

Competing to Win: How Florida's A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform

A Summary of
Information Obtained Through
Public Records Requests

By

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Making Schools Work Better for All Children

Introduction

By Dr. Howard Fuller
Former Superintendent
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In this report, Carol Innerst, who for decades provided balanced coverage of education as a journalist, details how Florida school districts have undertaken significant efforts to improve public schools in response to the competitive pressure applied by the state's groundbreaking Opportunity Scholarship program. Innerst's findings came as no surprise to me. I witnessed the same effect first-hand in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

As superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) from 1991 to 1995, I encountered the myriad of political and institutional pressures that impede meaningful change in urban schools. I found that these pressures on behalf of the status quo could stifle even the most determined and dedicated educators.

My tenure at MPS coincided with the initial years of operation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). The program is much like Florida's in that it allows families to use a portion of their state education funds to send their children to the schools that will best meet their needs, adding private schools to an array of public options. The eligibility criteria of the two programs differ somewhat as the MPCP is limited to low-income families whereas the Florida program is limited to parents of children assigned to schools receiving an "F" grade for two years in any four-year period.

Although one MPCP goal was to encourage improvement in public schools through the pressure provided by additional competition, during its early years I observed only a limited impact on MPS. This is largely explained by the fact that participation in the MPCP was limited to a small percentage of MPS students (one percent during 1991-1993 and 1.5 percent during 1993-1995). This modest participation simply did not constitute enough political and financial leverage to make a difference in the system as a whole.

In the summer of 1995, however, the program was expanded to allow for student participation of up to 15 percent of MPS enrollment, or roughly 15,000 students. The size of the program quickly doubled but its growth was just as quickly limited by a court injunction blocking the participation of religious schools. This obstacle was removed in 1998 when the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld all aspects of the 1995 expansion, including the participation of religious schools. As a result, the program's size has increased dramatically, and this school year more than 8,000 students are participating in the MPCP.

As the MPCP has grown in size over the last five years, it has had a positive and dramatic impact in fostering public school improvement. In that time period, I have observed several reforms in MPS that can be attributed largely to the expansion of school choice options for low-income parents. Here are just a few:

- *More Early Childhood Education:* Historically, MPS had resisted parent requests to provide a wide range of programs for three-, four-, and five-year old children. As a result, those able to provide such options for their children were limited mostly to middle- and upper-income families, which could afford private facilities. Since 1995, however, MPS has both expanded the number of its five-year-old kindergarten programs and expanded those programs to all-day schedules; 80 percent of four-year old kindergarten programs are now all-day; and the number of three-year old kindergarten programs has tripled.

- *Expanded Before-School and After-School Programs:* In 1995, MPS had one school with before- and after-school childcare, recreation, and tutoring programs for low-income families. Such programs are a major attraction at many private choice schools. Now, as a result of competition, MPS has 82 such programs, serving 28,000 students.
- *The Growth of Charter Schools:* As of 1995, MPS had only once used its authority to charter a school and, in so doing, give it substantial latitude in day-to-day educational and administrative issues. By the 2000-01 school year, however, six additional MPS charter schools will be in operation, serving several thousand students.
- *Greater Access to Health Care:* Two MPS schools had health clinics in 1995; today the number is 47.

Although these positive changes did begin to occur when the program was expanded in 1995, the pace of reform has substantially increased in the two years since the injunction was lifted and the choice program became fully operational. During the last year alone, for example, MPS has:

- Sought to encourage parents of young children to attend public school by promising in radio ads that the district will hire private tutors if students are not able to read at grade level by the third grade.
- Permitted a dozen schools to hire teachers outside the seniority system that stymies reform.
- Responded to longstanding requests by parents for more new schools that specialize in such popular programs as Montessori.

Moreover, last April, Milwaukee voters elected a slate of reform candidates to the MPS board who believe that parents deserve options. All of these actions suggest that MPS realizes that it can no longer take parents for granted.

Carol Innerst's comprehensive study of how Florida school districts have responded to the Opportunity Scholarship program makes a valuable contribution by reinforcing what we in Milwaukee already have learned: providing parents with additional options increases the responsiveness and accountability of public schools, and serves as a crucial impetus for public school reform. For this reason, Innerst's report should be read by everyone interested in improving the quality of educational opportunities available to our nation's economically disadvantaged children.

Competing to Win: How Florida's A+ Plan Has Triggered Public School Reform

By Carol Innerst*

Program Overview—Making the Grade

Teachers and administrators received a jolt when Rimes Elementary School in Lake County received an "F" on a state report card issued under Gov. Jeb Bush's sweeping, new Florida A+ Plan for Education.

"It was like a glass of cold water in the face," recalled Maureen Backenstoss, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Lake County School District.¹

The staff was further shaken when told that a second "F" on the next round of standardized testing would allow Rimes pupils to flee the failing public school with a state-funded "Opportunity Scholarship" that would pay the tuition at a cooperating private school. Rimes pupils also could opt to enroll in a higher-performing public school in Lake County or in an adjacent school district. But they could not be forced to stay at Rimes.

Lake County wasn't the only school district to receive a brusque introduction to the new face of education reform in Florida.

As part of last year's \$750 million increase in state education funding and this year's more than \$800 million increase, the A+ Plan gives more state assistance to failing public schools to help those schools improve while at the same time demanding that they meet higher standards. (This state help includes \$525 million for the current fiscal year in supplemental academic instruction funds available with a priority given to failing public schools.) If schools don't measure up for two years in a four-year period, pupils can either transfer to a public school graded "C" or better, or attend a private school with a state-funded scholarship in the amount the state would have spent on the student's public education. This year, the sum is about \$3,400.

In the first three years of Florida's standards and accountability program, the state Department of Education had couched its characterizations of poorly performing schools in terminology such as "critically low" and "Level I." But last year, the DOE came out with a school report card that used readily recognizable letter-grades. Schools with large numbers of pupils who flunked the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) in reading, writing and math received an "F." Fifteen of Florida's 67 county school districts had one or more "F" schools, for a total of 78 "F" schools in the state.²

The 61,000 pupils in those 78 schools represent the potential pool of Opportunity Scholarship applicants who could seek to attend private schools in the 2000-01 school year. Districts like Miami-Dade, with 26 "F" schools, reeled at the ramifications.

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¹ Telephone interview conducted April 5, 2000.

² 1999 School Performance Grades.

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The letter grades resonated among educators and in the public consciousness in a way the previous designations never had. "Since public accountability began four years ago, schools have been more focused," said Andrea Willett, chief of the Bureau of School Improvement and Educational Flexibility for the Florida Department of Education. "With recognizable measures this year—everybody knows what an 'A' and an 'F' school look like—the highly public visibility encouraged schools to take seriously reform efforts focusing on curriculum and instruction."³

But even more worrisome to the public school educators, an "F" for two years in any four-year period carried unprecedented consequences. Suddenly, the public schools found themselves thrust into a competitive market, their pupils no longer captive clients and their state per-pupil funding at risk.

All Florida school districts with failing schools quickly learned that the possibility of losing children to academically successful schools was not an idle threat. In the 1999-2000 school year, two Pensacola elementary schools, A.A. Dixon and Spencer Bibbs, received failing grades in two of the last four years of standardized testing and lost a total of 53 children to private schools through Opportunity Scholarships. Another 85 left for higher-performing public schools.

Not surprisingly, the loss of more than 130 students who were assigned to attend Dixon and Bibbs served as a loud wake-up call to teachers and administrators at those schools. As a result, intensive reform efforts have been implemented in an attempt to remove Bibbs and Dixon from the ranks of the "F" schools.

The departure of students, however, has not proved to be a necessary prerequisite to spurring significant action at failing public schools. As the schools themselves state in various documents obtained through public records requests, the mere threat of losing students through the Opportunity Scholarship program and the other school choice options of the Florida A+ Plan has led districts with schools that have received one "F" to launch major reform efforts. This is because, to most public school educators, the threat of competition from school choice looms as the most dreaded consequence of their failure to meet the state's accountability standards. In Florida, that threat has proved to be a motivating force for encouraging schools to take seriously reform efforts focusing on curriculum and instruction.

A review of more than 300 documents obtained from each Florida school district with at least one "F" rated school shows that most are taking serious steps to change the conditions that produced and sustained their climate of failure. Interviews with key state and district school officials support the renewed vigor of the districts directed to raising the achievement levels of Florida's schoolchildren and lend further insight into the reasons for it.

The Escambia County Experience

Escambia is the only district in Florida with pupils eligible for Opportunity Scholarships this school year. After receiving two failing grades in the last four years, the Opportunity Scholarships provision of the Florida A+ Plan kicked in and A.A. Dixon and Spencer Bibbs Elementary Schools combined lost 53 pupils to private schools and another 85 to public schools graded "C" or better. Although the constitutionality of using government-funded vouchers at private schools is being challenged in Florida's courts and jeopardizes the status of the 53 children who moved out of Bibbs and Dixon and into private schools, the 85 pupils who chose higher-performing public schools cannot be forced back into the failing schools.

³ Telephone interview conducted April 3, 2000.

Brenda McShane wasn't surprised when the Florida Department of Education gave "F" grades to Bibbs and Dixon. They are the schools that all four of her children attended. The Pensacola mother knew all along her children were not getting an adequate education, but although both she and her husband work, they could not afford private schools for their children.

"Some teachers were challenging and motivated, but didn't offer enough reinforcement," she said.⁴ "Then some teachers wouldn't correct paperwork. They would just say, 'Oh, they'll grow out of it,' and that it was okay to form letters upside down, to go outside margins, and to spell incorrectly. It was okay for them to do that. I tried to have them do it correctly at home. I believed some activities should be repetitious, especially if they had trouble with it. My ideas and concerns were rejected. It was rough. I felt like I was hitting my head against a brick wall."

McShane's three eldest children suffered because they were passed from grade to grade when they should have been retained. Her youngest was lucky. The year Brenisha, now 7, was in kindergarten at Dixon was the first year for a new phonics program. The next year, Dixon pupils became eligible for the Opportunity Scholarship program, and she enrolled Brenisha in the private Montessori Early School, where the child is blooming.

"She's learning fractions, subtraction, cursive handwriting," her mother said. "She's getting lots of skills my other kids didn't get, that they never learned at all."

McShane wishes Bibbs and Dixon had been forced to improve long before this. "A fire is being lit now," she said. "Schools are assessed for what they are doing. They should have had all that 'go-get' gumption back then. They should have tried with all their power to meet kids' needs, and to go to parents for help."

Failure in Escambia is not confined to Bibbs and Dixon. Last year, five other elementary schools and two middle schools in Escambia County received an "F" report card and could find themselves in the same situation as Bibbs and Dixon later this year if they fail to improve.

In response to the departure of students through the Opportunity Scholarship program and the prevalence of failure throughout the district, Escambia has begun to implement major reforms. To begin with, Escambia is among a handful of Florida districts that implemented a 210-day extended school year for students in its "F" schools. (More districts with "F" schools proposed an extended school year in their improvement plans, but did not implement it, often because of contractual issues with the teachers unions.) The typical calendar year runs 180 days. Escambia, like many others, also implemented an extended school day from 2 to 4 p.m. at least twice a week, and Saturday school.⁵

Two national panels—the National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its "Nation at Risk" report, and the Secretary of Education's Commission on Time and Learning—have called attention to the need to increase the amount and duration of learning activities in the public schools. Yet it has been nearly two decades since the first warning was issued (1983), and few schools have heeded those recommendations. Spurred by the unwelcome consequences of continued failure, many Florida districts, such as Escambia, have begun to see merit in "more time on task" and have initiated longer school days, longer school weeks, and in some cases, longer school years.

"More time on task" also changed classroom schedules. Students in Escambia's failing schools are not only spending more time in school but also more time mastering basic skills, such as reading.

⁴ Telephone interview conducted April 3, 2000.

⁵ Spencer Bibbs Elementary School, Escambia County School District, Recommendation 1.

Recognizing that children who don't learn to read can never be successful in school, "F" elementary schools, such as Bibbs and Dixon, have devoted 90-minute time blocks for reading instruction in grades K-5.

"Since increased emphasis is being given to reading, special area teachers use their subject area to address reading, and show commitment and support by participating in the reading time block," reads the Spencer Bibbs improvement plan filed by Escambia County. It continues: "No matter what discipline is being taught, reading skills are always emphasized and remain the top priority."⁶

At Dixon, "P.E., Art and Music teachers also integrate reading into special area curriculum," according to that school's improvement plan.⁷

The elementary schools also implemented longer time blocks for writing and mathematics instruction, with Dixon giving math a 90-minute time block. Bibbs ratcheted up math instruction to 60 minutes a day.⁸ At the middle and high school levels, block scheduling allows students to concentrate on fewer subjects over a longer period of time each day.

"More time on task" doesn't mean much if students don't show up for class. For this reason, Escambia County School District is trying to reduce student absenteeism by utilizing "visiting teachers" and an automated phone system to contact parents when a child is absent.

Aside from spending more time in class mastering basic skills, Escambia County has begun to recognize the importance of maintaining continuity in a child's education. In a significant departure from "business as usual," Escambia County has launched a massive busing effort in response to a high mobility problem that has worsened in the past five years. Extreme mobility among the urban poor is a chronic problem nationally and one that afflicts Escambia's Dixon and Bibbs schools. The high mobility rate among the families whose children attended those failing schools was identified as one cause of the schools' poor showing on Florida's standardized tests. Some children, for example, might move four or five times during the school year, and each move, although it might be only a few blocks away, often puts a child into a different school with a new environment and different lessons. Conceivably, a child could leave a school that was just getting ready to start subtraction and find himself in a new school where his class had just finished the subject. The result is a gap in the child's education.

"Our district has done everything we can to speak to the mobility rate," said Annette McArthur, director of elementary education in Escambia County. "Children who have moved out of this district, we've transported them back to Bibbs and Dixon. There are 84 children who for one reason or other moved in the course of the year and we send transportation to bring them back. Some children move three or four times. We get transportation arranged and then they move again. The extra busing is costing about \$175,000. But some of that is for the kids attending the higher-performing schools."⁹

High mobility among low-income, inner-city families is not a recently identified problem. But it appeared to be tolerable until Dixon and Bibbs lost pupils because of the state's Opportunity Scholarship program.

Reform at "F" Schools

⁶ Spencer Bibbs Elementary School, Escambia County School District, Recommendation 1.

⁷ A.A. Dixon Elementary School, Escambia County School District, Recommendation 1.

⁸ Escambia County School District Extended School Year Plan, Spencer Bibbs Academy and A.A. Dixon Elementary.

⁹ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

The catalyzing effect of the Opportunity Scholarship program on public school reform not only exists in Escambia County, where students have actually left failing public schools for private schools but also is evident in those districts with failing schools whose students might become eligible for the Opportunity Scholarship program this year. As these school districts pursue reforms to improve the grades of those schools that have already received one "F", their eyes have been drawn to Escambia County's experience with the Opportunity Scholarship program.

A memo advising Palm Beach School District principals of a meeting with the superintendent to discuss concerns related to the Florida A+ Plan noted that "vouchers have no impact until at least August, 2000 in Palm Beach County."¹⁰ The "Escambia County Experience" later showed up on the agenda for an August 31, 1999 meeting of officials of Palm Beach District.¹¹

A research brief dated June 24, 1999 and circulated to all principals and school board members by Dorothy J. Orr, interim superintendent of schools, Broward County Public Schools, spells out the consequences of failure to comply with the new state accountability criteria under Florida's A+ Plan. An attached document titled "Agenda: A+ Plan" views Opportunity Scholarships as one of the cudgels the state can use to force district compliance with the A+ Plan's accountability provisions. The first item on the document labeled "Agenda" is "vouchers." It outlines the school district's responsibilities relating to the use of Opportunity Scholarships at "F" schools and states that schools will lose FTE (full-time equivalent funding) when pupils abandon an "F" school. Opportunity scholarships come up again in the "Agenda" section on "Grading Schools." Failure to implement the A+ Plan, according to the document, means: "Schools reconstituted, State intervention, Opportunity scholarship, Loss of students and FTE." Another Broward brief, on "Pupils Progress/Promotion/Retention," explains that the A+ Plan requires intensive reading instruction for all children who read below grade level. Then it asks: "What will happen if we don't?" Among the answers that educators don't like to hear: "Awarding of school vouchers."¹²

Forced to improve their failing schools or lose their customers, most districts have risen to the challenge. Today the districts are teeming with activity with one goal in mind: raising achievement levels in their "F" schools. With Opportunity Scholarships in the wings to help children caught in the state's worst schools make the leap to private schools, Florida districts have initiated a variety of new strategies and reforms to improve their educational offerings.

All of the districts with schools that received an "F" or a "D" under Florida's new school report card system have undertaken massive amounts of professional development for teachers, training them to use technology and retraining them in better methods of teaching the rudiments of reading, writing and mathematics to children who have failed to learn those basics in the past. Given the characteristics of the children in the failing schools, most of those schools are taking a cue from the state and moving to direct instruction and explicit teaching, which makes no assumptions about students' prior knowledge and works well for children who don't have newspapers in their homes and who aren't readers outside of school. That shift in instructional technique requires massive amounts of teacher retraining.

Most schools with large numbers of low-achieving pupils have redoubled their efforts to teach children to read. Among the strategies: hiring more reading specialists, implementing one-on-one tutoring, replacing failed "whole language" reading programs with "direct instruction" techniques that

¹⁰ Memorandum from Vernon A. Pickup-Crawford, The "Escambia County Experience."

¹¹ Memorandum from Jake Sello.

¹² Pupil Progress/Promotion/Retention.

emphasize phonemic awareness and phonics, and creating a block of time for reading—up to two hours a day in at least one elementary school.¹³

The spate of school improvement plans prepared by the districts in response to the report card and the threat of Opportunity Scholarships reveal a sense of urgency not evident in the past. It appears that both the level of activity and the pressure to improve have increased in large measure because of educational competition fostered by school choice and the Opportunity Scholarship program. The scope and intensity of these new reform efforts can perhaps best be seen by closely examining the efforts of a few individual districts.

Broward County

“People get lulled into complacency,” said Carmen Varela-Russo, associate superintendent for technology, strategic planning and accountability of Broward County Public Schools. “The jolt of being labeled an ‘F’ school and the possibility of losing children to private schools or other districts was a strong message to the whole community. Labeling schools ‘A,’ ‘B,’ ‘C,’ ‘D’ or ‘F’ caused some pain.”¹⁴

Broward County has seven “F” schools to pull up by the bootstraps—four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and a charter school. In going through the exercise of developing school improvement plans, Broward discovered that previously flagged needs had not been met.

“We needed a reading coach and a math coach,” said Broward County’s Varela-Russo. “Pretty basic, but it wasn’t happening in many cases.”¹⁵

In another case, principals and supervisors in Broward, after taking a hard look at the data that created the “F” status in some of its schools, realized that while the computer laboratory was indeed functioning, teachers had not been given proper training in how to use the school’s technology and needed additional professional development to take full advantage of this equipment.¹⁶

One piece of the A+ Plan legislation, in an attempt to stem social promotion, says if a fourth-grade child takes the FCAT and remains in the lowest quartile, that child should not be promoted. Districts therefore have begun to identify children at risk of not being promoted and prepare an individualized student “Academic Improvement Plan” (AIP) for each of them.

One of the tenets of the education community is that if a child starts kindergarten behind his peers (in terms of pre-school exposure to language and books) and doesn’t catch up by the third grade, chances are that child will remain behind the rest of his school career. So while kindergarten in many districts is all play, Broward this year began a new, more academically oriented curriculum for kindergarten that is a mix of play and academics in an effort to boost student achievement down the road.¹⁷

Moving from the beginning of one’s public school experience to the final years, Broward has one high school that received an “F.” Deerfield Beach High School has a large group of students whose native language is not English and who are in the ESOL (English as a Second Language) program. After looking at the curriculum, school officials determined that the ESOL group needed more support services.

¹³ Rimes Elementary School in Lake County School District. Telephone interview conducted with Maureen Backenstoss on April 5, 2000.

¹⁴ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

¹⁵ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

¹⁶ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

¹⁷ Varela-Russo telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

As a result, they put in a language laboratory that utilizes technology and started an "intensive academy" for the lowest scoring ninth graders.

"Instead of putting them in regular classes where they are likely to fail, we are giving them a special program—an intensive academy—geared toward upgrading their knowledge and skills in reading, writing and math," Varela-Russo explained.¹⁸

The school district has implemented other reforms. Saturday tutoring at the schools is not new in Broward, but attendance is now more strictly enforced for children who are struggling. Summer school is mandatory for any fourth grader likely to be retained in his grade without it, and is "strongly encouraged" for many other children who could use the reinforcement. "We haven't extended the school day or year, but we're talking about it," she said. Most districts, including Broward, are reducing class size in the early grades.

Broward's new accountability regime does not extend just to traditional public schools. Broward's "F" rated charter school is being subjected to greater scrutiny. The school serves children from what would have been a "D" or "F" school, according to Varela-Russo. But she points out, "This is a public school. If they don't get it off the 'F' list we will review the charter. They could be shut down."

Miami-Dade County

Some school districts have come up with inspired plans to try to teach children who historically have struggled in the classroom because they enter school without the building blocks for learning that are formed in literate homes during the pre-school years. Lillie Carmichael Evans Elementary School in Miami-Dade County School District, for example, has turned to "Total Love," a program that targets fourth and fifth graders and their families.¹⁹ In addition to switching from a reading program that had limited success to one that is phonics based, this school encourages parents—many of whom are dropouts—to go back to school for a high school equivalency diploma.²⁰ It also provides materials and supplies for parents to create a home learning center where their child can study.²¹ Each night from 7 to 8 p.m., families are asked to "Turn on the Academic Light" so their child can study.²² The Lillie C. Evans Elementary School is also promoting greater use of "manipulatives"—objects that can be handled which make it easier for some children to understand abstract mathematics concepts—as a way to improve math scores.²³

¹⁸ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

¹⁹ Florida Department of Education Project Application Summary, Lillie Carmichael Evans Elementary, Item (9)-Abstract.

²⁰ Item (9)-Abstract—"Family representatives will be encouraged to enroll in GED or high school education classes where appropriate."

²¹ Item (10B)-Project Narrative (Continued)-Objective 3: Design and develop a home learning center. Materials, supplies will be created and purchased for convenient use at home by June, 2000.

²² Item 10A-Project Narrative—"Turn on the Academic Light/Let Our Vision to educate our children Endeavor," "Total Love" provides the full service approach to teaching reading and writing by creating a cadre of administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, parent aides, social service and health care agency representatives, and community volunteers. As the learning light is turned on nightly, students and families will experience a new power line of help that turns on success."

²³ Florida Department of Education Project Application Summary, Lillie Carmichael Evans Elementary, 1895 N.W. 75 Street, Miami, Item (9)-Abstract.

Miami-Dade initiated Saturday remedial reading for high school students in low-scoring schools.²⁴ A Miami-Dade official captured the intensity of the push for reform with a memo to principals last fall: "The Florida's High Quality Education System that designates school performance grade categories 'A'-'F' (corresponding with performance levels 5-1) has created a sense of urgency for focusing efforts, resources, and foster (sic) districtwide collaborations," wrote Joseph H. Mathos, deputy superintendent for education in Miami-Dade, in a September 3, 1999 memorandum.²⁵

Lake County

Lake County's only "F" rated school, Rimes Elementary School, this year reduced the pupil-teacher ratio to 15-to-1, extended the reading block to two hours a day, and switched to a Montessori methodology to reading mastery program that is strong on direct instruction and lots of drill and practice. Teachers find the scripted curriculum less than exciting to teach, "but the children are responding very well," said Maureen Backenstoss, the assistant superintendent.²⁶

The school has done the same thing with math, utilizing Saxon math, which is a strong, repetitive, direct instruction program. Backenstoss explained, "It focuses on those basic foundation repetitive issues in math. Kids today don't learn those multiplication tables. In my day it (failure to learn them) would have been cause for retention."

To encourage greater participation in its extended day program, Lake County began providing transportation home for children who stay until 5 p.m. or later for tutoring. The district is discussing the possibility of an extended school year, and the legislature is trying to put carrots out there to encourage schools to go to an extended school year model, but many teachers are resistant because they went into teaching to have summers off, according to Backenstoss. But the children come back August 9 this year—an earlier start time to prepare for the high stakes state testing in February.

"When you look at what is happening in education in general. . .slippage or denial. . .the population in different areas has started to change and sometimes the subtlety of those changes was not addressed in the education environment," Backenstoss said. "We have very seasoned teachers of 20-plus years, but the populations they are getting are different from the kinds of kids they taught 20 years ago and they have not totally readdressed their teaching style. The typical school day at Rimes used to be from 8:15 to 3 and now it is going to 5:30 or 6 with about 80 percent of the 310 K-5 pupils participating."

Other Counties

The school improvement plans developed by failing schools in other counties include a litany of reforms designed to improve the school's letter-grade and avoid eligibility for the Opportunity Scholarship program. Although these reforms are too numerous to be set forth in this report, a representative sample includes:

²⁴ Commissioner's Reading Initiative Grants: Guidelines for Applications, Florida Department of Education Project Application Summary, Miami Edison Senior High School, Item (10A) Project Narrative "Additional training in reading will be provided and the need for extended hours of instruction through Saturday School program focused on reading is obvious. The most skilled and dedicated reading teachers will be selected to deliver this additional instruction.

²⁵ Memorandum to: All Principals, Subject: Redirection of funds for FCAT Enhancement Program, September 3, 1999.

²⁶ Telephone interview conducted April 5, 2000.

- Gadsen County School District instituted a number of direct instruction programs and strategies—among them Accelerated Reader, Marva Collins, Core Knowledge, Direct Instruction and Saxon.²⁷
- Palm Beach County School District established classroom libraries, after school and Saturday tutorials, block scheduling in high schools, and reverted to homogeneous grouping for reading and spelling.²⁸ It also targeted its fourth grade teachers for coaching in how to teach reading, and began more frequent and closer observations of teachers in its “F” schools.²⁹
- Polk County School District turned to a new language arts program, an extended day, and set up a mentoring program with volunteers from business partners.
- St. John’s School District plainly states in its improvement plan that it is targeting the skills levels of both pupils and teachers. The District noted that one of the reasons for the poor showing of one school in math was “the circumstance of four different (math) teachers during the school year.”³⁰
- Volusia County School District brought in reading specialists, reduced class size and trained teachers in “brain compatible learning.”³¹ Orange County School District also offered staff training in brain research and in the math strategies recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.³²

Beyond the “F” Schools

The competitive pressure applied by the A+ plan and Opportunity Scholarship program is having an effect even in those school districts with no “F” schools. Although Hillsborough County School District, for example, has no “F” schools, district officials there are plenty worried about its 37 “D” schools dropping a grade. Hillsborough’s superintendent said he would take the extraordinary step of giving himself a five-percent pay cut if any of the schools—five middle schools and 32 elementary schools, most of them Title I schools—received an “F” on the next report card.

Darlene Cleminson, a teacher at Hillsborough County School District’s Mann Middle School reacted to the announcement by commenting, “I’ve seen principals eat worms, I’ve seen vice principals kiss pigs to get students to read a certain number of pages, but I’ve never seen a superintendent put his salary on the line.”³³ Sam Rosales, Hillsborough’s supervisor of accountability summed up the district’s approach in the following manner: “A total attack on the situation is being developed as we speak.”³⁴

²⁷ Components of a District Assistance and Intervention Plan for “D” or “F” Schools (To inform Extended Year Plan) 3-5 years.

²⁸ Glade View Elementary School, Blueprint 2000 Goals: 3, 4, 6 Reading.

²⁹ Support for D and F Schools Meeting Oct. 27, 1999.

³⁰ St. Johns School District Technical Assistance and Intervention Plan for Hastings Elementary School.

³¹ Project Planner: “Train all teachers in brain compatible learning.”

³² Learning Community Interventions, Area North Learning Community Plan for “D” and “F” Schools Aug. 16, 1999, and Targeted School and Instructional Enhancement Grants for Hosts Projects, Abstract, Polk. School” Auburndale Central Elementary.

³³ Chion-Kenney, Linda, “School officials tie salary to tests,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 10, 1999, p. 1A.

³⁴ Telephone interview conducted April 6, 2000.

In a similar vein, Martin County School District has no "F" schools but is still taking action to ensure that none of its "D" schools receive an "F" in future years. Among other steps, school officials are providing teachers at "D" schools who meet new performance goals with a \$1,000 bonus.

The Challenges Ahead

While the districts' collective efforts to improve the quality of education received by students at Florida's low-performing schools are impressive, there are nonetheless many obstacles ahead.

For instance, some of the districts' activities in the name of reform might be considered specious or even misguided. Marion County School District proposed more early release days for students in order to provide more in-service training for teachers—a move that could benefit teachers, but prove costly to students who need more time on task, not less.³⁵ Escambia County School District, by contrast, decreased the number of days teachers are out of class by scheduling staff development activities at alternative dates and times.³⁶ Marion County, with three elementary schools that received an "F," also included as part of its staff development the following program of questionable worth: 10 weekly sessions in stress management at each failing school.³⁷

Beyond the effectiveness of specific reforms, many school officials also argue that there are inherent limits to what any reform plan can accomplish because of the backgrounds some children bring into the school environment. "Mother on drugs, no father in the home, no appropriate housing, no prepared meals—it's not saying kids can't learn, but they've got lots of baggage overwhelming them," said Lake County's Backenstoss. "Learning is an extended process. It has to happen in the home and at other periods of time. If it's a survival mode when the child gets home, there has to be residual effects."

But others believe failing schools are victims of a "misguided compassion" problem. "It's important that we recognize there are schools in Florida with high mobility, high poverty and high minority populations—yet they aren't 'F' and 'D' schools," said Willett of the Bureau of School Improvement and Educational Flexibility.³⁸ "Children who are poor can learn as well as kids who are rich."

Brewser Brown, chief of staff to Lt. Gov. Frank Brogan and an education advisor for the governor, similarly recognizes that the schools that have flunked the state's tougher standards and assessments are largely populated by poor, disadvantaged minority children—many from broken and dysfunctional homes—and by immigrant children whose native language is not English.³⁹ But he concludes, "There is a well-intended but misguided philosophy in operation that says 'your life is so bad we're going to buck up your self-esteem and provide you with some comfort in the world, but we aren't going to expect you to learn.' The schools' job is not to coddle the child and make him or her feel better," he said. "It's to teach children how to read, write and do mathematics so they will be prepared to succeed. The Florida A+ Plan has helped the school districts make the difficult decisions they didn't have to make in the past—like removing, reassigning or retraining administrators, principals and teachers who

³⁵ October 1, 1999 Memorandum: To: Dr. John D. Smith, Superintendent; From: Community Assistance Team; Subject: Plan to Address Critically Low Scores—Provide Teacher Training: "It is further recommended that more early release days be provided for these schools in order that on going staff development may occur."

³⁶ Escambia County School District, District Staff Assistance Model, "Decrease the number of days that teachers are out of class by scheduling staff development activities at alternative dates and times."

³⁷ Staff Development, "April 17, 1999 Stress Management—Charter Springs will provide 10 weekly sessions at each Level I school."

³⁸ Telephone interview conducted April 3, 2000.

³⁹ Telephone interview conducted April 3, 2000.

are not up to the reform challenge. Some district officials say they knew of these personnel situations all along, but now are doing something about it.”

CONCLUSION

Although the merits of the districts’ reform efforts reviewed in this report can be debated, what is important is that school officials have been prodded into action. The crucial factors providing the impetus for that action have been the public embarrassment associated with a “bad” school report card and the threat of Opportunity Scholarships.

There is a newfound sense of urgency to turn around Florida’s lowest performing schools. All across Florida, districts are implementing promising strategies for improving the performance of students attending “F” rated public schools. Students are spending more time in class and devoting more time to mastering basic reading, writing and math skills. Schools are providing students with individualized tutoring and are encouraging greater parental involvement in their children’s education. Districts are providing teachers with training in different instructional approaches.

While only time and the results of future tests will demonstrate for certain the effectiveness of the A+ Plan, the best evidence to date indicates that the public embarrassment of a bad school report card along with the threat of students leaving public schools through the Opportunity Scholarship program and taking their per-pupil funding with them have had the effect of prodding districts to take major steps to reform failing schools. The fact that education reform efforts are being made at all in a system notably resistant to change is in and of itself a significant and noteworthy accomplishment.