

FCAT Works

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Florida's teachers' unions and some school administrators have treated high-stakes tests such as FCAT like a skunk at the picnic. The FCAT also has come under fire from some parents who want to protect their children from the consequences of failing it.

Yes, failing FCAT has tough consequences. Kids who can't pass FCAT reading in third grade are held back. And seniors in high school who can't pass FCAT's reading and math tests don't graduate.

But Florida is now starting to be vindicated for its tough stance on the test. And that's to its credit. Evidence keeps growing that FCAT is making a difference, especially for children who start life without money, a strong family, or fluency in English.

The latest indication came last week: Florida fourth-graders showed the largest percentage-point increase in reading and math scores of 24 states studied by the Education Trust, a Washington foundation for education reform.

Comparing results in 2002 and 2004 in the states that had compiled them, the group found a majority made progress in reading and math, but none as much as Florida.

This state's fourth-graders showed a 15 percentage-point increase in average reading scores and 13 percentage-point increase in math.

Equally important, the gap between whites and minorities and between poor and non-poor children narrowed significantly.

These results are encouraging, especially since this is the second major study showing Florida's leap. Using a different scale, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported similar improvement in reading and math last year.

Some might say Florida made long strides in part because it had so far to go. Student reading scores until last year were below the national average.

But another reason for Florida's progress is that it has been using high-stakes testing longer than most states.

Education reformers worry that their goal -- that all children will be able to read and do math at grade level by 2014 -- isn't attainable, given the slow pace of change. But they should take heart from Florida's experience, which shows that improvement accelerates over time. Florida has been fortunate that support for accountability has been bipartisan.

That's why it's disheartening to see so many candidates for office this year backing away from full support of FCAT. They say they support testing, but only as one of several measures of how well students are doing. Many don't think it should determine

promotion or graduation.

This is the popular thing to say. But it's wrong to run away from a program that's working. To back off now would stall Florida's advances -- maybe reverse them.

When students get an education in Florida, it should mean something.