

Transforming Education in Florida
*A Comprehensive Approach to
Creating a Highly Successful Education System*

THE PROBLEM

Florida's education system is not producing the quality and quantity of graduates required to ensure that it has the high quality leadership, workforce, and citizenry needed to sustain a vibrant economy and society.

- Three out of ten ninth graders drop out and do not attain a high school diploma.
- Of the seven ninth graders who will later graduate from high school, only four will enter a college or university degree program. Forty percent of those students will require remediation.
- Over 13,000 high school seniors did not have the skills and knowledge to attain a passing score on the FCAT in 2003.
- High quality career education opportunities are limited for those six out of ten high school students who do not graduate from high school or attend postsecondary education.

These problems are not new to Florida. Past efforts to address them have been limited and largely unsuccessful. A comprehensive and consistent long-term effort is needed to solve the problems facing Florida's education system.

These problems have a major negative and costly impact in terms of:

- Depriving young people of the opportunity to achieve their full potential.
- Diminishing the vitality and success of Florida's economy and society.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Creating a highly successful education system requires defining and obtaining broad-based agreement on a comprehensive approach that involves three key elements.

- **An overall vision**
 - Creating a clear, unified focus on the best use of resources.
- **Implementing and sustaining transformation**
 - Identifying the methods and actions necessary to achieve effective, consistent, long term change and improvement.

- **Focus on major initiatives**
 - Identifying key changes that must be implemented in order to accomplish the overall vision.

THE VISION

The first key element of the comprehensive approach to transform education in Florida is to develop a vision statement that gives focus and clarity to the required efforts. This vision statement needs to be embraced by all who are committed to a high quality education system:

Our students are a state treasure. In order to fully develop and protect the value of that asset, by no later than 2010 Florida students will graduate from high school with the level of knowledge, skills, and personal development which makes them fully capable of choosing, entering, and being successful in either the workforce, further career education, or postsecondary degree programs.

Florida's new system of K-20 education has the potential to achieve an unparalleled transformation and improvement of the state's education system. The ultimate test of this seamless, efficient system will be to bring universal respect and clear value to the Florida high school diploma. Achieving this goal will necessarily improve the entire education system by:

- **Improving each student's level of learning and personal development** from the beginning of schooling through the grades leading to graduation from high school.
- **Ensuring that high quality career education and postsecondary programs are available** to provide access and encourage progression for all students to reach the highest level to which they aspire.

The overall K-20 system currently exists more in concept than in everyday operation.

Coordination and collaboration between and among the three segments of the overall system must be defined by clear policies and reinforced by an effective approach to funding. Each segment must be accountable for achieving specifically defined results which contribute to the achievement of overall goals.

The "A+" program is effective in focusing on the performance of the largest segment of the overall system. However, policies and funding approaches are not yet in place to ensure that certain key goals are met such as:

- Providing and retaining the number of high quality teachers needed for Florida.
- Aligning the curriculum, instruction, and assessment against valid and clearly understood standards.
- Making the necessary investment in ongoing professional and leadership development.

- Ensuring collaboration between sectors which will create a seamless system in terms of student progress and ensure the most cost effective use of available resources.
- Providing for the most cost effective use of available resources.

The state must develop and maintain a well coordinated K-20 system in order to produce an increasing number of knowledge workers to ensure Florida’s long term economic vitality.

IMPLEMENTING AND SUSTAINING TRANSFORMATION

The second key element of the comprehensive approach is recognizing that a powerful force for change must be created to ensure that the necessary steps are undertaken, implemented, and sustained over time despite changes in political leadership and economic conditions.

This element must provide the *broad based consensus* and *political power* to overcome the major obstacles listed below which may stand in the way of achieving the overall vision for Florida:

- The lack of a clear and consistent focus on the importance of high quality education and the significant negative impact on the economy and society of failing to have a highly successful education system.
- Not having the political courage to openly admit and address the shortcomings of the current system.
- The impact of powerful interest groups that drive education policy and funding in a variety of different directions but whose primary goal is maintaining their own status and influence.
- The tendency of the Legislature and other policy makers to respond to political pressures by initiating programs intended to improve education that are limited in scope and time.
- The lack of a sustained commitment to education reform initiatives leads to inconsistency with regard to funding, policies, and programs. The absence of a long term commitment to initiatives at the state level often leads to a lack of commitment to improvement efforts at the local level.
- The lack of understanding of education initiatives among many potential major support groups and their reluctance to hold political leaders accountable for initiating and sustaining efforts to improve education.

Florida needs an entity that will serve as a significant force for change at all levels of education today. Such an entity would serve as an advocate for young people to ensure that they receive the quality education they need to be productive, useful citizens. Such an entity should represent the views of a wide variety of constituencies. To be most effective it must represent the interest of:

- **STUDENTS** – the primary customers of the education system.

- **BUSINESS** – the primary user of the output of the education system.
- **PARENTS** – whose children must be well served by the education provided.
- **TAXPAYERS** – who invested almost \$23 billion in state and local taxes in education this year.

MAJOR INITIATIVES

The third key element of the comprehensive approach is to define what actions are needed to implement the vision of a highly successful education system that will provide a quality education for all students. Such a system will provide Florida’s taxpayers a good return on the significant funds invested in education each year.

FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURAL AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

There are three major initiatives which deal with fundamental structural issues that impact the entire education system.

1. **DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO FUNDING.** *Education systems operate in response to how the money flows.* A more effective approach to funding which reinforces the achievement of the overall vision and the effective use of available resources must be developed and put in place.

Florida’s current system:

- Allocates funds based primarily on head count instead of rewarding performance and achievement of stated goals.
- Does not promote collaboration between the three segments of the K-20 system or the most effective use of available resources.
- Does not provide a consistent level of funding which can be relied upon by the education system from year-to-year.

2. **ENSURE THAT THERE ARE HIGH QUALITY TEACHERS IN ALL CLASSROOMS.** *The quality of the individual teacher in the classroom is the most important determinant of the learning and personal development achieved by students.* The status of the teaching profession must be enhanced to ensure that students at all grade levels receive the quality academic instruction and personal development skills that enable them to learn and develop to their full potential.

In Florida today, teaching is not viewed and treated as a true profession and the training, ongoing professional development, and retention of good teachers is hampered by:

- Teacher education programs that are not accorded a high status by colleges or universities or given the same level of support as other professional schools.
- Inadequate classroom environment, lack of support for professional growth, and inadequate competitive compensation.

3. **ENSURE THAT FLORIDA’S EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS THE HIGHEST QUALITY LEADERSHIP.** *No organization can be successful in continuous improvement without high quality governance and leadership.* High quality leadership must exist at all levels of governance and executive management throughout the education system in order to implement and sustain key actions that make the most effective use of resources.

Florida’s current local governance and leadership structure was created many years ago to deal with much different societal and educational issues and does not, on a systemwide basis, provide the quality of leadership needed to deal with current issues. The following issues must be addressed to ensure they are not barriers to obtaining the highest quality leadership.

- School boards and their qualifications, method of selection, compensation, responsibilities, and performance.
- Superintendents and their qualifications, method of selection, compensation, responsibilities, and performance.
- The Sunshine Law and its constraints on effective governance and selection of educational leaders.
- The ability to provide quality education with the current size of Florida’s school districts.

KEY LEVERAGE POINTS

There are also two major initiatives which focus on key leverage points in which the application of targeted leadership and resources can produce very significant results.

1. **ENSURE HIGHLY EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING.** Establishing a solid base is critical to the success of future learning and personal development. Of specific importance is reading at grade level by the end of grade three.

A significant step has been taken with the passage and implementation of the “Just Read, Florida” program. However, there is currently not a broad and intense focus on early learning to fulfill the promise of leaving no child behind in terms of:

- Integrating pre-K into the overall education system.

- Providing adequate resources and leadership.
- Ensuring achievement of reading and other basic skills by the third grade.
- Eliminating social promotion.

2. ENSURE THAT HIGH QUALITY CAREER EDUCATION PROGRAMS ARE AVAILABLE. Appealing, effective, and relevant career education programs must be provided for the 60 percent of high school students who do not graduate from high school or go into college or university programs. Such programs will enable participants to become productive and contributing members of Florida's economy and society.

Historically, career education has not been a major focus in Florida. Its current effectiveness is hampered by:

- Career education programs that are not being well defined or well understood and are regarded as vo-tech programs.
- A lack of adequate investments in career education that is currently supported by less than five percent of the total state funding for education operations (\$674 million out of \$23 billion).
- No one segment of the education system has specific responsibility for career education. Many delivery systems and state agencies are involved in some way with the administration and structure of career education programs.

As Florida's K-20 system continues to evolve, identifying and meeting the educational needs of those 60 percent of high school students who do not complete or go on to postsecondary studies must be a continuing priority of the Florida education system.

SUMMARY

Florida's students are a state treasure. They must be provided with a high quality education to be able to successfully compete in the global marketplace and to help sustain a vibrant state economy. It is easy to decide what must be done but very difficult to make it happen.

The citizens of Florida, through their Constitution and State Legislature, have provided a new K-20 education with a single State Board of Education with the unique capabilities to do what's best for students. To actually ensure that Florida's young people have the greatest opportunity to fulfill their potential remains a major challenge to Florida's educational system. Implementing the necessary changes and sustaining them over time will take political courage.

This document outlines a unique approach for fulfilling the promise of Florida's new education system while benefiting its students. It is an approach which has not been tried before in that it includes three key elements in a coordinated way:

- **Establishing a single, overriding goal** aimed at producing capable high school graduates who are fully ready to move ahead on any career path they choose.
- **Creating an alliance of business leaders, parents, and citizens** to provide the ongoing, intense focus and political force necessary to overcome well entrenched obstacles and roadblocks to improvement. Implementing needed changes and staying the course through changes in economic conditions and political leadership.
- **Identifying the several major issues** that must be dealt with immediately in order to achieve the overall goal of creating a high quality education system.

If fully implemented and sustained on an ongoing basis, this approach will ensure that those who enter the K-20 education system will learn, achieve personal growth, and graduate from high school fully capable of being productive and contributing members of their communities and state. To do less fails our young people and fails to take full advantage of the state treasure they represent.