

*ACHIEVEMENT TESTING IN FLORIDA*

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## *Introduction*

*In 1973, the Governor's Citizens' Committee on Education issued a report on needed improvements in Florida's public education system. The report, entitled Improving Education in Florida (1973), contained several recommendations addressing the need for accurate information on students' achievement. The Committee believed that a quality educational system could be implemented only if student achievement was closely monitored. In the Committee's words, Florida educational policy decisions should be based on "research, not merely on tradition."*

*Since then, the Florida Legislature has moved with considerable speed to create an educational accountability program which uses student achievement tests as one of its cornerstones. The Florida testing program has been documented previously by Fisher (1978), Burlington (1979), and Pinkney and Fisher (1978).*

*Briefly, the Florida approach to student achievement testing as authorized by the 1976 Educational Accountability Act (Chapter 76-223, Laws of Florida) depends upon measuring student mastery of certain high priority learner objectives at grades three, five, eight, and ten. School, district, and state summary reports reveal how many students have attained the objectives. For high school graduation purposes, students must pass a state minimum competency test. Unless the test is passed, the student cannot be given a regular diploma from a public high school. The acceptability of this policy has been demonstrated repeatedly in both the public and legal arenas. The Debra P. v. Burlington case challenged the use of the graduation test, but, when the last appeal was decided, the State was permitted to continue the requirement.*

*The Florida Legislature has been the most visible force behind the testing program in Florida. Individual legislators can be identified who were enthusiastic supporters of*

*the concept and who worked diligently to convince their fellow legislators to vote for the proposed laws. Implementation of the program was the responsibility of the Commissioner of Education who was unswerving in his commitment despite legal challenges and attempts to delay it.*

*The State Board of Education also was supportive of the testing program and worked with the Department of Education and the Commissioner to adopt rules which were necessary for implementation. In 1981, the Board exerted its own initiative in passing a resolution calling for Florida's educational system to be of no less quality than that of the upper one-fourth of the states. This "upper quartile goal," as it became known, led to the creation of a set of indicators to be used in determining the progress being made toward the "upper quartile." The indicators, of course, included test scores.*

*Generally, the testing and accountability laws in Florida have been enacted because citizens demanded them. Citizens believed students needed clear statements of expectations and believed the schools were promoting students who lacked even the most rudimentary skills. Educators did not initiate the movement toward increased educational accountability; however, since the laws have been enacted, they have become supportive of the requirements and have cooperated in successfully implementing them.*

*Florida continues to expand its testing and accountability programs, with improvements and additional requirements being enacted by almost each session of the legislature. The requirements have the effect of strengthening the state database and providing greater consistency in academic requirements.*

## *The 1983 Educational Reform Act*

*In 1983, the Florida legislature enacted a series of laws collectively known as the Educational Reform Act (Chapter 83-327, Laws of Florida). The Act requires the state Board of Education to adopt minimum student performance standards in science and computer literacy in addition to those previously authorized in reading, mathematics, and writing. Further, the Board is authorized to adopt student standards of excellence. These standards are intended to set goals for the very capable students.*

*In regard to the first of these two new requirements, the Department of Education convened working panels of district educators to draft the proposed minimum student performance standards in science and computer literacy. The draft standards were reviewed by all of the school districts. After revisions were made, the State Board of Education considered the standards and adopted them. The Department recently issued a Request for Proposals for the development of the test specifications which will guide the work of future test development contractors. School districts and universities were encouraged to submit proposals for the specification development project as the Department believes that the tests should be developed with the close involvement of local district educators. After the specifications have been developed and reviewed by all school districts, the test items will be constructed. The Department anticipates that the assessment of student skills in these subject areas will begin in about two years.*

*In regard to the standards of excellence, the Department proceeded in a similar manner. Panels were convened, the standards were reviewed, and revisions were made prior to consideration by the Board. The Department engaged the Dade County School Board to develop the test item specifications and test item pools. The assessment of standards of excellence will probably be done on a sampling basis with the data used for instructional planning rather than for determining individual student progress in school.*

## The 1984 FACET Act

*In 1984, the Florida legislature passed the Omnibus Education Act (Chapter 84-336, Laws of Florida) which again strengthened and broadened the testing programs. These provisions collectively are known as the Florida Accountability in Curriculum, Educational Instructional Materials, and Testing Act (FACET) of 1984. The stated purpose of the law is to “enhance quality education and upgrade student achievement [through] a coordinated effort. . . to ensure that the diverse needs of our public school students are met with the best available instructional materials and assessment instruments and procedures.” It is clear that the legislature intends for testing and instruction to be closely linked.*

*The FACET Act strengthens previous language in the 1976 Accountability Act specifying that the testing programs will include comparisons between Florida and the nation. Interest in these comparisons dates back to the work of the Governor’s Citizens’ Committee report, previously cited, which mentioned the need to include elements of the “National Assessment of Educational Progress in the statewide assessment. Legislators believed that state learner objectives should be pursued but, at the same time, it is worthwhile to monitor the achievement of Florida students compared to that of students across the nation.*

*FACET requires the Department to determine and report norm-referenced test results no later than the 1989-90 school year. Comparisons between schools, districts, regions, and states are to be made public through a series of reports. In implementing this requirement, it will be necessary for the Department to consider the movement toward a national indicators project currently being advocated by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Council, 1985). Obviously, state-by-state comparisons will be available only to the extent that states cooperate in the design and collection of the same data.*

*At this time, the Department is working on the design of its norm-referenced testing procedures. A set of general criteria and characteristics of the norm-referenced program has been endorsed by the Board of Education. These criteria require the Department to use testing procedures which will produce the most accurate data from which the comparisons required by the law are to be made.*

*A second major provision of FACET is the requirement that curriculum frameworks be established for selected curricular areas. These frameworks are to consist of broad guidelines for individual course content. They will ensure consistency across the curricular offerings in the public schools.*

*The Board of Education is required to adopt student performance standards derived from the curriculum frameworks. The Department then is to develop assessment instruments and procedures to permit the determination of student proficiency in the selected courses no later than 1988-89. The Department is currently working toward implementation of these requirements.*

*FACET contains specific requirements for public reporting of the test results. The state level data is to be included in the annual report on public education issued by the Commissioner of Education. Comparative test scores are to be included with rankings of the districts and analyses revealing how Florida compares to other states.*

*Each school district is to report annually on the status of education in the district. These reports are to include the results of the FACET tests. Likewise, each school is to issue annual reports of a similar nature. The reports are to include consideration of student socioeconomic status, aptitude, and prior achievement.*

*Lastly, FACET recognizes that educators need more training in the selection and administration of tests and in the use of test results. The Department is required to develop standards and procedures for these activities as well as model training procedures. Further, the Department is to develop criteria and procedures for determining those school programs which are the most deficient in student*

*performance. These procedures are to take into account the results of the various tests specified in the Accountability Act and the provisions of FACET.*

*In summary, FACET represents a comprehensive addition to the statewide assessment program established originally by the 1976 legislature. Prior to FACET, the assessment program concentrated on certain minimum skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Testing now has been extended to specific high school courses. The curricular offerings in the state's schools are being made more consistent. The public reporting of test results has been strengthened. Clearly, this is a significant legislative action affecting the public schools.*

#### *Uses of Test Data in Florida*

*Test data are used in a variety of ways in Florida. This is possible because of the different aggregations of test results which are made available. Generally, test results are used for (1) allocation of certain resources, (2) as performance goals for students, (3) for public accountability, and (4) as an incentive for improvement.*

*When the 1976 Educational Accountability Act was initiated with its requirement for a high school graduation test, it became evident that the State had an obligation to assist those students who were not adequately prepared to pass the test. Thus, the State Compensatory Education Program, funded at about \$35 million annually, was initiated. Funds are distributed according to need — those districts which have the most students performing inadequately on the statewide assessment program receive the most money. The program is widely accepted and is very important in providing remedial instruction to students with academic needs.*

*The statewide assessment tests measure required performance standards, and, in that sense, are important elements in decisions about promotion from grade to grade.*

*However, the state tests at grades three, five, and eight do not determine by themselves whether a student will be promoted. The information is advisory only, and the teachers have the final decision. In contrast, high school students must pass the state test if they are to qualify for a high school diploma. The schools must incorporate the state standards into the local curriculum, and teachers are obligated to provide instruction in these skills. Since graduation is ultimately tied to student performance, the standards serve as a powerful incentive for individual students to perform well.*

*As has been mentioned, the statewide assessment test results are public information. The data consistently have been made public in various reports and news releases. Schools with low test scores are identified and are expected to improve their students' performance. The Department of Education has implemented a sophisticated system for auditing all school districts in a cyclical fashion. Particular attention is paid to the educational programs in the schools which have low test scores.*

*The test scores also serve to create a climate of academic competition among the schools and school districts. The State has been divided into regions based upon the circulation areas of the major metropolitan area news media coverage. Test results are aggregated and released by region thus making it possible for the citizens and parents to see how their area schools are performing. Furthermore, each district is required to submit an annual plan and evaluation report which shows its progress toward improvement in student performance. This requirement is part of the State Board of Education's goal of moving Florida to a higher quality educational system. The general feeling is that educational competition is perfectly acceptable and can be used as a vehicle for motivating students, teachers, and administrators to strive toward higher achievement.*

## *Summary and Conclusions*

*In summary, it is clear that Floridians believe in the collection and use of student achievement test data. Programs already implemented provide information about students' fundamental skills. Programs authorized but not yet implemented will provide information about student skills in individual school courses. The data are used by educators, administrators, legislators, parents, and citizens. The data are used for making individual student instructional planning decisions as well as for broader, policy decisions by the legislature. Clearly, the new programs are having an impact in the K-12 grades. But, the use of tests extends beyond high school to new testing requirements for college sophomores and the use of tests for determining teacher and administrator academic expertise.*

*Certainly, no one in Florida believes tests can measure everything, and they are not a perfect solution for all of education's difficulties. But, tests do provide incentives and do permit public accountability. These factors are so strong in Florida that the use of tests is likely to continue.*

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