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## ***FSBA Issue Brief: High Stakes Testing In Florida***

### **Background**

In 1995, the original Sunshine State Standards were developed as part of achieving the Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability's goal for creating a procedure for assessing student learning to raise educational expectations for students and help them compete in the global market. In 1998, the first Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCATs) in reading and math were administered in various grades to measure student proficiency in meeting the Sunshine State Standards. Over the course of the next several years, FCAT was expanded to include exams in writing and science and revised to remove norm-referenced components, to remove certain multiple choice questions, and to amend cut scores. In 2007, Florida adopted the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards and called for a transition from FCAT to FCAT 2.0 and a series of End of Course (EOC) exams to measure student proficiency in meeting the new and more rigorous Next Generation standards. FCAT 2.0 (in reading and math in certain grades) and EOC (Algebra I) were first administered in 2011, but scoring was based on the previous FCAT scoring protocols. In 2012, FCAT 2.0 in reading, math, writing, and science (in certain grades) were administered and subsequently scored using new cut scores and placing a greater emphasis on certain aspects of the scoring rubric. In addition, EOCs in Algebra I, Geometry, and Biology I were administered.

By 2015, the Florida Department of Education (DOE) is scheduled to develop EOCs in history and civics. In addition, a variety of other statewide standardized tests have been, or will be, administered to various groups of students including, among others, the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR), the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screeners (FLKRS), and the Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT). Meanwhile, school districts are expected to develop or acquire valid EOCs for any subjects NOT covered by statewide assessments.

### **Discussion**

Standardized tests are a widely accepted diagnostic tool to measure and identify student learning gains, proficiency, and areas of student academic weakness. However, under Florida's high stakes testing structure, student performance on statewide standardized tests has been used, sometimes exclusively, to gauge the performance of school personnel, schools, and school districts and has been used to provide or deny state funding. More important, student performance on these tests has been used, sometimes exclusively, to determine student progression, retention, remediation, course credit, graduation, and/or access to desired and elective courses and programs. For more than a decade, students, parents, educators, and testing professionals have expressed concerns about the validity, reliability, costs, and related ramifications of Florida's use of high stakes testing and the recent transition from FCAT to FCAT 2.0 has, once again, put a spotlight on these key issues.

### **Impact on Students**

Under Florida's high stakes testing structure, a student who scores poorly on a statewide assessment may be retained in grade, may be required to take extensive remediation courses, may be denied access to upper level courses, may be denied any credit for a course, and/or may be denied a standard high school diploma. While there are exceptions,



often the alternatives for avoiding this list of potential consequences involve passage of some other standardized test. Also, in making the determination of whether to apply these potential consequences, in many cases, the student's performance on other course tests, course work, projects, and other indicators of the student's abilities has significantly less weight than the student's score on the single, statewide assessment. This is discouraging to students who see their year's worth of work and learning reduced to a day's worth of testing.

Another area of concern is the amount of time devoted to the administration of statewide assessments and the gap between when tests are administered and scores are made available to students. First, the sheer number of high stakes tests administered to Florida students has grown dramatically over the last 15 years. According to DOE's Statewide Assessment Program Schedule for 2011-2012, more than 45 days were consumed by the administration of FCAT and EOCs alone (field testing and other state tests can add an additional 30 days of testing). Although not all students are being tested on all of those days, the testing protocols disrupt the normal class and school schedules. Students who are not being tested may be relegated to study hall and may not have access to certain classrooms, media centers, and computer labs on testing days. Worse, all students "lose" access to traditional classroom instruction. Second, most statewide assessments are administered in March and April, which is a full month, or more, before the end of the school year. This makes it impossible to measure, accurately, student progress from the beginning to the end of the same school year. Third, test results are often not available until May or June, and sometimes not until after the end of the school year. This makes it difficult for some students and their families to make informed decisions and plans if remediation, retention, or other interventions are indicated. Similarly, students who score well on statewide assessments may not have adequate time to make informed decisions and plans for accessing advanced or accelerated coursework, dual enrollment options, or other special programs. Many of these concerns would be offset if the stakes were not so high.

Another area of concern for students arises from the periodic adjustments made to proficiency cut scores, testing standards, test format, test scoring protocols, and other elements of the statewide high stakes testing structure. As a result of these periodic changes, today, in a typical high school, students in each grade find that they have differing requirements for graduation. In addition, students who performed well on, for example, FCAT Reading one year, suddenly find that they performed poorly on FCAT Reading the subsequent year. In many cases, this difference is not due to a decline in the student's progress or abilities. According to Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson, the drop in FCAT scores "does not mean Florida's children know less than before, or that teachers are doing a bad job." Instead, the drop in FCAT scores is due to the fact that the assessment has changed, the standards have changed, and/or the scoring procedures have changed. Nevertheless, the state will proceed with interventions, such as retaining 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students and withholding a standard diploma from high school students, despite the acknowledgment that the declines may not be due to the student's performance. This instability and unreliability in accurately measuring student performance due to state adjustments and manipulation of the high stakes testing structure is, at best, confusing and misleading to students and their families and, at worst, punitive to students.



### *Impact on School Personnel*

All of the concerns about the impact of high stakes testing on students also apply to school personnel. In addition, at least 50% of a teacher's evaluation must be based on student performance on standardized tests. This evaluation is critical to a teacher's employment status. However, since student scores may not always accurately reflect the student's abilities – as discussed above – this evaluation process is called into question. In addition, given the periodic adjustments to the testing structure, a teacher who is deemed to be "highly effective" one year, but may be deemed to be "unsatisfactory" in a subsequent year even though it is unlikely that the teacher's skills have declined. Further, under Florida high stakes testing structure, an educator whose work or instruction is not assessed by a statewide assessment, is evaluated based, in majority measure, on locally developed assessments that may be less rigorous than the statewide assessment – particularly since no state funding is available to school districts to develop these local assessments. Another concern is that, in some cases, an educator's evaluation may be based, in part, on the performance of students that the educator may have never met or taught. These vagaries of Florida's high stakes testing structure not only discourage classroom teachers, school administrators, and other school personnel, it also undermines the recruitment and retention of excellent teachers and administrators.

### *Impact on Schools and School Districts*

All of the concerns about the impact of high stakes testing on students also apply to schools and school districts. In addition, under Florida's high stakes testing structure, schools are assigned grades and are ranked. For elementary and middle schools, the grade and ranking are based entirely on student scores and participation on FCAT. The calculation of high school grades and ranking was amended in the 2012 legislative session to provide that at least 50% of the school grade and ranking is based on student scores and participation on FCAT and applicable EOCs and the remainder is based on the on-time graduation rate, accelerated coursework participation and performance, and postsecondary readiness. Again, the instability of Florida's high stakes testing structure call the practice of grading and ranking school districts into question. For example, in 2011, 94% of Florida's schools received passing grades, with more than half receiving a grade of "A". It is expected that school grades for 2012 will substantially decline, yet, as acknowledged by Commissioner Robinson, this is not because schools have declined. However, sanctions and interventions will still be applied.

Similarly, under Florida's high stakes testing structure, school districts are assigned grades and are ranked. School district rankings are based entirely on student performance on statewide assessments. In 2011, 66 of Florida's 67 school districts received a passing grade, with 30 receiving a grade of "A". As is the case with school grades, district grades are expected to decline.

### *Impact on District Budgets*

According to the DOE, the state cost for administering the FCAT and statewide EOCs in the 2010-2011 school year was \$30.87 per student, or approximately \$60 million. However, this amount covers only the state's costs and does not offset district costs, including, but not limited to, costs for substitute teachers, test security, postage (in part, to deliver FCAT results to students and their families after the school year has ended), and computer hardware and bandwidth for assessments administered online.



2. In addition, for several years, Florida Statutes have required that measurement of the learning gains of students in all subjects and grade levels, other than subjects and grade levels covered by FCAT and EOC statewide assessments, is the responsibility of the school districts. In the absence of any state funding for the development or acquisition of new assessment instruments, this requirement was met in school districts through classroom tests, mid-term and final exams, term papers, projects, and other similar assessments developed by classroom teachers. With the passage of SB 736 during the 2011 Legislative Session, school districts are now required, by the 2014-2015 school year, to administer valid assessments for all courses that are not covered by statewide assessments. However, state funding has yet to be provided for this purpose, including, but not limited to, funding for test development or acquisition, field testing, production and printing, scoring, reporting, analyses and research, training, language translations, and test security – even though the state provides funding to the DOE for these purposes. It has been estimated that the unfunded non-recurring cost for these local assessments and related costs could be as much as \$1.5- \$2 billion statewide, with recurring annual costs of as much as \$1 billion.

### **Recommendations**

Florida School Boards Association recommends that the Governor, Florida Legislature, and State Board of Education:

- ✓ • Contract with a qualified, independent entity to conduct a thorough and fully transparent independent review and evaluation of Florida's accountability system, including the assessment instruments, contracts with service providers, state and local costs, the return on investment, and the overall quality, reliability, and validity of the system;
- ✓ • Revise the accountability system to include data from multiple forms of assessment and limited standardized testing to more accurately reflect student learning gains and identify learning weaknesses;
- ✓ • Eliminate the practice of using student performance on standardized tests as the primary basis for evaluating teacher, administrator, school, and district performance;
- ✓ • Phase in any revisions to the accountability system in order to ensure adequate time for students, teachers, parents, and administrators to fully understand and adapt to the revisions, and ensure that students, teachers, schools, and districts are held harmless during the phase-in period; and
- ✓ • Ensure that Florida's accountability system is fully funded by the state and that school districts are held harmless from incurring any expenses related to the development of assessment instruments and the administration of assessment tests, including the expenses related to training, test security, and the hardware, software, and infrastructure necessary to administer assessment tests.

In addition, the Florida School Boards Association calls on the U.S. Congress and Administration to overhaul the ESEA, reduce the testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality in accountability, and not mandate any fixed role for the use of student test scores in evaluating educators.