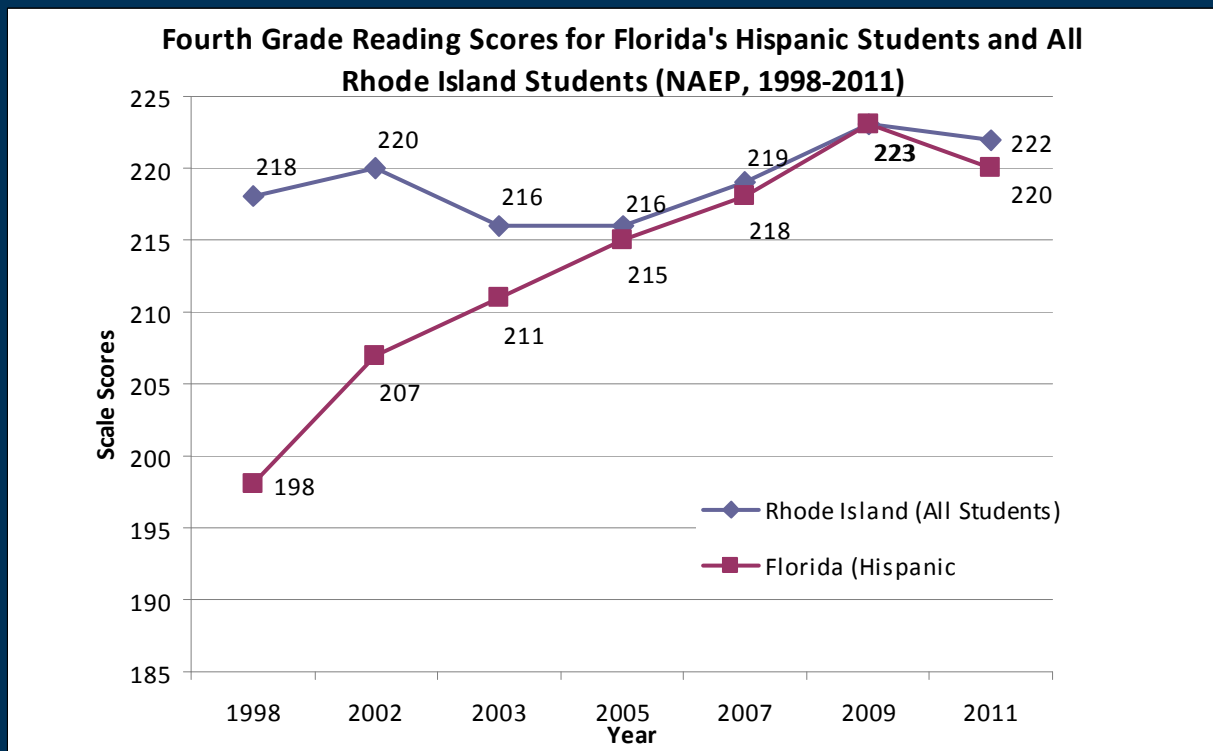




Closing The Gap

*How Hispanic Students in Florida Closed the Gap
with All Rhode Island Students*



To View the Complete Study, go to: www.RIFreedom.org





Introduction

Imagine two young students entering the first grade in 1999. Both come from immigrant families. Both come from homes of modest means. Because their parents are not native English speakers, both have limited proficiency in English as they enter elementary school.

One of those students is fortunate because she is entering a school in Florida as that state begins to implement a series of significant educational reforms. In fact, the reforms are so sensible and obvious – and the problems in their schools so dire - that the Governor and the Florida Legislature work hand in hand to see these reforms through together.

The other young girl, however, will see no such comprehensive reform in 1999 or at any time in her grade school career. She lives in Rhode Island, and as the 20th century comes to a close, there is certainly much hand wringing over school performance in the state. On the one hand, concerns are voiced loud and clear by those who care about equal opportunities and the injustice of schools where racial makeup and financial need are used as excuses for poor performance: We know our schools are failing and we know that the students who need our help the most are in the worst schools. Yet, on the other hand, we do little about it.

In 1999 that young girl in Rhode Island had an opportunity to learn. She may have lacked certain advantages that some other students had, but she did not lack ability. In 2011, however, she is heading to high school graduation years behind her Florida peers in terms of academic achievement. She has arguably been denied at least 2 of her 12 years of education because the leaders who could have reformed the system in Rhode Island in 1999 failed to act. She has lower reading skills, lower math skills, and will have to compete throughout her career against better educated graduates because Rhode Island lacked the political will to give her a fair chance.



The educational achievement gap that existed in Rhode Island in 1999 still exists today. The difference is that in 1999 Florida made the decision to embark on a new path. They were blazing a trail because they knew they couldn't do any worse. We failed to act then, but twelve years later, Rhode Island faces a much easier choice than Florida faced in 1999. We can not only build our reforms based on solid theory, but we can now also model them on proven results.

Imagine a young girl entering first grade in Rhode Island today. Do we care enough about her future – about the future of our state that relies on her and all of her peers? Will we do what is necessary to close the gap ... now? Doesn't she deserve that opportunity?

Not only does she deserve a bright future, but she deserves a "Bright Today".



CLOSING THE GAP: Executive Summary

How Hispanic Students in Florida Closed the Gap with All Rhode Island Students

Florida lawmakers began a comprehensive education reform effort in 1999 combining accountability, transparency, and parental choice with other far-reaching changes. In 2011, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released new results showing just how successful Florida's reforms have been as compared with Rhode Island's efforts.

This study documents how recent NAEP results strengthen the case for Florida-style reforms. By 2009, some groups of traditionally underperforming students from Florida—including that state's Hispanic students—improved to actually match the statewide average score for *all Rhode Island students* on 4th grade reading.

Hispanics are the largest minority group in Rhode Island and represent 11 percent of the total population and 19 percent of the public school population. Unfortunately, Rhode Island Hispanic students have among the lowest NAEP scores in the nation for both 8th grade math and reading.

This report explains in some detail why Florida's reforms, while benefiting all students, have been especially beneficial to disadvantaged students. For example, Florida's method for grading schools looks not only at students' overall performance and overall gains, but also considers gains among the 25 percent of students with the lowest scores. Importantly, those 25 percent of students are counted in all three categories, providing a strong incentive for schools to help their lowest-performing pupils.

This study details the key components of Florida's K-12 education reform strategy and explains why the adoption of the Florida reforms in Rhode Island would aid all children, especially disadvantaged students.

Key findings include:

- Florida grades all district and charter schools based on overall academic performance and student learning gains. Schools earn letter grades of A, B, C, D, or F, which parents can easily interpret.
- Florida's reading achievement surged over the last decade while Rhode Island demonstrated relative stagnation during the same period.
- Florida students went from being more than one grade level behind Rhode Island's reading average in 1998 to almost a half-grade level ahead in just 9 years.
- Florida's 4th grade Hispanic students scored about two grade levels below Rhode Island's reading average for all students in 1998 and improved to match RI's achievement level by 2009.
- Rhode Island's 4th grade Hispanic students reading average score is 16 points lower than their peers in Florida, roughly the equivalent of one-and-a-half grade levels worth of progress.
- By 2009, Florida's Hispanic students outscored or tied the statewide average for all students in Rhode Island and 30 other states.
- In 1998, Florida students eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch scored 28 points below the average for all students in Rhode Island. As of 2009, the gap was been reduced to just 6 points and remains there.

- In 1998, Florida students eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch scored 5 points below the average for the same student group in Rhode Island. By 2009, the Florida group scored 12 points above their Rhode Island counterparts, a swing of more than a grade and a half. In 2011 the gap was 8 points.
- In 1998, Florida students with disabilities including 504 (IEP) designations scored 24 points below the average for the same student group in Rhode Island. In 2009, the Florida group scored 25 points above their Rhode Island counterparts, a swing of more than 49 points - approximately five grade levels!
- Florida's schools improved their Florida Department of Education Grade Rankings despite the fact that the state strengthened grading criteria three separate times.
- Florida's school grading method balances overall scores and student learning gains while emphasizing progress among low-achieving students.
- The elimination of "social promotion" practices allowed retained students to catch up on basic skills and prevented others from falling further behind.
- Alternate Teacher Certification programs in Florida provided urban school districts with a new tool to attract and retain great teachers.

Conclusions:

- Setting rigorous standards for all students is attributed to many of Florida's successes
- Race of the student is not an excuse for low educational performance
- Income levels are not a major deterrent to educational improvement
- Children with disabilities can show enhanced learning under the proper conditions
- Social promotion of students generally causes them to fall farther behind
- Alternate teacher certification provides a new tool to attract great teachers to urban schools
- Rigorous school evaluations combined with some form of school choice introduces competitive forces into the equation which generally benefits educational performance



Enacting Florida's K-12 education reforms in Rhode Island – via our own "Bright Today" Education Plan - can close the educational achievement gap between student populations and raise the bar for all students. With a set of reasonable reforms, Florida has radically improved student performance, especially among disadvantaged students. Rhode Island can and must do the same. **More directly, how can we not?**

Parents and concerned citizens are encouraged to actively raise awareness of the issues in this study, to stimulate rigorous public debate about its findings, and to self-organize in order to advocate for the comprehensive educational reform via the recommendations listed in the full report which can be found at RIFreedom.org.

[Closing the Gap is a publication of](#)



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