

FCAT Myths vs. Facts

Since 1998, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) has been administered in all Florida public schools. The test results form the basis for the school accountability program, and the grade 10 FCAT has now become the high school graduation test. As with any new program, students, educators, and citizens sometimes have concerns that are based on myth rather than fact. Here is a list of the most common myths about the FCAT program.

- 1. The FCAT test was developed by people out of Florida who do not understand what our children are learning.**

Truth: The FCAT test items were created to measure portions of the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) adopted by the State Board of Education. The items are initially written by commercial testing contractors, such as CTB/McGraw-Hill and Harcourt Educational Measurement. However, all items are reviewed and revised by Department of Education staff, by teachers employed by the FCAT Test Development Center headquartered in the Leon County School District, and by practicing Florida classroom teachers and curriculum supervisors. No items are used without this extensive review. It makes no difference who initially creates a draft item as long as the final product has been reviewed, revised, and validated by committees in Florida.

- 2. The FCAT administrations take too much time away from instruction.**

Truth: Each school year is about 180 days long, each with about six hours of instructional time. Out of these 1,080 hours, the FCAT administration requires only about eight hours over a number of days and amounts to less than one percent of the total time the student is spending in school per year. The FCAT is the only state assessment that affects all public schools and all students in grades 3-10. It is a worthwhile investment of a small amount of time.

- 3. The FCAT is requiring teachers to “teach to the test” instead of providing normal instruction to students.**

Truth: The term “teach to the test” generally means that students are being taught the exact questions on the FCAT. This clearly is not desirable, and since the test is secure, it should not happen. The larger issue is whether teachers should be teaching Reading, Writing, and Mathematics as defined in the Sunshine State Standards, and the answer, most affirmatively, is “Yes.”

The State Board of Education adopted the Sunshine State Standards as the basis for education in public schools. The Standards were developed by Florida educators, and all school districts reviewed the Standards before their adoption. The Standards do not represent anything that is “unusual” in the curriculum; indeed, they are simply statements of what anyone would recognize are appropriate things for students to know and be able to master.

Students will be well prepared for the FCAT if teachers provide quality instruction in the subject matter they ordinarily teach.

- 4. The FCAT is biased against minority students.**

Truth: All test questions are reviewed to make certain they are not biased against anyone. All items are reviewed by two community sensitivity review panels. In addition, various item bias statistical analyses are conducted on all test items. There is no evidence of bias in the items.

Some students do not perform well on the FCAT regardless of their ethnic origins. These students have not yet learned the necessary reading, writing, and mathematics skills. Our job is to provide all students the opportunity to learn.

- 5. The FCAT is not reliable or valid.**

Truth: The concepts of “reliability” and “validity” are testing terms. They basically ask, “Is the student’s test score something that is consistent, and is it something we can properly interpret?” The answer is, “Yes,” to both questions. The FCAT is extensively monitored for statistical reliability, and the results are reported in technical reports. The FCAT also has demonstrable test validity, so we can interpret students’ scores as being an indication of the degree to which they have learned the required reading, writing, and mathematics content.

6. Students must “pass” the FCAT in each grade level to be promoted to the next grade.

Truth: Student promotion requirements are established by each local school board, not by the State. The Governor, Florida Legislature, and Commissioner and Secretary of Education are concerned that students not be “socially promoted” when essential skills have not been learned. However, the FCAT statutes mention the issue of “passing” in only two situations. First, students must pass the grade 10 test to qualify for a regular high school diploma. Second, students in grade 4 who have not demonstrated sufficient reading skills must be provided additional instruction before being promoted to grade 5.

7. Teachers’ paychecks depend on their students’ good performance on the FCAT.

Truth: There is nothing in state law that ties a teacher’s pay to performance on the FCAT. The law requires that each local school board establish teacher pay schedules. The schedules take into account how well the teacher is performing in terms of student knowledge and skill, but the language does not mention the FCAT.

8. The mathematics grade 10 FCAT is too difficult since students are expected to have taken a course in Plane Geometry.

Truth: The FCAT mathematics test measures student knowledge and skill across five content areas, one of which is called “Geometry.” This does not mean that students must have taken a course in Plane Geometry. It simply means that the test has some questions about geometric concepts. Students in the earliest grade levels learn geometric concepts such as the difference between a circle and a square.

9. It is unfair to require students to pass the FCAT to earn a high school diploma.

Truth: Florida’s existing graduation test, the High School Competency Test (HSCT), is being phased out. Students graduating in the 2002-03 school year, and thereafter, will be required to pass the FCAT.

The elected officials at both state and local levels have the responsibility of establishing performance standards for students. The courts have upheld the right of states and districts to establish such standards. Florida was the first state to implement a requirement that students pass a state competency test to receive a high school diploma.

Clearly, it is not “fair” to give students a diploma signifying they are proficient in Reading and Mathematics when, in fact, they may have mastered the skills in only one area.

10. The FCAT is unfair to Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students.

Truth: The FCAT standard applies to anyone who wishes to earn a regular high school diploma. We cannot have different standards for different students. The FCAT program offers accommodations for ESE and LEP students who need them. Decisions about the participation of an individual ESE or LEP student in the statewide assessment or about the best testing accommodations are made by the parents and teachers through the individual educational plan (IEP).

11. The State has no right to tell classroom teachers what to teach.

Truth: Classroom teachers are not free to teach whatever they wish to students. Teachers are hired to implement a curriculum that has been approved by the local board of education on behalf of parents and citizens. The curriculum must include the content that has been mandated by state law and administrative rule.

The State does not tell teachers how to teach students. The specific day-to-day lessons are the responsibility of each school. However, when the State Board of Education adopts curriculum priorities, they must be included in classroom instruction.

12. The grade 10 FCAT is so difficult that students are not likely to pass and get a diploma.

Truth: The FCAT contains a mixture of test items – some are easy and some are more challenging. Students are not expected to correctly answer all of the questions. The State Board of Education sets the passing scores based on recommendations from the Commissioner of Education. As required by law, the Board adopts passing standards after taking into account the performance of all standard curriculum students.

13. The State of Florida is spending too much money on FCAT development and administration.

Truth: The FCAT program costs vary from year to year, depending on the design of the program. The total costs run about \$26 million per year for development, administration, scoring and reporting all components of the FCAT, including the criterion-referenced portion, the norm-referenced portion, and the writing test. The total of \$26 million is less than one percent of the money the state spends on K-12 education annually. In 2001, approximately 1,440,000 students were tested in grades 3-10, which amounts to about \$4.64 per student per test.

14. The FCAT performance items are scored by people who are just “hired off the streets.”

Truth: Performance items are included in the tests at grades 4, 5, 8, and 10. At each grade level, there are about six to eight such items, and each requires students to provide a written response or show a solution to a mathematics problem. The responses are graded by a test support contractor. Usually, the student answers are scored at several scoring locations around the country. For the 2001 assessment, one of the sites was located in Florida.

The responses are scored in April, so it is not possible to hire classroom teachers to do the work since they are otherwise occupied with their instructional assignments. The test support contractor places ads in the local newspaper and hires people who have at least a baccalaureate degree. Each person must participate in an intensive training program and pass qualifying tests before being hired. As the readers score the student responses, their work is continuously monitored. If they drift from the desired levels of reliability, they are either retrained or discharged. This process is used across the nation by other states that have large-scale testing programs.