The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity is the state’s leading free-enterprise public policy think tank. Non-partisan, yet firm in its belief that freedom is indispensable to citizens’ well-being and prosperity, the Center for Freedom’s mission is to restore competitiveness to Rhode Island through the advancement of market-based reform solutions to the Ocean State’s economic and educational problems.

Closing The Gap

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

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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
**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**”. 
**Findings**

*Closing the Gap*, a study produced by the Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity, focuses on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“NAEP” - also known as “The Nation’s Report Card”\(^1\)) standardized test results of Florida’s disadvantaged students over time as compared with the testing results of all students in Rhode Island. This report considers the comparative test results in reading and math in context of a series of K-12 educational reforms enacted in Florida dating back to 1999. Test scores have increased nationally for Hispanic and white students, but the achievement gap between these two groups of students is about the same as it has been since 1990.\(^2\)

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**Figure 1**

*Trend in fourth-grade NAEP mathematics average scores and score gaps for White and Hispanic students*

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**Figure 2**

*Trend in eighth-grade NAEP mathematics average scores and score gaps for White and Hispanic students*
As shown in Figures 1-4, the tests given to fourth and eighth graders in reading and math in 2011 show that nationally, Hispanic students scored about two grade levels lower than their white counterparts.

Rhode Island was among three states that had larger achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students than the national gap in reading and math at both the 4th and 8th grade level.³

In comparison, Florida saw a steady increase in the performance of its Hispanic students since initiating reforms.⁴ As reported in Time Magazine, “The state has one of the very highest Hispanic populations in the nation, yet 31%...
of their Hispanic students score proficient or better on the test. Florida's Public Schools Chancellor Michael Grego attributes their success to **rigorous standards for all students**, teacher training focused on instructing non-English speakers and programs such as dual language classes where English speakers learn Spanish and vice versa.\(^5\)

Florida’s results have generally increased the overall academic achievement of its student population and narrowed the racial achievement gap. Today, Florida’s Hispanic and black students outscore many statewide reading averages for all students.\(^6\)

Florida’s reform model includes:

- **Public-school choice.** Students in low-performing public schools may transfer to a higher-performing public school of their parents’ choice.
- **Private-school choice.** Families with special-needs children have access to the McKay Scholarship Program, which provides vouchers to attend a private school of choice. Corporations in Florida can also receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to organizations that fund private scholarships for low-income students.
- **Charter schools.** Charter schools offer families another choice. During the 2008/2009 school year, more than 100,000 Florida students attended charter schools and more than 50 new charter schools began operation.
- **Virtual education.** Florida is a leader in online learning. More than 80,000 students in the state take courses online.
- **Performance pay.** Florida’s performance pay system rewards teachers who achieve student gains, not necessarily those who have the longest tenure. It also provides bonuses for teachers who increase the number of students who pass Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Since beginning performance rewards for AP completion, Florida has considerably increased the number of all students who take and pass AP exams.
- **Alternative teacher certification.** Non-traditional routes to teacher certification, such as permitting school districts to offer teacher certification programs, reciprocity with other state teaching certificates, and honoring certification offered through alternative teacher certification programs such as the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (“ABCTE”), play an important role in bringing qualified teachers into the classroom.
- **A+ Accountability Plan.** In 1999, Florida required that students be tested annually. While Florida has graded the performance of its public schools since 1995, the Sunshine State moved to a more straightforward grading system in 1999.\(^7\) The new grading system, coupled with the introduction of the annual Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), means that students and schools are held accountable for academic outcomes.
- **Social Promotion Ban.** Florida has also curtailed the “social promotion” of students. This reform plan requires students to pass the third-grade reading (Florida Common Assessment Test) FCAT before progressing to fourth grade.

The facts presented in this report directly contradict the soft bigotry of low-expectations ... too often used as an excuse!
Despite the nation’s limited progress in raising the scores of minority students overall, Florida has made enormous progress in narrowing racial achievement gaps. The timing of these gains coincides with the adoption of Florida’s educational reforms.

_Closing the Gap_ intends to encourage support for and implementation of best educational practices in Rhode Island public schools. It is meant to support acceptance of the notion that all students can learn to their cognitive potential if they are not blocked by lowered expectations to succeed based upon their race, ethnicity, family socio-economic status or special needs. These excuses are often used to defend the status quo of failing schools, but the facts presented in this report directly contradict such bigotry.

According to Kati Haycock, president of the national policy group, Education Trust, many disadvantaged students are not expected to perform well. As a consequence, they only reach the low bar set for them rather than being pushed to a higher level. "Look at what is being asked of kids who are poor, Latino or black... They have shockingly low expectations. Until we get serious about having equally rigorous assignments for all kids, we're not going to close these gaps."^8

_Closing the Gap_ aims to reinforce the need for a freer market in education. Our RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity believes that parents are savvy and interested consumers looking for the best choices for their children; but that the government designated solution is the only option most of them are reasonably allowed. It is the moral and economic equivalent of holding non-wealthy students hostage for the sake of perpetuating the monopoly system that has been in place for decades; a system we allow to persist despite continued evidence of the harm it is doing to our children.

_Closing the Gap_ points out that demanding and expecting alternative public education models, and thereby providing greater parental choice, can no longer be considered as theory in the world of education. In fact, as Florida has shown, this kind of choice may be the only proven solution for the disadvantaged students who are condemned year after year after year to failing schools. For as long as the adults debate, ponder and pretend to thoughtfully consider alternatives, Rhode Island children are passing through a system that has pockets of mediocrity and worse, a documented failure to meet basic annual progress as measured by student testing scores. Our students in Rhode Island deserve a bright future that must begin with a “Bright Today”.

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Florida’s success can be attributed to rigorous standards for all students, regardless of race.
Standardized Testing and the Politics of Education

Academics, teacher unions, think tanks, teachers, school administrators, school boards and mayors, and state departments of education have long worked and re-worked the question of how to raise the levels of student achievement as measured by standardized testing. There remains argument over the validity of standardized testing; whether teachers are “teaching to the test” or even if students are learning in context of culture or are victims of bias. On a more fundamental level, angst rightfully exists where curriculum fails to meet the tested subject matter, or vice versa, whichever one prefers in the world of the debate over standardized testing.

The debate rages on over how to reduce the achievement gap among students in poverty, minority students, and students whose first language is not English. An across-the-board consensus has yet to be reached and accountability on the part of any stakeholder group remains elusive. Further complicating the debate of pedagogy and policy is the reality that public education is a political football in Rhode Island as it is in our nation as a whole. As such, politics emphatically rears its head in Rhode Island as we struggle down the road of improving the public education system for all students and closing the gap for those who lag behind.

A casual sift through Rhode Island archives of print media reveals the same arguments made by the same guardians of the status quo year after year, decade after decade. Over countless debates and proposals (and many students later) defenders of the current educational system have testified and railed against reform measures to raise the bar of teaching and learning while pointing to lack of parental involvement, poverty, and lack of funding as excuses for lackluster achievement levels. Pointing to the omnipresent achievement gap - presumably immoveable as a result of demographics and fate - they have blocked and tackled reform measures, sued the citizens of Rhode Island to prevent improvements to the state’s Basic Education Plan (BEP), interrupted the progress of teacher contract negotiations, and most recently, displayed a show-down mentality over a bid to

The Language Barrier: According to the National Center for Education Statistics ("NCES"):
“... data collected in 2009 by the U.S. Department of Education indicate that a substantial proportion of Hispanic students in grades 4 (37 percent) and 8 (21 percent) are English language learners.”

This fact, coupled with the growing size of the Hispanic population in the United States underlies the achievement gap between Hispanic and White fourth- and eighth-graders. Closing the Hispanic-White achievement gap remains a challenge. While Hispanic students’ average scores have increased across the assessment years, White students had higher scores, on average, on all assessments.” As time Magazine recently noted:

“The numbers suggest that the persistent gap has more to do with the language barrier among a subset of that group. There are some four million Hispanic students in public schools whose primary language is not English. The NCES report showed an even larger difference between those students, known as English language learners or ELL, and their Hispanic classmates who are proficient in English. For example, in eighth grade reading, the discrepancy between ELL Hispanic students and non-ELL Hispanic students was 39 points, or roughly four whole grade levels.”

add to the menu of public school choice for parents in Providence and Cranston. While this track record does not bode well for breaking through the barriers to closing the achievement gap, it is informative in that it serves as a harsh reminder that for too long our students’ educational opportunities and parental voices are held ransom by adult self-interest and political entrenchment in the educational system.

That is not to say, however, that such debates must always yield the same vapid results. Despite opposition by its teachers’ unions, Florida enacted a series of educational reform measures with support of the state’s legislative body. It was a true reform coalition. And it worked in no small part because of the justified self interest of parents and policy makers representing the very students who would pay the dearest price for a failed system. And the results and successes, that over 10-years later, we can now attribute to those bold leaders of reform, that they can show their constituents are clear. Florida’s Hispanic students have significantly narrowed the racial achievement gap. Moreover, they have begun to outscore many statewide averages for all students. Florida’s academic successes were made possible by commonsense changes to the educational landscape achieved by reformers, students, and teachers.

The requisite processes to advance educational reform measures in order to raise student achievement levels and to close the gap among underachievers are simple and complex all at once.

☐ Simple in the notion that highly qualified, professional educators and instructional leaders, mixed with common sense, know what works best to elevate students to their potential.

☐ Simple in the notion that with collaboration and a plan, student achievement levels can be raised and achievement gaps can be significantly narrowed.

☐ Simple in the notion that it always makes sense to focus on what is within our grasp; in other words, control that which is within our control and step away from that which is not.

☐ But complex, of course, in those entrenched and moneyed interests will make every effort to distract and intimidate political leaders away from the cold hard facts of hope, respect, and success.

It is long overdue that we step away from pointing to poverty, lack of parental involvement, or language barriers as excuses for lackluster student achievement. While these factors obviously create significant challenges to teaching and learning, they can no longer be the straw-man for maintaining outdated status quo practices in our educational system. A system that respects the teachers should also respect their ability to succeed in the face of common challenges. A system that respects educators should also reward those who are truly great at what they do.

Standardized testing is a tool to assess the achievement of both educators and students, and as one measure of teaching and learning, it is not likely to go away anytime soon. As long as testing is utilized as a benchmark of effective teaching and learning, then the pedagogy and institutional best practices, some of which are revealed in the Florida model, must be acknowledged for the successes that they are and emulated for the sake of all of our students.
Making the Case by the Numbers: Why Rhode Island should follow Florida’s Lead

By 2009, after about 10 years of educational reform, some groups of traditionally underperforming students from Florida, including the state’s Hispanic students, matched the statewide average NAEP score for all Rhode Island students on 4th grade reading.

Hispanic students are the largest minority group in Rhode Island and represent 11% of the state’s total population and 19% of the public school population. Unfortunately, by 8th grade, testing results for Rhode Island Hispanic students rank among the lowest NAEP scores in the nation for reading and math.

Florida's reforms, while benefiting all students, have been especially beneficial to disadvantaged students.

Consider:

- Rhode Island students continue to lag behind their counterparts in other states. It is also common knowledge that students in the United States lag behind their global peers.9

- Of all the subjects tested by NAEP, education officials pay the closest attention to the fourth-grade reading exam. Literacy acquisition involves developmentally crucial periods; reading is broadly similar to learning a foreign language in that it is easier to do when young. Educators summarize this phenomenon 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.

- The average reading scores of all fourth-grade Rhode Island students from 1998 to 2011 increased by just four points ... virtual stagnation. During the same period Florida’s peer students jumped by nineteen points ... a difference of almost two entire grade levels.

- This flat-line performance came in spite of a 69.7% increase in per-pupil spending in Rhode Island between 1998 and 2007, 43% more than the national average.10

Rhode Islanders have suffered from a malady all too common in the United States: paying more for K-12 schools without receiving the benefit of improved student learning.11 The state desperately needs far-reaching changes to its education system.
**Figure 5** presents the scale scores from NAEP's fourth-grade reading exams for Rhode Island and Florida between 1998 and 2011. Florida's reforms began the year after the 1998 NAEP; prior to this time the state's reading scores had been low and flat. For the NAEP charts presented in *Closing the Gap*, bear in mind that a 10-point gain approximates one grade level of learning.

Notice that in 1998, the year before the Florida reform efforts began, Rhode Island fourth-grade students outscored the average student score in Florida by 12 points on the NAEP reading exam. Florida's score that year was near the bottom of the rankings. Within just 5 years, by 2003, however, the average Florida student improved to score 2 points higher than the average Rhode Island student.

**Does Race Inhibit the Capacity to Achieve?**

**Figure 6** presents fourth-grade reading NAEP data comparing Florida Hispanic students with the statewide average for all students in Rhode Island. In 1998, the average Rhode Island student stood head and shoulders above the average Florida Hispanic student—about two grade levels higher. Just 7 years later, however, the gap was virtually eliminated and by 2009, Florida's Hispanic students tied the statewide average for all students in Rhode Island.

**Figure 7** compares the academic progress of Florida’s Hispanic students to Hispanic students in Rhode Island between 1998 and 2011. Discounting the anomaly between 1998 and 2002 for RI students, Florida’s Hispanic students have widened their superiority over the past 9 years.
Figure 6

Figure 7

Hispanic students in Florida made such strong progress that by 2009 they matched or outscored the statewide averages of 30 states, as shown in Figure 8. Note that Rhode Island was the only state in New England and the entire Northeast where its average for all students scored lower than Florida Hispanic students!
These figures blow apart the notion that certain groups of students cannot achieve dramatic performance enhancements because of their ethnicity or race. Because of Florida’s reforms, students from all cultural backgrounds are experiencing a “Bright Today”.

**Do Income-levels Inhibit the Capacity to Achieve?**

**Figure 9** compares the fourth grade reading scores of all students in Rhode Island to Florida’s students whose family incomes make them eligible for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRPL); eligibility is used as a measure of poverty in the public school system.

To add some perspective to the circumstances of the students we are discussing here, bear in mind that the United States Census Bureau estimated the median family income for a Rhode Island family of four to be $87,002 in 2008\(^\text{14}\). In 2010, a family of four could earn no more than $40,793 per year to qualify for a reduced lunch or $28,665 for a free lunch.
Figure 9 compares all students in Rhode Island to only those Florida students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch. It illustrates that Florida's low-income children also closed the gap to just six points below the Rhode Island average for all students after scoring 28 points lower in 1998.
Comparisons between FRPL eligible students in Florida and Rhode Island show an even more startling transformation. In 1998, Florida low-income students scored five points below their Rhode Island counterparts, but by 2009 the Florida students were 12 points higher and is now 8 points higher. (Figure 10).

These numbers should serve as a wake-up call for parents of students in low-performing schools, and to those responsible for setting education policy in Rhode Island. Once again, a commonly held notion - that students from low-income families are less capable of achieving – is shown to be false! Because of Florida’s reforms, students from low income families are experiencing a “Bright Today”.

**Student Outcomes in Florida: A Closer Look**

Florida's private school choice programs allow children with disabilities and low income children to receive assistance to attend private schools of their parents’ choosing. Florida charter schools, public schools of choice, are open to all students. Who are the big winners from the competition created by public and private school choice? Students. Those who are most poorly served by traditional district schools are most likely to transfer to a better school.

**Do Disabilities Inhibit the Capacity to Achieve?**

**Florida’s McKay Scholarships: Vouchers**

Florida passed its voucher bill in 1999, and Florida's NAEP scores for children with disabilities have increased strongly since then, outperforming their Rhode Island peers by 220%, as shown in Figure 11. Reform in this area would provide the most benefit for Rhode Island students with disabilities, including 504 designations. This RI group has seen a decline in performance over the last decade, consistently dropping from a score of 195 in 1998 to 176 in 2011 (Figure 12). Florida students with disabilities, including 504 designations, once scored 24 points below peer students in Rhode Island ... but now score 25 points higher. This 49 point swing represents approximately 5 grade levels!

![Percentage of students with disabilities scoring "Basic" or better, fourth-grade reading (NAEP, 2011)](image)
For many years, Florida's children with disabilities have had the opportunity to receive a scholarship to attend the public or private school of their choice. This program has been a tremendous success—almost 21,000 children with disabilities use McKay scholarships, making it the nation's largest voucher program of its type. Moreover, McKay parents express strong support for the program.

Florida's McKay scholarship program doubtlessly helped spur academic improvement for children with disabilities. The McKay program alone, however, cannot claim exclusive credit for this improvement. Florida's overall reforms encouraged school districts to find ways to produce strong learning gains for traditionally low-scoring student groups—including students with special needs.

So once again, another myth about certain groups not being able to achieve increased educational performance has been shattered. Because of Florida's reforms, students with disabilities are experiencing a “Bright Today”.

Figure 12

Fourth Grade Reading Scores for Disabled Students (Including 504) in Florida and Rhode Island
Florida’s Third Grade Retention Policy

This educational reform measure prevents third grade students from social promotion if they do not demonstrate requisite reading skills. As we will see, once again, students are the winners as a result of this policy.

In 2006, approximately 29,000 third-grade students failed the reading portion of Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). It is important to note, however, that Florida's retention policy contained a number of exemptions. An analysis by Manhattan Institute scholars compared the academic progress of retained students to two groups of similar students (those who barely scored high enough to avoid retention and those who scored low enough for retention but received an exemption).

The Manhattan team reported that after two years "retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students." The researchers found that the academic benefit increased after the second year: "That is, 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."

The retained students learned how to read, whereas the promoted students continued to fall behind grade level. This illustrates the normal academic trajectory for children failing to learn basic literacy skills.

Once again, students at the bottom proved the biggest winners from Florida's tough-minded reforms and are experiencing a “Bright Today”.

Alternate Teacher Certification

Non-traditional routes to teacher certification, such as permitting school districts to offer teacher certification programs, reciprocity with other state teaching certificates, and honoring certification offered through alternative teacher certification programs such as the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) play an important role in bringing qualified teachers into the classroom. Allowing more people with advanced degrees and demonstrated content knowledge to join the teaching profession expands the potential pool of highly motivated and qualified teachers. It is a well-known fact among education stakeholders that the traditional public school system favors the suburban districts in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers.

Alternate teacher certification provides urban school districts and the students in those districts with a new tool to attract and retain great teachers.
Curriculum Reforms

In addition to structural reforms, Florida also embarked upon significant curriculum reforms. The “Sunshine State Standards” were approved by the State Board of Education in 1996 to define at a state level the expectations for student achievement. The Sunshine State Standards were broken down by subject matter and grade ranges in order to provide maximum flexibility to individual school districts without defeating the purpose of state standardization and accountability.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to address the detailed changes stemming from those specific reforms, those with an interest in this area can find detailed discussion of the “Sunshine State Standards” adopted in 1996 here: [http://www.fldoe.org/bii/curriculum/sss/sss1996.asp](http://www.fldoe.org/bii/curriculum/sss/sss1996.asp).

A+ Accountability Plan

In 1999, Florida required that students be tested annually. While Florida has graded the performance of its public schools since 1995, in 1999 the Sunshine State moved to a more straightforward grading system. The new grading system, coupled with the introduction of the annual Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), means that students and schools are held accountable for academic outcomes.

Florida's accountability system grades schools A, B, C, D, or F, which some complained was unduly damaging for schools with predominantly minority student bodies. A small but noisy group continues to bemoan the grading method, claiming that it is unfair to teachers and to students.

It would prove difficult to be any more tragically mistaken, or more willfully ignorant. To be sure, rating schools A through F in Florida represents hard 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.

As some speculated, did Florida's D and F schools wither under the glare of public shame? Quite the opposite: Those schools 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 student academic performance and enhancing the school's grade became a focus.

In 1999, 677 Florida public schools received a grade of D or F, and only 515 an A or B. Figure 9 tracks the trend for those sets of grades, and critically, the three dotted arrows represent periods where standards were actually raised, which made it even more challenging to receive a high grade. By 2009, only 217 schools received a D or F, while 2,317 schools received an A or B.
Is this just an illusion? Was progress achieved by lowering the "cut score" of the state FCAT exam? (The "cut score" is the minimum passing score students can achieve.) In a word, no. Harvard Professor Paul Peterson has demonstrated that Florida has indeed maintained the integrity of the FCAT and has maintained a constant standard.22

Florida's students have improved both on the FCAT and on the NAEP. Importantly, Florida's improvement on NAEP also dispels the concern that schools are "teaching to the test." NAEP exams have a high degree of security, and federal, state, and local authorities do not use them to rate schools or teachers. Teachers lack both the ability and the incentive to teach to the questions on NAEP exams.

The students with the least gained the most from Florida’s reforms.

Florida's schools improved their rankings because their students learned to read at a higher level and became more proficient at math. Those who wanted to continue to coddle underperforming schools, while perhaps well-intentioned, argued in favor of consigning hundreds of thousands of Florida children to a degree of illiteracy. They may not have accepted it at the time, but one cannot avoid the obvious results that we can see 10 years later.

Those students with the least consistently gained the most from Florida’s reforms. This is perhaps clearest of all when one examines the formula for assigning letter grades to schools.
How Florida’s Grading System Works

Florida determines schools’ grades in equal measure between overall scores and gains over time. In addition, the state divides the “gain” portion of the formula equally between the gains for all students and the gains for the 25 percent of students with the lowest overall scores. Figure 14 below illustrates how the state determines these grades (50 percent on overall scores, 25 percent based on the gains of all students, and 25 percent based upon the gains of the lowest performing students).

Figure 14

Notably, the bottom 25 percent of students play the biggest role in determining the grade of a school. These students count in all the categories: the overall scores, the overall gains, and the gains of the lowest performing students. Notice the elegance of that system.

In comparison, the federal No Child Left Behind Act (“NCLB”) allows schools not to count subgroups depending upon the size of the group. NCLB divides student bodies into various subgroups based upon race, ethnicity, income, disability status, etc., and requires an increasing passing threshold from each group. The exact size of the groups permissible is determined by obscure bureaucrats in state departments of education—meaning some districts exempt far larger groups of students than other districts, thus leading to inconsistent baselines.

The Florida system is far more direct: Every school has a bottom 25 percent of students. Regardless of why those students have struggled academically, Florida's grading method will not grant schools a high grade unless those students make progress.

Academic fatalists are eager to argue that many students simply cannot learn. Florida’s success in substantially improving the scores of poor and minority children should put this "soft bigotry of low expectations" into the shameful dustbin of history that it so richly deserves.

Moreover, Florida’s success in helping its Hispanic children to read at similar levels to the statewide average for all students in Rhode Island crushes such arguments.
Florida’s Educational Reform Measures and the Teachers’ Union

Florida did not achieve its results with any single reform, but rather with a multifaceted strategy as part of a larger vision for educational reform. In other words, there is no one silver bullet to improve student outcomes and narrow the achievement gap.

Highlights of Florida’s reform measures include:

- Florida grades all district and charter schools based upon overall academic performance and gains in student learning. Schools receive a report card based on their performance and earn letter grades of A, B, C, D, or F, which parents can easily interpret.
- Florida has the largest virtual-school program in the nation, with more than 80,000 students taking one or more courses online.
- Florida has an active charter school program serving more than 131,000 students.
- The Step-Up for Students Tax Credit Program assists 23,000 low income students to attend the school of their parents’ choice; both private (via tuition assistance) and public (via transportation assistance for district school transfers).
- The McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program is one of the nation’s largest school voucher programs, allowing more than 22,000 students with special needs to attend the public or participating private school of their parents’ choice.
- Florida stopped the practice of social promotion for third graders who cannot read. The student will repeat the grade until he/she demonstrates the requisite reading skills which may result in mid-year promotion.
- Florida created an alternative teacher certification path by licensing/certifying adult professionals who demonstrate content knowledge. Half of Florida’s new teachers arrive through alternative routes.

Terry Moe and John Chubb, in Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education, detail a history of K-12 education reform since the publication of A Nation at Risk, the seminal 1983 report of the President’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. That report famously warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in American schools and went so far as to say that if a foreign power had saddled our country with such ineffective schools, we would consider it “an act of war.”

A Nation at Risk served as a clarion call for reform, but Moe and Chubb chillingly describe the politics of the education reform era as a game of “Whack a Mole” played by the dominant player in K-12 education politics: the teachers’ unions. “Whack a Mole,” is a well known carnival game in which plastic moles pop up and down through holes on a board while the players attempt to ‘whack’ them with a rubber mallet to score points.

Moe and Chubb argue that the political modus operandi of the education union bosses is to oppose any educational reform measures that do not involve increasing public school revenue to increase employment levels thereby increasing the flow of union dues. The “moles” targeted for the “whack” by teacher union leaders have historically been market driven solutions such as school choice, charter schools, school vouchers, teacher accountability, alternative teacher certification, rigorous teacher evaluations with consequence, classroom assignments based on content knowledge and skill as opposed to seniority based placement, and similar changes that place students’ interests ahead of the financial beneficiaries of the system.
Moe and Chubb do point out that education union bosses are not able to whack every mole every time but they whack most of the moles most of the time; and so the game goes on, over many years and decades, as parents and community leaders struggle to implement much needed educational reform measures.

Education unions are huge multi-million dollar entities organized in every legislative district in the country. Their strategies are multiple and well developed: they hire lobbyists, give millions of dollars in campaign contributions, and enlist political activists to work on those same campaigns. Often they will fund and organize other groups in the name of a different cause in order to broaden their reach, but their goals remain unchanged. There is little to match the political power and vested interests of the teachers unions on the parents’, students’, and reformers’ side. The question, however, should not be "HOW do they get to whack the moles?" but rather "How does anyone ever BEAT them?"

The question is valid, but it cannot be denied that the parents, the students, and the reformers took control of K-12 education policy in Florida in the late 1990’s. Then Governor, Jeb Bush, made education reform his top priority, and the majority of Florida legislators strongly supported a series of education reform measures.

The results in Florida underscore the political nature of education and provide the answer to driving education reform for the students: students, parents, and education reformers must engage in the political process to counter the self-interests of union bosses, their full-time, high-paid lobbyists, and conflicted legislators.

Today, because of the coalition that demanded those reforms, Florida's minority and low-income students have a real chance at a real educational opportunity. Florida students are experiencing a “Bright Today” as well as a brighter future.

**RI Education Demographic Fast Facts**

**Student Characteristics:**
- Number enrolled: 145,118 | Percent in Title I schools: 81.1%
- With Individualized Education Programs (IEP): 18.1%
- Percent in limited-English proficiency programs: 4.7%
- Percent eligible for free/reduced lunch: 41.9%

**Racial/Ethnic Background:**
- White: 68.0%  |  Black: 9.2%  |  Hispanic: 18.6%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 3.4%  |  American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0.9%

**School/District Characteristics:**
- Number of school districts: 32  |  Number of schools: 331
- Number of charter schools: 12  |  Per-pupil expenditures: $14,491
- Pupil/teacher ratio: 12.8  |  Number of FTE teachers: 11,365

Source: NCES
Years of Warning in the Education World: Fortune Favors the Bold in K-12 Education Reform

In December 2006, the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce released a report titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. The commission included a bipartisan mix of education luminaries, including two former U.S. secretaries of education. The report warns, "If we continue on our current course, and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job."28

Commenting on the report, Jack Jennings, executive director of the Center on Education Policy in Washington, told the Christian Science Monitor, "I think we've tried to do what we can to improve American schools within the current context. Now we need to think much more daringly."29 These and other observers have reached an unavoidable conclusion: The traditional model of delivering public education requires a drastic overhaul, not incremental reform. This is especially true in Rhode Island.

Marc Tucker, vice chairman of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 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."30

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. Rhode Island's policymakers should view Florida's reforms as a *floor* rather than a *ceiling* in terms of their own efforts to improve education in the state.

Consider Rhode Island's charter school regulations: Rhode Island has a charter school law; but that law, in 2011, received a grade of "D" from the Center for Education Reform, and is the nation's 14th weakest law.31 Rhode Island's charter law provides limited autonomy, and a narrow authorization process. In addition, Rhode Island does not allow genuine alternative teacher certification for mid-career professionals to enter the teaching profession.

Indeed, Rhode Island cannot achieve regional or national competitiveness through minor tweaks of a largely underperforming system. Florida's broad efforts and resulting outcomes provide ample evidence that our students need a more substantial vision for their future success, and who will deny that they deserve more?

Fortune favors the bold, and a brighter future awaits Rhode Island's students if Rhode Island's adults will take strong action to implement a “Bright Today”.

In the fall of 2011, the Ocean State saw just how difficult it can be to approve new Charter Schools: A charter school proposal in Cranston was killed by the Board of Regents.
Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Florida's reformers, having wrested control of education policy from special interest groups, pushed forward a multifaceted educational strategy that has benefited a full range of students.

Beginning in 1999, the Florida state legislature began adopting far-reaching education reforms. These reforms included grading schools with clearly comprehensible labels—letter grades A, B, C, D, and F—and expanding school choice by creating a tax credit scholarship program and the nation's largest voucher program. Florida also became the nation's leader in virtual education—offering classes online through the Florida Virtual School. In addition, Florida's lawmakers curtailed the social promotion of illiterate elementary students, reformed reading instruction, and created multiple paths for alternative teacher certification. The results, specifically from national reading exam data, speak volumes.

Florida remains a leader on behalf of all students and educational choice. The current Governor, with the support of the Florida legislature, recently signed five new education bills into law in 2011. The bills aim to expand charter schools, virtual schools, school vouchers and a program that allows students to transfer out of failing public schools.

In Rhode Island, Commissioner of Education Deborah Gist has a placed a premium on substantive reform measures that had long been recommended prior to her arrival in the state. Those recommendations involved removing tenure as the lever for classroom assignments and calls for rigorous evaluation systems. The Commissioner and the Board of Regents under the former administration significantly re-wrote the Basic Education Plan (BEP) to stop seniority-based teacher assignments, to increase rigor for teacher evaluations, to raise standards for acceptance into the state's teacher-preparation programs, and also garnered legislative support to pass a statewide funding formula. These are all positive reform goals, yet many remain to be implemented to their fullest impact. However, empowering parents with school choice can produce the most substantial results, especially for the most disadvantaged of our students.

Empowering parents with school choice can produce the most substantial results for most disadvantaged students.
Path to a “Bright Today” for Rhode Island Students

At an October 2011 educational forum, Commissioner Gist repeated her mantra that “every decision must be made with the best interests of the children” in mind. That education is central to our state’s well-being, especially our economic future. That we must move away from the adversarial mode that has dominated the education reform debate of recent years.

Our RI Center for Freedom and Prosperity agrees. With the overwhelming evidence presented in this study supporting a major, multi-strategy reform agenda ... all sides must come together and indeed keep the best interests of the children in mind.

The RI Center for Freedom and Prosperity recommends the following “Bright Today” educational policy objectives for Rhode Island ... because who wants to tell a child that she has to wait for a bright tomorrow?

Many of the recommendations below are consistent with the objectives in the Rhode Island Department of Education’s “Transforming Education in Rhode Island, Strategic Plan 2010-2015”, by Commissioner Deborah Gist.

That “Bright Today” plan should include many of the significant reforms enacted by Florida over the past dozen years:

- **Accountability Testing and School Grading.** All Rhode Island students should be tested annually, and the results should be published and made available to the media and posted on state and district websites year-round. NECAP scores should be statically verified by comparison to NAEP scores, and teachers or administrators found cheating should be immediately and permanently removed from the system.

  All schools should be graded A, B, C, D, or F. The scoring system should more heavily weight schools that see gains for their lowest performing students, and should be seen as an opportunity to focus effort where it is most needed.

  *This accountability system aligns with RIDE strategic plan recommendations to “Accelerate All Schools Toward Greatness” (§AS), “Establish World-Class Standards and Assessments” (§WCS), and “Develop User-Friendly Data Systems” (§DS).* Specifically, these RIDE recommendations provide pathways to identify and close achievement gaps in Rhode Island schools, develop and employ rigorous standards as well as the means to apply them, and the creation and usage of mechanisms for transparency and public oversight, respectively. Establishing a comprehensive accountability plan puts each of these objectives within easy reach.

  **Analysis:** An example of some progress includes recent changes that tether teacher certification to performance. Adopted in early November 2011 to begin in 2012, the new rules stipulate that teachers will lose their certification if their performance is rated poorly for five consecutive years. This is a positive sign, but falls short on at least one major count -- five years is too long for a teacher to be allowed to let down Rhode Island’s children. Though these are not “world class standards” and while there is great room for improvement, the spirit and intention of these new rules are a welcome first step.
• **Open Enrollment/Public-school choice.** Students in low-performing public schools may transfer to a higher-performing public school of their parents’ choice, without regard to their parent’s residence. This requires rating schools and allowing some percentage of the per student cost of the non-performing school (say 95%) to follow the child to a better performing school. An Open Enrollment program improves student achievement and enhances parental choice in education, while introducing competitive forces into the public education sector.

  *Public school choice fits with RIDE recommendations §AS, §WCS, and “Invest Our Resources Wisely” (§IRW). Giving more choice to taxpayers creates the competitive conditions for better schools and better student outcomes and raises standards by default. In addition, more choice is a better investment decision for the state (§IRW). If educating Rhode Island’s youth is the chief goal, then policy and resources should be directed accordingly.*

• **Private-school choice.** Families with special-needs children should have access to a Bright Today Scholarship Program, which would provide a tax-credit scholarship or a voucher equal to the full per-pupil cost of the district they are leaving to attend a private school of choice. Caps should also be removed from the existing Rhode Island scholarship tax-credit program for contributions by businesses or individuals to organizations that fund private scholarships for disadvantaged students.35

  *School choice proposals align with RIDE strategic report recommendations §AS, §WCS, and §IRW. If educational excellence is the ultimate goal, school choice -- whether it’s through private schools, public schools, charter schools, or others -- is a valuable policy regardless of the direct provider.*

• **Charter schools.** The Rhode Island Charter School system should be reformed to remove caps on the number of schools, reduce red tape, and broaden the authorization process required to open a new school. The hundreds of families on charter school waiting lists in Rhode Island are not only being denied a choice, but they are being denied the opportunity to save the state money by exercising this consumer-based option. Charter schools combine the accountability and oversight of traditional public schools with the flexibility of private schools. To deny them this option not only restricts their parental rights and their parenting skills, but does so at the expense of other public school students and taxpayers.

  *School choice proposals align with RIDE strategic report recommendations §AS, §WCS, and §IRW. Likewise, charter schools fit with an outcome-based strategy with regards to both resources and especially educational performance.*

• **Virtual education.** An online learning “pilot” program should be developed by the Rhode Island Department of Education in partnership with public and private institutions throughout the state and the country. Such programs provide flexibility and allow for highly individualized, personalized instruction. Close oversight and analysis of outcomes should be tracked and reported annually, along with estimates of per pupil/per class costs versus the district average.36

  *Virtual education proposals align with RIDE strategic report recommendations §AS, §WCS, and §IRW. Virtual education, perhaps more than anything else, represents a potentially powerful innovative force in education. When used to supplement other programs, virtual education can dramatically reduce costs while increasing learning opportunities.*
• **Performance pay.** Teachers who achieve gains in student performance should receive the largest raises, not necessarily those who have the longest tenure. Total annual increases paid do not need to be raised to fund this system – but the increases already budgeted should be more heavily weighted towards those who do the best job. Testing systems already in place allow this to be done objectively and predictably, so that teachers can focus on their chosen profession instead of union politics. Rhode Island should also provide bonuses for teachers who increase the number of students who pass Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

*Performance Pay furthers RIDE strategic plan recommendations to “Ensure Educator Excellence” (§EE as well as §AS, §DS, §IRW, and §WCS). Performance pay greatly incentivizes school achievement, high education outcomes, mandates rigorous data-development, and can be the perfect investment. But most importantly, performance pay is the single best means of encouraging teaching excellence while reorienting the learning process from an inputs-based approach towards one based on outcomes.*

• **Alternative teacher certification.** Rhode Island should expand its current, limited program in this area by accepting teaching certificates issued in other states, and honor certification offered through alternative teacher certification programs such as the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (“ABCTE”). In addition, aspiring teachers with advanced degrees in a specific subject area should have a streamlined process for certification by the Department of Education.

*Alternative teacher certifications align with RIDE strategic plan recommendations to revamp this process in RI (§AS, §EE, and §WCS). Providing low-threshold means for motivated people into teaching without arduous requirements is an important way to bring the best and the brightest into the profession and universally raise standards and outcomes.*

• **Social Promotion Ban.** Rhode Island must take a stand against the “social promotion” of failing students. The most disciplined approach should be taken in requiring students to pass a standardized third-grade reading assessment before progressing to fourth grade.

*Ending social promotion is also a major step in pursuit of RIDE’s strategic plan recommendation §AS. Genuine achievement cannot be realized without adhering to defined, testable measures.*

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 the findings in this study, and to self-organize in order to advocate for the comprehensive educational reform and the recommendations listed herein.
The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. Assessments are conducted periodically in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history. See [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/). Passage of the "No Child Left Behind Act" in 2002 made participation in NAEP a precondition for receiving federal education dollars. All states began participating in NAEP in 2003.

Ibid.


See also "The Education Crisis No One Is Talking About." [http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2070930,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2070930,00.html).


All public schools get letter grades on an A to F scale. Schools receive grades based on a complicated point system. A school's grade makes it clear to the school, the parents and the general public where the school stands. School scores are sent home to the parents, published on "report cards" on the Florida Department of Education Web site and publicized through the media.; [Testing in Florida: An Overview](http://www.greatschools.org/students/local-facts-resources/427-testing-in-FL.gs?page=1). A Great Schools guide to standardized tests. For more information see [http://www.greatschools.org/students/local-facts-resources/427-testing-in-FL.gs?page=1](http://www.greatschools.org/students/local-facts-resources/427-testing-in-FL.gs?page=1).


See, for example, studies conducted by the Program for International Student Assessments ("PISA") at [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/index.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/index.asp).


Figure courtesy of the Heritage Foundation.


A “504” designation is a reference to the federal code section that requires (as a condition of federal funding) accommodations for all students determined to have disabilities. Section 504, 29 U.S.C. §794 states:

“No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States... shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

Section 504 has a specific set of regulations which can be found at Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 104. Section 504 has specific procedural requirements for the identification, evaluation, placement and procedural safeguards of students. The more familiar reference stemming from a '504' designation is an "IEP" or Individualized Educational Program.


Florida’s retention policy allowed students to demonstrate basic literacy skills to advance with a portfolio, and limited the number of times a student could be retained.


See: http://www.abcte.org/about-abcte.


See: http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/Information/McKay/.


Ibid.


Ibid.


It should be noted that some local efforts to incorporate virtual learning programs are underway in Rhode Island (see http://www.ride.ri.gov/Instruction/intech/TechSurvey/2010_Data/2010_TechCapSurv-School_DistLrngCourses-Students.pdf ) and the Rhode Island Department of Education has been attempting to allocate resources to an expansion of virtual learning as a component of their “Race to the Top” program (see http://www.ride.ri.gov/commissioner/RaceToTheTop/docs/RTTT%20Year%20One%20Progress%20Update.pdf ).
The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity is the state’s leading free-enterprise public policy think tank. Non-partisan, yet firm in its belief that freedom is indispensable to citizens’ well-being and prosperity, the Center for Freedom’s mission is to restore competitiveness to Rhode Island through the advancement of market-based reform solutions to the Ocean State’s economic and educational problems.

Closing The Gap

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

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