

A Statewide Network Promoting
College Readiness, Access and
Success

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



research • communication • advocacy • support

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ENLACE FLORIDA is a W.K. Kellogg Foundation initiative managed by the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships.

Three Positive Results for Education

Despite a Terrible Budget

By Paul J. Dosal

On March 21, 2008, Dr. Sara Lundquist, Vice President of Student Services at Santa Ana College and the guiding light of the national ENLACE movement, gave a group of educators one word of advice: **NEVERTHELESS**. She was speaking to a group of educators interested in making the college prep curriculum the default curriculum for all high school students in California. Knowing that such a reform would impact an already shrinking school and university budget for teacher training and development statewide, she encouraged the educators to move forward with curricular reform. Dr. Lundquist reminded the educators that they have never really enjoyed a decent budget, and the fact that their legislators are often unresponsive to their requests should come as no surprise. So under these rather normal circumstances, educators trying to increase the rigor and relevance of the high school curriculum have no choice but to move forward **NEVERTHELESS**.

Today in Florida, there is no doubt that our schools, community colleges, and universities will have to take drastic measures to cope with severe budget cuts. On May 14, the University of Florida's Board of Trustees unanimously approved a plan to slash \$47 million from the budget by eliminating 422 faculty and staff members and reduce undergraduate enrollment by 1,000 students a year for four years.¹ Sadly, our flagship university is not alone. Florida State University reduced its budget by \$17.5 million; Florida International University cut \$11.9 million; and the University of South Florida trimmed its budget by \$34 million. At each university, enrollment is shrinking, hiring is frozen, and programs are being threatened. To make things

¹ Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, "Fewer Students will Learn Less at UF after Cuts," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 6, 2008; "UF Trustees Approve \$47 Million Spending Cut," *Tampa Tribune*, May 15, 2008.

even worse, our administrators and faculty are being recruited by other institutions. The most recent losses include John Cavanaugh, president of the University of West Florida; Bob Donley, the Board of Governor's Chief of Staff; Mark Hoyt, University of Florida chief technology officer, who is leaving our state to be vice chancellor of IT at North Carolina State and Larry Conrad, FSU's chief information officer who is now going to UNC. Chancellor Mark B. Rosenberg described these and other recent losses as adding up to "a bad day for the state university system."²

Our K-12 system fared no better in the 2008-09 budget. Legislators reduced K-12 spending by \$336 million, representing a 5% reduction from the previous school year. In Broward and Palm Beach counties, this reduction amounts to a decrease in per pupil spending of \$117.³ School districts throughout Florida are scrambling to balance their budgets by eliminating teacher aides, consolidating bus routes, and canceling valuable before- and after-school programs. Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, spoke for many educators when he described the 2008 legislative session as simply "disastrous."⁴

While it is hard to argue that this has been a *bad* and even *disastrous* year for education, policy makers *nevertheless* took three positive steps forward in public education. Governor Crist committed Florida to join the American Diploma Project, a nation-wide effort to increase the rigor and relevance of our high school curricula and prepare our graduates for a college education. The legislature also passed a major reform of the school accountability system that has been in place for nearly a decade. The FCAT, once the sole and exclusive measurement of all schools' performance, will now account for only 50% of a high school's grade while taking into account other key measurements such as student participation and performance in Advanced Placement courses and exams. Finally, the legislature also passed legislation allowing community colleges to offer more B.A. programs, which may signal a move toward the development of a middle tier of state colleges. ENLACE FLORIDA, dedicated to the principle that all Florida students should be prepared to enter and succeed in college, applauds the policy makers for taking these bold steps forward despite the state's fiscal crisis.

²"Legislature Slams College Doors Shut," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 11, 2008; "Bad Day for the SUS," May 14, 2008. <http://blogs.tampabay.com/schools/>

³Josh Hafenbrack and Linda Kleindienst, "Florida Senate Sends \$66.2 billion Budget to Governor," South Florida Sun-Sentinel, May 2, 2008, <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/sfl-0502senatemeet,0.6985656.story>

⁴Michele McNeil, "Florida Districts Slash Programs, Personnel," *Education Week*, May 14, 2008.

American Diploma Project

Florida became the 33rd state to join the American Diploma Project (ADP) Network, an initiative launched by Achieve, Inc. in 2005 “to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to face the challenges of work and college.” In October 2007, the Go Higher, Florida! Task Force recommended that Governor Crist join 32 other governors participating in the American Diploma Project. Through this collaborative effort, states can share best practices in education and maximize their efforts to improve college readiness. Commissioner of Education Eric Smith, appointed by Governor Crist to lead Florida’s participation in the ADP, explained that “we want our high schools to help our students dream big. We want to do better. We want all of our students to graduate and to graduate with a meaningful diploma.”⁵

By signing onto this national initiative, Governor Crist is committing the state to an ambitious reform agenda. The ADP was launched with the understanding that many high school graduates are not necessarily prepared for success in college or the workplace. The ADP project is designed to raise high school standards across the country and ensure that all states:

- “Align high school standards and assessments with the knowledge and skills required for success after high school.
- Require all graduates to take rigorous courses—aligned to college- and career-ready standards—that prepare them for life after high school.
- Streamline the assessment system so that the tests students take in high school can serve as placement tests for college and hiring for the workplace.
- Hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are ready for college or careers and hold post-secondary institutions accountable for students’ success once enrolled.”

These ambitious objectives will require a substantial effort on the part of our schools and teachers across the state. Although Florida has made significant progress in the creation of a P-20 data system that is the envy of most states, it still is working on plans to align high school standards with college and workplace expectations. As the state moves forward with the ADP project, the state will be expected to align its high school graduation requirements with college and workforce expectations; administer a college readiness test to all high school students; and hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are college and career ready.

⁵ TaMaryn Waters, “Florida Joins National Education Network,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, April 28, 2008.

The implementation of these goals will require substantial changes in high school curricula. In mathematics, for example, few states (including Florida) expect high school students to take courses beyond Algebra II. According to Achieve, however, research demonstrates that students, who complete this coursework as well as advanced courses in English and science, are more likely to succeed in work and college.⁶ Florida's high school students in the traditional program or the career preparatory program are only required to earn three mathematics credits in high school, one of which is required to be Algebra I or its equivalent. Students enrolled in the college preparatory program are required to earn 3 credits at the Algebra I level or above, but they are not required to take a mathematics course in their senior year.⁷

By joining the American Diploma Project, Governor Crist is essentially committing Florida to raising standards and establishing benchmarks that will define the knowledge and skills high school graduates will be required to master. In English, for example, benchmarks are organized by the ADP network into eight strands; language, communication, writing, research, logic, informational text, media, and literature. In each one of these strands, the ADP establishes standards that high school graduates will be required to meet.⁸ Florida's Department of Education, which is already in the process of revising its Sunshine State Standards, will have to study and revise these standards as needed to meet the ADP expectations and, more importantly, ensure that they are aligned to meet the expectations of colleges and employers.

Designation of High School Grades

The legislature also passed SB 1908, Designation of High School Grades, sponsored by Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville. This bill, expected to be signed into law by Governor Crist, is one of the most significant changes in K-12 education policy in the last five years. Beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, only 50% of a high school's grade will be determined by student scores on the FCAT exam. The other 50% of a school's grade will be determined by other factors, including:

- High school graduation rate of the school
- High school graduation rate of at-risk students who scored at Level 2 or lower on the 8th grade FCAT in reading and math
- Student performance on statewide standardized end-of-course assessments
- Postsecondary readiness of students, as measured by the SAT, ACT, or the Common Placement Test
- Student participation in and passage of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses and exams
- Annual growth or decline in these components

⁶ "The American Diploma Project: Closing the Expectations Gap," <http://www.achieve.org/node/604>

⁷ For Florida's high school graduation requirements go to: <http://www.facts.org/cgi-bin/eaglec>

⁸ Go to: Achieve.org, K-12 Benchmarks, at <http://www.achieve.org/node/479>

The bill will also push back the date of the FCAT exams. Beginning in the 2010-11 school year, the writing portion will be administered in late February and the other subject tests will not be administered before mid-April.⁹

The legislation responds to critics who have long complained about the timing of and value attached to the FCAT exams. Because the FCAT exams are only given to freshmen and sophomores, critics have charged that the exams are not a fair assessment of the school's total performance. By including other factors in the determination of a high schools' grade, supporters of the legislation argue that the result will be a more comprehensive and accurate assessment. Mark Ludlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, praised the legislation: "Pushing the FCAT back is probably one of the better ideas that came from this [2008] session. And the idea that school grades won't be solely hinging on FCAT is a step in the right direction."¹⁰

A lesser known provision of the legislation requires the Commissioner of Education to develop Next Generation Sunshine State Standards. These standards, similar to the World Class Education Standards advocated by Speaker of the House Marco Rubio in the 2007 legislative session, are conceived as a significant upgrade that will bring Florida's standards into alignment with expectations for success in post-secondary education and "high-skill, high-wage employment."¹¹ The legislation mandates the development of specific core content knowledge and skills that K-12 public students are expected to acquire in language arts, science, mathematics, social studies, visual and performing arts, physical education, health, and foreign languages.

The new curriculum, to be developed over the next three years, is expected to include more rigorous and relevant standards, with an emphasis on technology, media literacy, foreign languages, and civics. Rep. Joe Pickens, R-Palatka, Chairman of the House Schools and Learning Council, explained why he supported strengthening the rigor of the high school curriculum and raising the bar for our students: "The three R's are no longer enough."¹²

If Governor Crist signs this bill into law as he is expected to do, it will strengthen our state's commitment to and support of the efforts being made through the American Diploma Project, which also mandates the establishment of more rigorous benchmarks for students in core subject areas. Moreover, it will create a more comprehensive accountability system that will grade high school performance on a variety of factors that will likely produce a more accurate assessment of teacher and school performance.

⁹ For the text of the bill as well as staff analyses of it, go to: http://www.flsenate.gov/session/index.cfm?BI_Mode=ViewBillInfo&Mode=Bills&SubMenu=1&Year=2008&billnum=1908

¹⁰ Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, "Lawmakers Lower the Stakes of FCAT Score," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 2008.

¹¹ For the text of the bill go to: http://www.flsenate.gov/session/index.cfm?BI_Mode=ViewBillInfo&Mode=Bills&SubMenu=1&Year=2008&billnum=1908

¹² Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, "Lawmakers Lower the Stakes of FCAT Score," *St. Petersburg Times*, May 5, 2008.

The Florida College System

The House and Senate also approved Senate Bill 1716, sponsored by Senator Steve Oelrich, R-Gainesville, which established a Florida College System. Speaker of the House-designate Ray Sansom and Representative Joe H. Pickens of Palatka proposed similar legislation designed to turn some of Florida's 28 community colleges into state colleges offering a limited number of four-year bachelor's degrees. Both efforts respond in part to growing and widespread concerns about the capacity of the eleven state universities to meet demand for bachelor's degrees and the state's need for a better-trained work force. By a unanimous vote in the Senate and only 10 dissenting votes in the House, the legislature sent this bill on to Governor Crist, who is likely to approve the measure as a means of expanding access to higher education.

Ten community colleges in the state already offer or plan to offer four-year degrees. St. Petersburg College (formerly St. Petersburg Community College), is the model that policy makers had in mind when approving SB 1716. In 2001, the community college received approval to offer a limited number of bachelor's degrees in high-demand areas such as teaching and nursing. Other community colleges, most notably Miami Dade, followed suit, creating the momentum that ultimately led to a more organized effort to develop the Florida State College System that some see as a middle-tier of higher education institutions. As Rep. Pickens explained, the system he proposed would simply "build on what we are already doing, but in a more organized, less piecemeal fashion."¹³

The system created by SB 1716 may not yet be a full-fledged middle-tier, but it may be a step in that direction. It creates a Florida College System Task Force that will work to develop recommendations for transitioning community colleges to baccalaureate-granting colleges. This task force, composed of 11 members appointed by the Commissioner of Education, will be charged with developing a strategic plan by March 2009. In the meantime, the legislation creates the State College Pilot Project for the 2008-09 year. The former community colleges that will participate in the project include Chipola, Daytona Beach, Edison, Indian River, Miami Dade, Okaloosa-Walton, Polk, Santa Fe, and St. Petersburg. The participants in the pilot project will be obligated to respond to community needs for postsecondary academic education and career degree education as their primary missions; maintain an open door admissions policy for associate degrees and workforce education programs; continue to provide outreach to underserved students; and continue to provide remedial education. The institutions will not be allowed to participate in intercollegiate athletics beyond the 2-year level, nor will they be allowed to award graduate credit or degrees.¹⁴

¹³ Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, "House Leaders Push for 'State College' System," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 7, 2008

¹⁴ For the text of the bill go to: http://www.flsenate.gov/session/index.cfm?BI_Mode=ViewBillInfo&Mode=Bills&SubMenu=1&Year=2008&billnum=1716

In a previous policy brief, ENLACE FLORIDA predicted that 40,000 to 60,000 college-ready and college-eligible students would be denied admission to a state university in Florida because our state universities have had to freeze and cut enrollments. With our state institutions at or very near capacity, the issue of access to higher education is a critical concern to all high school graduates in Florida. The creation of a middle-tier system, a move anticipated and recommended by the Pappas Report submitted to the Board of Governors in January 2007, may alleviate some of the pressure on the state universities and open the doors of higher education to increasing numbers of college-ready students. The terms of SB 1716 require the new state colleges to maintain the open-door admissions policies that have long been a hallmark of the community college system. Chancellor Mark B. Rosenberg, recognizing the fact that access is threatened throughout the state, supported the creation of a Florida College System, explaining that “we’ve said for a while there ought to be an intermediate layer [of higher education institutions].”¹⁵

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Florida’s participation in the American Diploma Project should lead to substantial reforms in high school standards and improved graduation rates. Given the benchmarks that Achieve has established in the various disciplines, policy makers and educators should consider more rigorous standards and graduation requirements, particularly in math. As our educators move this process forward, they are likely to recognize that the college prep curriculum is looking more and more like the curriculum that employers expect to find in the high school transcript of any graduate. Thus, policy makers should consider the option of making the college prep curriculum the default curriculum for all high school students, with the understanding that students can still choose to opt out of this curriculum.

Strengthening the rigor and relevance of our high school curriculum will also mean the development of new AP courses, especially at low-performing schools. The new accountability system will also take into account student participation and performance in the AP program. As a result, more schools are expected to offer more AP courses requiring school districts to invest in and expand additional training opportunities for teachers interested in the benefits of teaching an AP course. Fortunately, Florida’s partnership with the College Board already provides support for teacher training in AP, but given the new incentives and expectations for schools to increase participation, we should expect an increase in demand and

¹⁵ Shannon Colavecchio-Van Sickler, “House Leaders Push for ‘State College’ System,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 7, 2008.

The establishment of a Florida College System that will maintain the open access policies of our community colleges is a step in the right direction toward expanding higher education opportunities. With access to our state universities at risk, Florida has little choice but to expand the capacity of our higher education system. Creating a middle tier of universities that will focus on the production of baccalaureate degrees in high demand areas is a logical option for our policy makers and education leaders to consider. To transition from a community college to a state college will likely require an expansion in faculty, staff, accreditation requirements, and quite possibly facilities. Hence, our policy makers have to recognize that this State College System will not become a reality without an increased investment to colleges that have been consistently underfunded for a number of years.

Many educational reforms can be enacted without additional expenditures. The curricular reforms that will come about as a result of the American Diploma Project or the enactment of the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards require only the determination of education leaders around the state. However, the development of new and more rigorous and relevant coursework may require additional resources at the state and local level. While the legislators reduced the K-20 education budget this year, it is doubtful that our K-20 system can withstand another year of budget cuts, particularly when legislators, students, and parents, are expecting much more from our public education system.



ENLACE FLORIDA is a statewide network funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and managed by NCCEP to promote college readiness, access, and success for Latinos, African-Americans, and other underrepresented students through non-partisan research, communication, advocacy, and support.

For more information, go to: www.enlaceflorida.org

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