

2.0 BACKGROUND

The FCAT is the latest and most comprehensive initiative in Florida's continuously developing system of statewide educational assessment. It is the result of numerous expansions and refinements of the original vision for a statewide system of educational accountability set forth in the Educational Accountability Act of 1971 (Section 229.57, Florida Statutes). The FCAT is similar to Florida's historical educational assessments in that it is a test of student achievement; however, the implementation of the FCAT was influenced by two recent trends in educational assessment: an emphasis on rigorous and clearly defined state-level standards and an emphasis on regular assessments (i.e., annually for a range of grades) of those standards. A more detailed history of Florida's statewide assessment program can be found at www.firn.edu/doe/sas/hsaphome.htm.

2.1 The Educational Accountability Act of 1971

The 1971 Act created the statewide assessment program by requiring:

- the establishment of basic, specific, uniform statewide educational objectives for each grade level and subject area, including, but not limited to, reading, mathematics, and writing; and
- the development and administration of a uniform and regularly administered statewide assessment to determine pupil status, pupil progress, and the degree to which pupils had achieved established educational objectives.

The resulting educational objectives included only minimum requirements, in contrast to the more extensive, detailed, and rigorous standards that have since evolved. The 1971 assessment included only a criterion-referenced test (CRT) component for reporting Florida students' progress in meeting Florida-specific objectives.

1968

Legislature instructed Department of Education to improve educational effectiveness.

1970

Commissioner authorized to develop plan for evaluating effectiveness of educational programs.

1971

Educational Accountability Act passed.

First SSAT given in Grades 2 and 4 (field-test).

The first statewide assessment, called the State Student Assessment Tests (SSAT), was given in reading, writing, and mathematics in Grades 2 and 4 in 1971 and in Grades 3, 6, and 9 in 1972. The assessments collected data on representative samples of Florida students in each grade level tested, providing useful information at the state and district levels but not at the school or student level.

2.2 Expansions and Enhancements

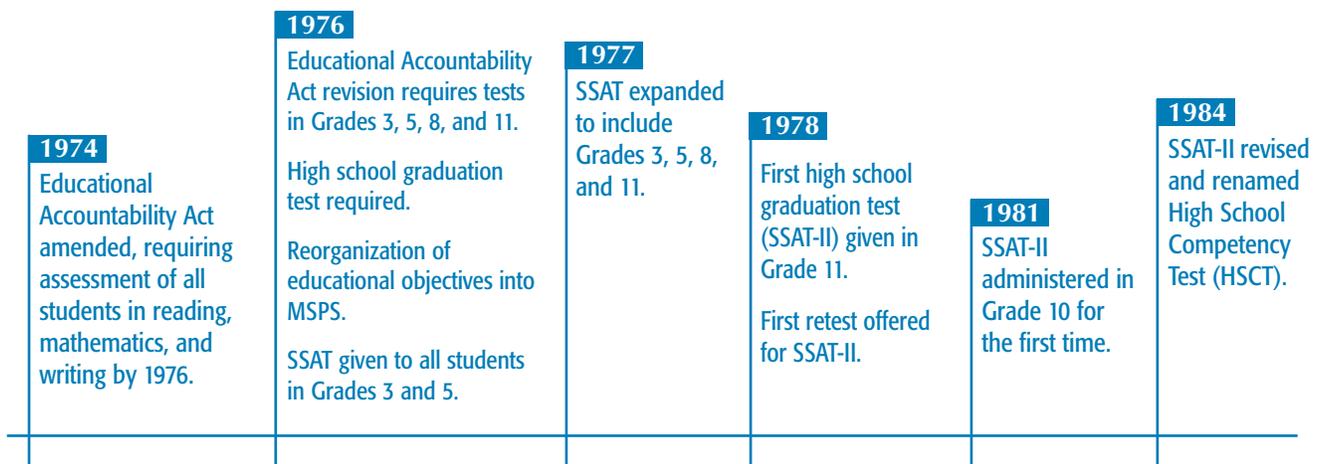
The need for school- and student-level data was quickly realized, and in 1974, the Educational Accountability Act was amended to require the assessment of all students in reading, mathematics, and writing by 1976.

In 1976, the Florida Legislature expanded the Educational Accountability Act to require assessments in Grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 and the nation’s first high school graduation test, a functional literacy test, to be given in Grade 11. The Act also called for organizing educational objectives used in test development into Minimum Student Performance Standards (MSPS), which would have wider applications for curriculum and instructional planning.

The Grade 11 graduation test, which became the State Student Assessment Test, Part II (SSAT-II), was changed to Grade 10 in 1981 to allow additional opportunities for students to pass the test. After substantial revisions in 1984, the name of the test was changed to the High School Competency Test (HSCT). In 1992, the test was moved back to Grade 11.

In 1992, the Florida Writing Assessment Program was introduced in the format of a single, extended writing task based on a prompt. Originally administered only in Grade 4, the assessment was also administered in Grade 8 in 1993 and in Grade 10 in 1994.

Also in 1992, the Florida assessment program included the Grade Ten Assessment Test (GTAT), which was a customized, norm-referenced, multiple-choice test in reading comprehension and mathematics given in Grade 10. The GTAT ended with the 1996 administration.



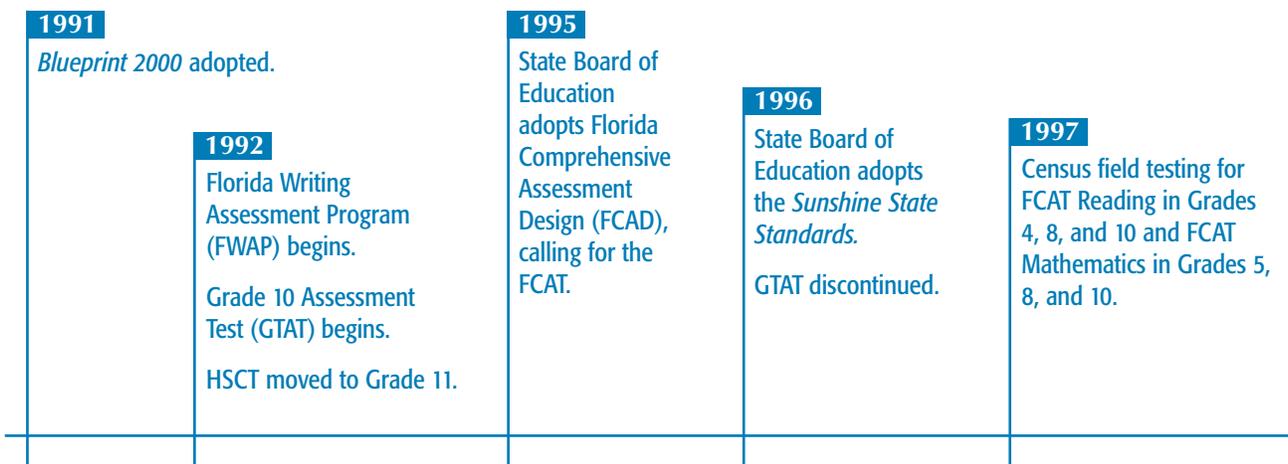
2.3 Birth of the FCAT: Florida Comprehensive Assessment Design and the *Sunshine State Standards*

The School Improvement and Accountability Act of 1991 called for sweeping changes by defining seven innovative and challenging goals for Florida’s public educational system. The goals were further delineated by the Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability and were disseminated in *Blueprint 2000*. Goal 3 of the legislation was dedicated to improving student performance and included ten standards. The first four of these standards correspond to reading, writing, mathematics, and thinking skills.

The ten standards from *Blueprint 2000* were reinforced in 1995 by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Design (FCAD), created by the Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability. The FCAD called for formal development of a new statewide assessment system as part of an overall strategy to increase student achievement. This assessment system, which would be called the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), was based on the first four standards of *Blueprint 2000*’s Goal 3.

The FCAD was followed a year later by the adoption of the *Sunshine State Standards*, a set of learning expectations, driven by Goal 3, in seven content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health and physical education, foreign languages, and the arts) and in four separate grade clusters (PreK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). The benchmarks of the *Sunshine State Standards*, which represent the skills and knowledge deemed essential for Florida students, became the foundation for the FCAT.

In 1997, the FCAT was census field-tested for the first time in Grades 4 (reading), 5 (mathematics), 8 and 10 (for reading and mathematics). A *census field test* means the entire eligible population is tested. Other field tests include only select populations, a sampling of the eligible test population. Item types included multiple-choice, gridded-response (for mathematics), and performance task (short- and extended-response) items, or questions. Within a few years, the existing Florida Writing Assessment Program (FWAP) was incorporated into the FCAT and became known as FCAT Writing.



2.4 A+ Plan for Education

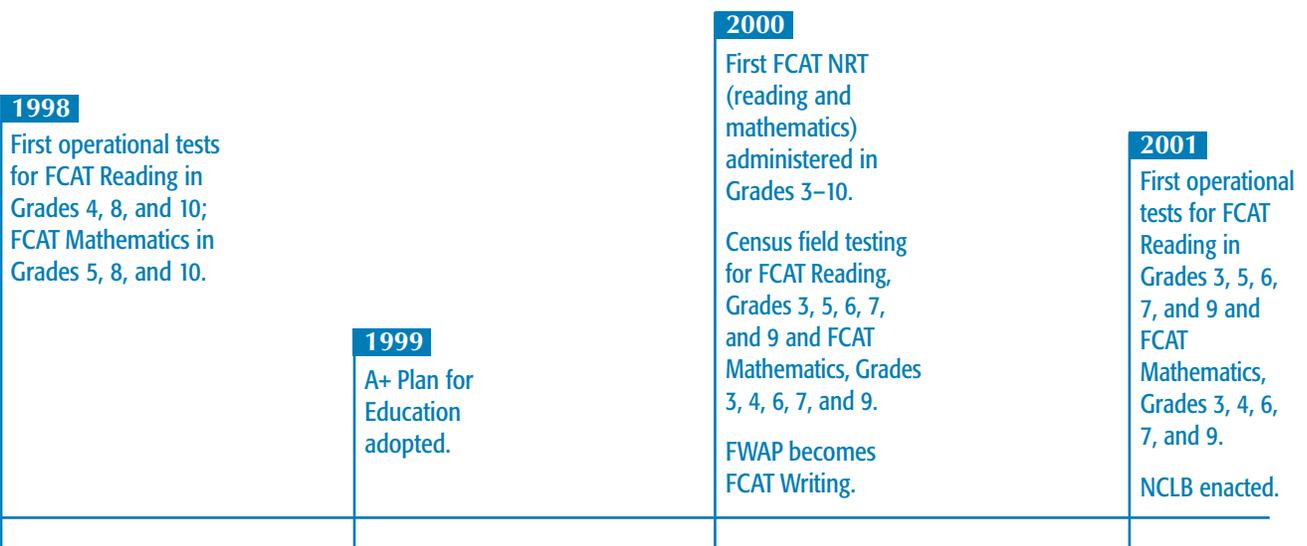
Approved by the Florida Legislature in 1999, the A+ Plan for Education expanded Florida’s statewide assessment program to include the assessment of reading and mathematics in Grades 3–10, a science assessment (FCAT Science), and a system for calculating the academic growth of each student over time. It also required students to pass the Grade 10 FCAT SSS in reading and mathematics in order to graduate from high school. As a result of these changes, the *Sunshine State Standards* were further defined to include Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs) for Grades 3–8 in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

2.5 No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) required the assessment of all students in Grades 3–8 in reading and mathematics. Because the FCAT assesses reading and mathematics in Grades 3–10, Florida already had an assessment system in place to provide the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data required by the Act. Although NCLB increased emphasis on the FCAT and required new types of analyses, it did not require any major changes to the FCAT’s content, development process, or administration.

2.6 FCAT Writing+

The DOE is supplementing the FCAT Writing essay test with multiple-choice items. Items were field tested on all eligible Florida students in Grades 4, 8, and 10 in February 2005. Since a multiple-choice component is being added, the test was renamed “FCAT Writing+ (plus).” The first operational administration of FCAT Writing+ (essay plus multiple-choice items) will be in February 2006. In this *Handbook*, the writing assessment will be referred to as “FCAT Writing+.”



The purpose for adding a machine-scored section to FCAT Writing+ is to allow writing performance to be used to satisfy the state’s graduation requirement and also to provide a more comprehensive assessment of writing. Although all decisions about FCAT Writing+ will not be finalized until after the 2005 field test, the FCAT Writing Content Advisory Committee recommended that a 100–500 whole-test scale score be reported, as well as subscores (a rubric score of 0 to 6) for the essay and for the categories of focus, organization, support, and conventions. Student scores on FCAT Writing+ will be reported for the first time in May 2006.

2.7 FCAT Science

The A+ Plan for Education passed by the Florida Legislature in 1999 required a science assessment for students in Grades 5, 8, and 10. Development of science test items began in 2000, and a field test of these items was conducted in a representative sample of Florida schools in April 2002. The first operational assessment and reporting of student scores took place in May 2003. Beginning in March 2005, FCAT Science was administered in Grade 11 instead of Grade 10. This change was in response to requests by Florida science educators to allow an additional year for students to receive high-school level science instruction.

