**Figure 4. All California Students and Hispanic Florida Students: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**



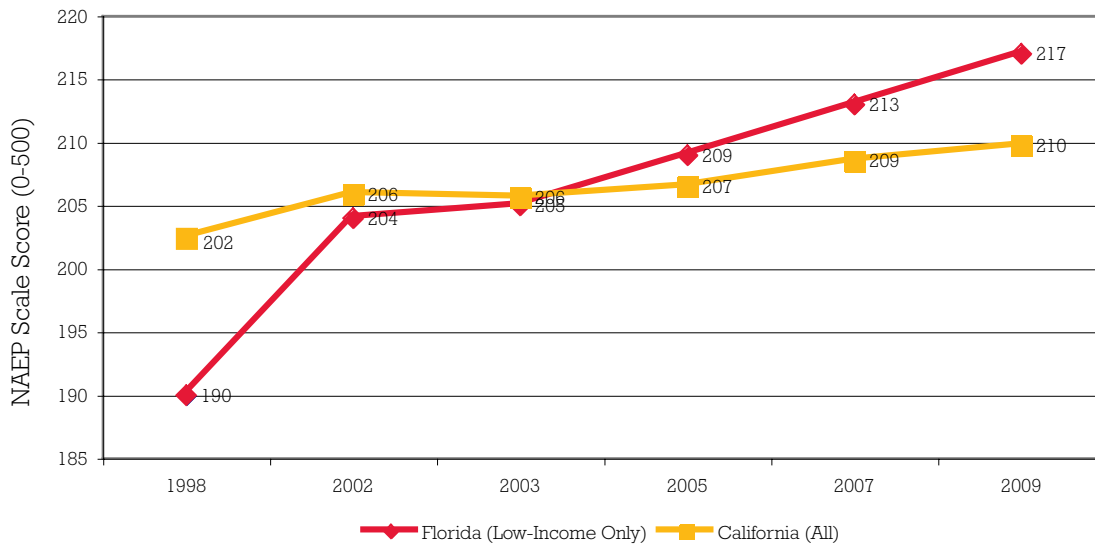
Source: Authors’ figure based on NAEP performance data.  
 Note: NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.

NAEP reading performance is so strong among Florida's low-income Hispanic fourth graders, they now outperform all students in 15 states.

Moreover, Hispanic fourth graders in Florida now exceed the average NAEP reading performance of all fourth graders in 27 states, including California—up from 15 states on the 2007 NAEP reading assessment.

Low-income Florida fourth graders are also outperforming all California fourth graders in NAEP reading, as Figure 5 shows. Low-income students are from families whose incomes make them eligible for the federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program, a standard poverty metric used in the public schooling system.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 5. All California Students and Low-Income Florida Students: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**



Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.

Notes:

1. NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.

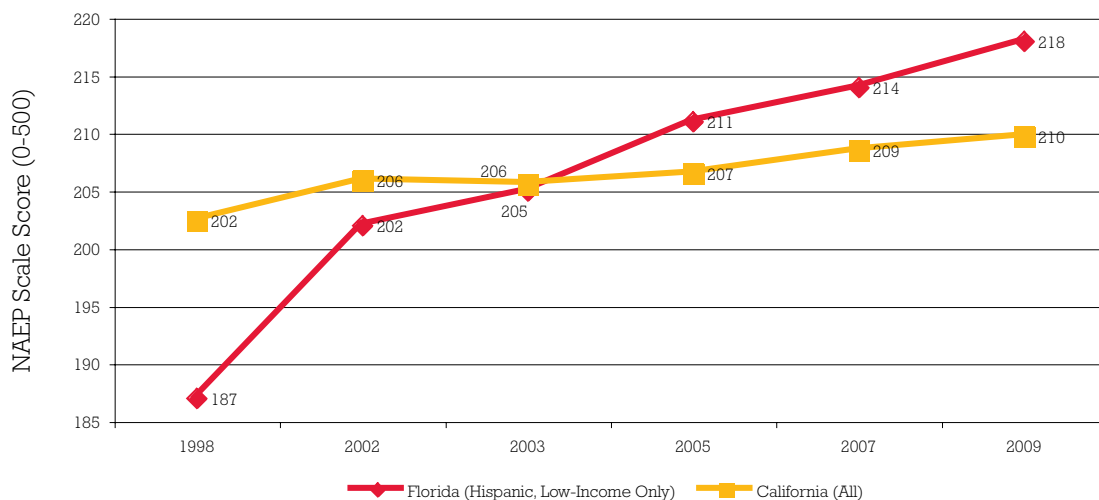
2. "Low income" stands for students who qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch program.

Low-income Florida fourth graders turned a 12-point NAEP reading deficit compared to all California fourth graders into a 7-point advantage in only 11 years. In all, the average NAEP reading score for Florida's low-income fourth graders now exceeds the average reading score of all fourth graders 13 states. This superior performance extends as well to Florida's low-income, Hispanic fourth graders, as Figure 6 shows.

Some people may believe that Hispanic students in Florida do not share the socioeconomic challenges of their California counterparts, and therefore have an academic advantage. Figure 6 indicates that in spite of background, low-income, Hispanic fourth graders outperform all California fourth graders in reading, widening their reading performance advantage from 2007

to 2009. In fact, low-income, Hispanic fourth graders now outperform all California fourth graders in reading by an equivalent of nearly a full grade level.

**Figure 6.**  
**All California Students and Low-Income, Hispanic Florida Students:**  
**Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**



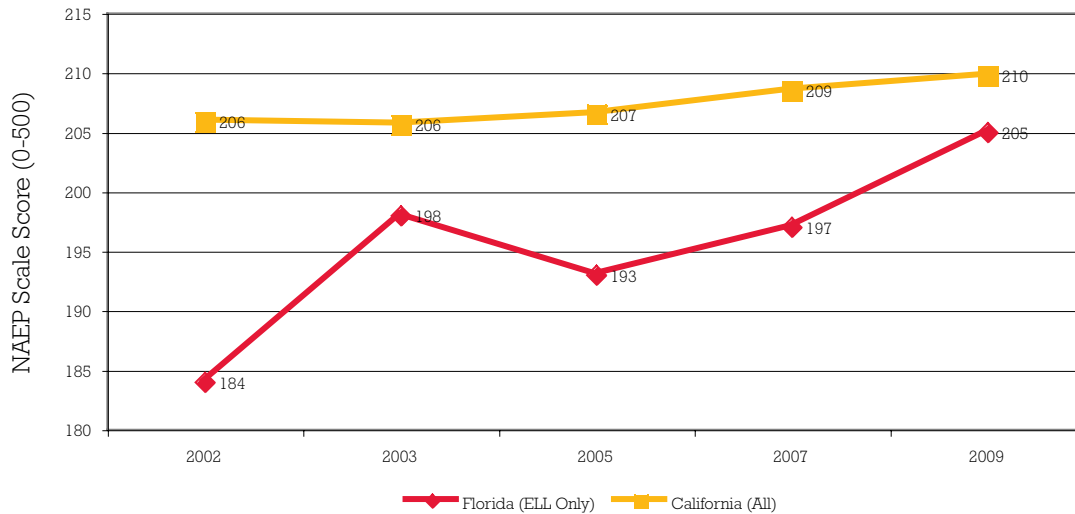
Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.

Notes:

1. NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.
2. "Low income" stands for students who qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch program.

NAEP reading performance is so strong among Florida's low-income Hispanic fourth graders, they now outperform all students in 15 states. Florida's fourth-grade English learners have also made strides in reading equivalent to more than two full grade levels since 2002 in their reading performance—on an assessment conducted in English, as Figure 7 shows.

Figure 7. All California Students and Florida English Learners: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009



Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.

Notes:

1. NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.
2. "ELL" stands for English language learner.

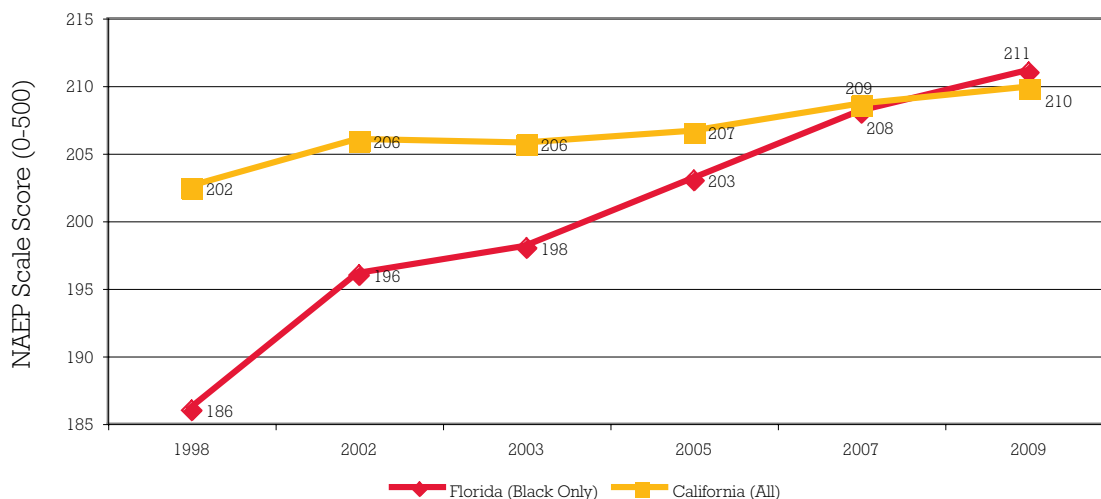
In just 11 years Florida's low-income, Black fourth graders have made stunning reading achievement gains worth almost three full grade levels; and they now outperform all fourth graders from three states in reading.

Just five NAEP reading scale-score points now separate fourth grade English learners in Florida from all fourth graders in California, compared to 22-point deficit in 2002. At this rate, Florida's fourth-grade English learners could surpass all California fourth graders on the next NAEP reading assessment.

Another important fourth-grade subgroup is black students. While these students represent 7.3 percent of California's student enrollment, researchers pay close attention to them because their academic performance in public schools has been historically weak.

On the 2007 NAEP reading assessment, black fourth graders in Florida were poised to surpass all California fourth graders. On the 2009 assessment, they succeeded, as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8. All California Students and Black Florida Students: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**

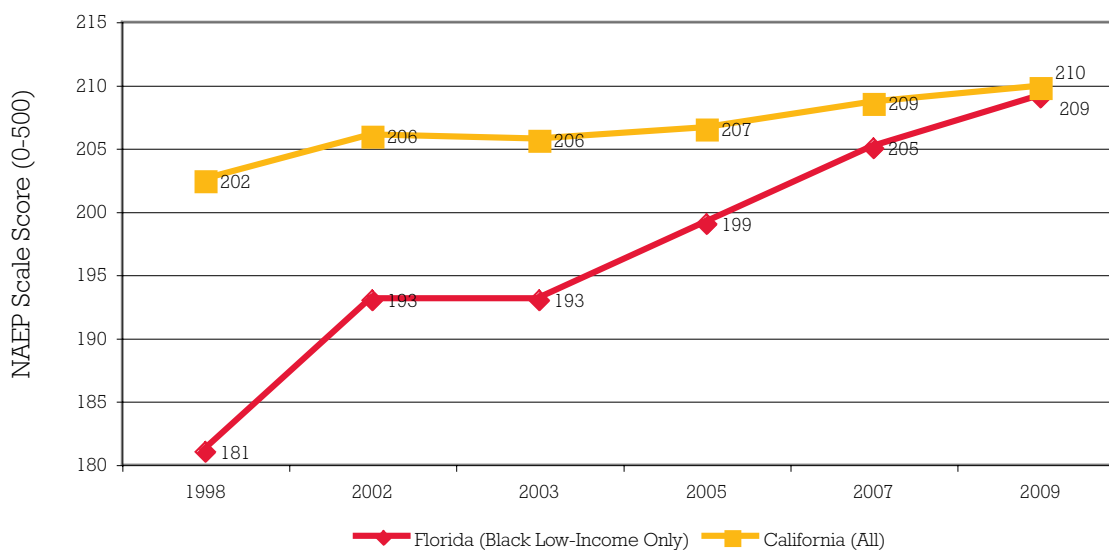


Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.  
 Note: NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.

Florida's black fourth graders also now surpass the NAEP reading performance for all fourth-grade students in five states. And, as Figure 9 shows a single NAEP scale-score point now separates low-income, black fourth graders in Florida from all California fourth graders.

At this rate, Florida's fourth-grade English learners could surpass all California fourth graders on the next NAEP reading assessment.

**Figure 9. All California Students and Low-Income, Black Florida Students: Fourth Grade NAEP Reading, 1998—2009**

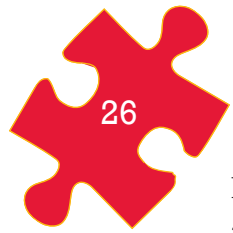


Source: Authors' figure based on NAEP performance data.

Notes:

1. NAEP reading achievement is scored on a scale of 0 to 500.

2. "Low income" stands for students who qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch program.



In just 11 years Florida's low-income, Black fourth graders have made stunning reading achievement gains worth almost three full grade levels; and they now outperform all fourth graders from three states in reading.

## Options, Information, and Incentives Drive Progress of Disadvantaged Students

While NAEP reading performance among Florida fourth graders has improved overall, *disadvantaged students* have gained the most from these reforms. Why? A number of elements of the Florida reforms deserve attention.<sup>26</sup>

**Parental choice.** Florida’s private-school parental-choice programs provide assistance to students who are low-income, from foster care, and those who have disabilities so they can attend private schools that work best for them. Florida also makes public-school choice widely available. All Florida students may attend public charter schools. Students in or assigned to failing public schools may also use transportation scholarships to transfer to other public schools outside their resident districts. These options level the playing field for students who are the most poorly served by their current traditional public schools—typically low-income and minority students—who now have the same options available to them as non-minority and more affluent students.

**Social promotion.** Florida’s third-grade retention policy may seem objectionable to some. Yet research shows the true victims are not students held back, but *students passed along unprepared*. In 2006, approximately 29,000 third-grade students failed the third-grade reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).<sup>27</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters of the Manhattan Institute compared the academic progress of retained students to students who barely scored high enough to avoid retention and those who scored low enough for retention but who received an exemption. After two years, Greene and Winters reported that “retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, academic benefits increased after the second year: “students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking.” Simply put, retained students learned how to read while socially promoted students continued to fall behind.

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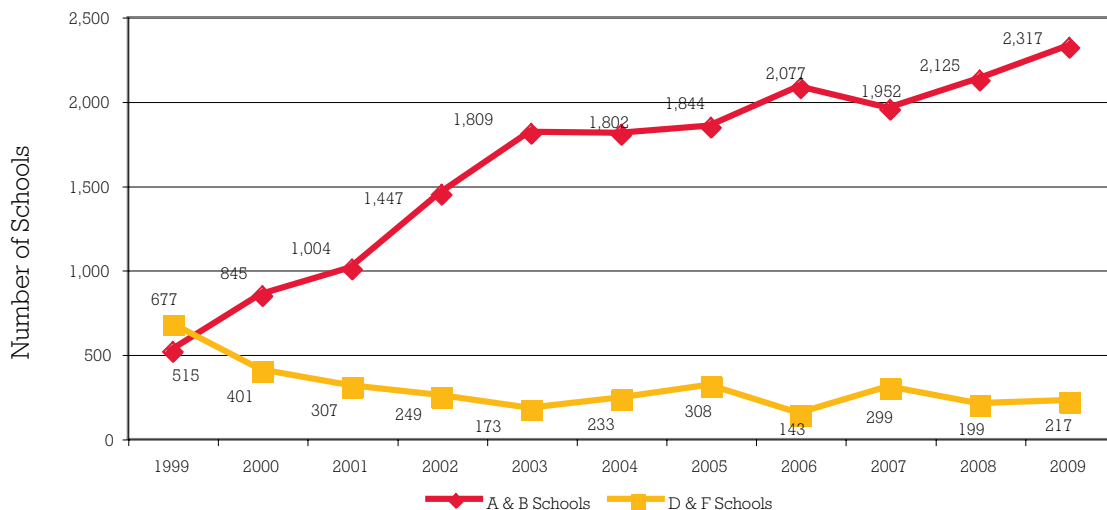
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**Alternative teacher certification.** Allowing more individuals to demonstrate content knowledge and join the teaching profession expands the pool from which to recruit high quality teachers. Inner-city children suffer the most from the shortage of high quality teachers, as the system advantages suburban systems in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers. Inner-city children gain most from reducing the shortage of qualified teachers.

**Curriculum reform.** The U.S. Department of Education's Project Follow-Through found that traditional methods of instruction far more effective on average than the poorly named "progressive education."<sup>29</sup> Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair led the charge against progressive education in Britain, noting that it is the lowest income students most harmed by ineffective education. Wealthier children in two-parent families have greater opportunities to learn reading at home or from tutors than do low-income, single-parent children whose mother or father is often struggling to make ends meet. The poor have the most to gain from the adoption of proper instruction methodologies.<sup>30</sup> Florida's experience mirrors this perfectly.

**Letter grades for schools.** Florida now grades schools with an easily-understandable A, B, C, D or F. At the outset, many complained that this was cruel to schools with predominantly minority student bodies. History has proven them wrong. To be sure, rating schools A-F in Florida represents tough medicine: the state called out underperforming schools in a way that everyone could instantly grasp. Tough love is still love: Florida's schools began to improve, both on the state FCAT and on NAEP (a source of external validation for the state exam). Did Florida's D and F schools wither under the glare of public shame? Quite the opposite. Schools in Florida focused their resources on improving academic achievement. Made aware of the problems in their schools, communities rallied to the aid of low-performing schools. People volunteered their time to tutor struggling students. Improving academic performance and thus the grade of the school became a focus.

**Figure 10. School Grades in Florida 1999—2009, Number of A & B versus D & F Schools**



Source: Foundation for Education Excellence. Figure above is authors' replication of "Results of Florida's A+ Plan: School Grades in Florida 1999—2009, Number of A & B versus D & F Schools."

As Figure 10 shows, in 1999, 677 Florida public schools received a grade of D or F, and only 515 an A or a B. In 2009, only 217 schools received a D or F, while 2,317 received an A or B. Importantly, as Harvard professor Paul Peterson has shown, this did not result from a “dumbing down” of FCAT standards.<sup>31</sup> In summary, the least advantaged students and schools gained the most from Florida’s reforms.

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Every school has a bottom 25 percent of students. Regardless of why those students have struggled academically, Florida’s grading system will not grant a school a high grade unless these students make progress.

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**Standards weighting.** One important reason Florida’s new standards have benefited the most vulnerable students is that the standards themselves place strong emphasis on students most at risk. A Figure11 shows, Florida’s system for assigning letter grades focuses on overall proficiency, gains in average achievement, and gains of the lowest performing students. Students in the bottom 25 percent play the biggest role in determining the grade of a school because these students count in all three categories.

**Figure 11. Florida’s System for Assigning Letter Grades: Double Counting Progress Among Low Achieving Students**

**School Grades**  
Each category has 100 possible points (percent of students)

Reading	Math	Writing	Science
Proficiency	Proficiency	Proficiency	Proficiency
Progress (all students)	Progress (all students)		
Progress (lowest 25%)	Progress (lowest 25%)		

Foundation for Education Excellence

Source: Foundation for Education Excellence.

Unlike the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which divides student bodies into various subgroups based upon race, ethnicity, income, disability status, Florida’s reforms rely on a simple fact: *every school* has a bottom 25 percent of students. Regardless of why those students have struggled academically, Florida’s grading system will not grant a school a high grade unless these students make progress.

Florida's success in getting Hispanic, black, and low-income children reading at higher levels than the statewide average for all students in California crushes arguments that disadvantaged students cannot learn.

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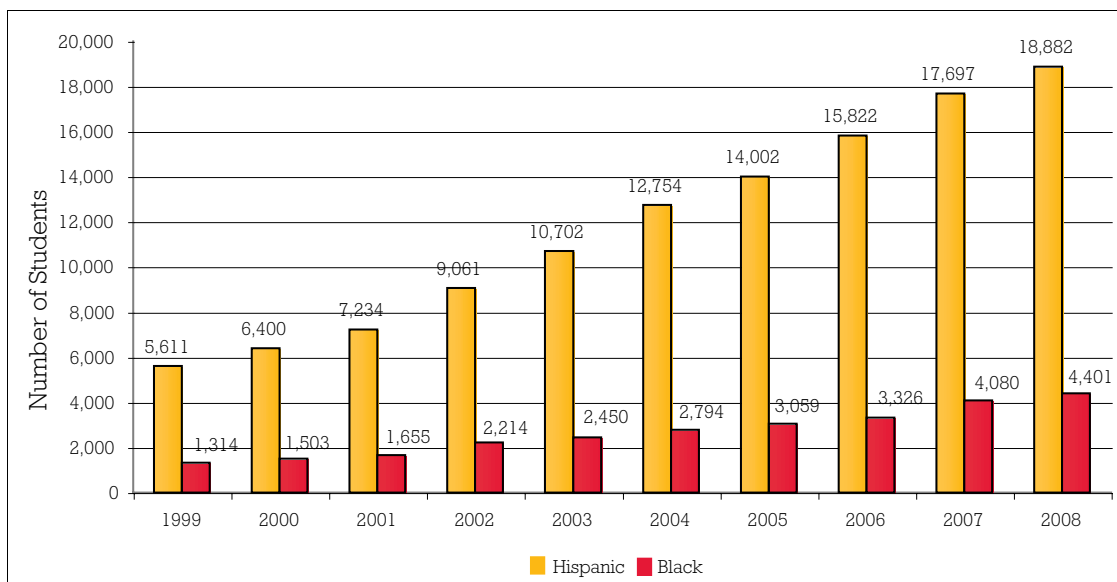
**Literacy reforms.** A major focus of Florida's curriculum reforms over the past decade has been to improve reading instruction. In 2002, the state implemented "Just Read, Florida," which created new academies to train teachers in reading instruction and provided for the hiring of 2,000 reading coaches in public schools across the state.<sup>32</sup> Teachers in grades K-3 entered mandatory reading training courses over a three-year period. Likewise, students in grades 6-12 who demonstrated insufficient reading skills took remedial instruction. All states had access to federal funds to implement such programs, but Florida seems to have made better use of their funds based on its fourth-grade NAEP reading achievement. Retraining teachers can be an expensive proposition. It may be possible,

however, for the state to work with private companies to provide online literacy instruction training at a lower cost. Of course, any program cost incurred should be weighed against the untenable cost of the status quo to California students, schools, and taxpayers.

**Performance bonuses for teachers and their schools.** Florida education reforms not only have improved elementary-level literacy, they are also preparing a higher percentage of minority students for college work by incentivizing success. For instance, under the Florida Partnership for Minority and Underrepresented Student Achievement Act, the state created an Advanced Placement (AP) Teacher Bonus of \$50 for every passing score, up to \$2,000. The program also created an incentive for the school, paying their schools an additional bonus of \$650 per student passing an AP exam. Florida officials carefully wrote this bonus into the funding formula so that it went to the school, not to the school district.<sup>33</sup> The One Florida plan provided an additional school bonus of \$500 per student passing an AP exam for schools rated "D" or "F."<sup>34</sup>

The National Math and Science Initiative recently collected data on the number of students passing AP exams, which indicates these programs are getting results. Overall, between 1999 and 2008, the number of Florida students passing AP tests increased by 169 percent.<sup>35</sup> Broken down by ethnicity the numbers are even more encouraging. Florida leads the nation in the rate of Hispanics passing AP exams.<sup>36</sup> As shown in Figure 12, the numbers of Hispanic and black students passing AP exams have both more than tripled since 1999.<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 12. Florida AP Passing Scores, Hispanic and Black Students, 1999—2008**



Source: National Math and Science Initiative.

Florida’s success with Advanced Placement Exams shows the merit of creating incentives for success. While such incentives require up-front funding, the Florida AP program also saves the state money in higher education and related costs. This is an especially important consideration for California since the estimated cost to students, schools, and the state of inadequate college and workforce preparation is nearly \$14 billion annually.<sup>38</sup>

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Any program cost incurred should be weighed against the untenable cost of the status quo to California students, schools, and taxpayers.

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## Conclusion: Fortune Favors the Bold in K-12 Education Reform

Marc Tucker, vice chairman of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, recently told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “We’ve squeezed everything we can out of a system that was designed a century ago. We’ve not only put in lots more money and not gotten significantly better results, we’ve also tried every program we can think of and not gotten significantly better results at scale. This is the sign of a system that has reached its limits.”<sup>39</sup> California policymakers are coming to a similar realization.

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California cannot achieve global competitiveness through minor tweaks of a largely underperforming system.

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In the words of former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell, “[W]e must be willing to rethink the way we deliver education services if our state and nation are to survive, let alone thrive, in this rapidly changing, technology-driven world.”<sup>40</sup> The most comprehensive review to date of California’s public-schooling system conducted by state and national experts

concluded, “Quite simply, the finance and governance system is broken and requires fundamental reform not tinkering around the edges.”<sup>41</sup>

Florida’s example shows that it is possible to improve student performance by instituting a variety of curricular and incentive-based reforms, placing pressure both from the top down and bottom up on schools to improve. Indeed, California cannot achieve global competitiveness through minor tweaks of a largely underperforming system. Florida’s broad efforts and resulting outcomes prove this. Fortune favors the bold, and a brighter future awaits California students if California adults will take strong action.

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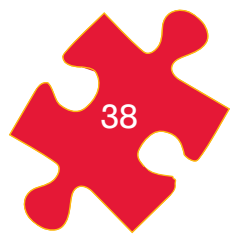
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### Vicki E. Murray, Ph.D.

Vicki E. Murray is Education Studies Associate Director and Senior Policy Fellow at the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy (PRI). Dr. Murray's research focuses on education reform measures to improve academic accountability at all levels, promote a competitive education climate, and increase parents' control over their children's education.

Dr. Murray is the former director of the Goldwater Institute Center for Educational Opportunity in Phoenix, Arizona. She has advised the U.S. Department of Education on public school choice and higher education reform. She has also advised education policymakers in nearly 30 states, provided expert testimony before state legislative education committees, and served on two national accountability task forces. Dr. Murray's research helped advance four parental choice voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs in Arizona in 2006, and she provided expert affidavits as part of the successful legal defense of choice programs for low-income, foster-care, and disabled children. Dr. Murray's research and writings on market education policy have been widely published and cited in state and national media and research outlets, as well as outlets in Canada, Great Britain, Mexico, and New Zealand.

Prior to her career in education policy, Dr. Murray taught college-level courses in American politics, English composition and rhetoric, and early British literature. She has lectured at universities nationwide, including the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, and has presented her academic research at annual meetings of the American Political Science Association and its regional affiliates. Dr. Murray received her Ph.D. in politics from the Institute of Philosophic Studies at the University of Dallas, where she was an Earhart Foundation Fellow.

### Matthew Ladner, Ph.D.

Matthew Ladner is Vice President of Research for the Goldwater Institute. Prior to joining Goldwater, Dr. Ladner was director of state projects at the Alliance for School Choice, where he provided support and resources for state-based school choice efforts. Dr. Ladner has written numerous studies on school choice, charter schools and special education reform. Ladner is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin and received both a Masters and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Houston. Dr. Ladner previously served as director of the Center for Economic Prosperity at the Goldwater Institute and as vice president of policy and communications at Children First America.

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