Florida education highly ranked

By Ron Matus
Guest Columnist

A few months ago, the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress — the gold standard of standardized tests — showed Florida, again, made a national splash. This time, it notched the biggest gains in America.

You’d think the biggest gains in America would prompt applause from school boards, teacher unions and allied lawmakers. But no. In Florida, good news about public schools is increasingly ignored by public school groups and overlooked by media; meanwhile alternative facts seed conspiracy theories.

No wonder, then, that candidates for governor are again vying to see who can flog Florida’s education system the most.

“We are experiencing a true state of education emergency,” says one candidate, citing a single, obscure ranking based on especially crude indicators. “Florida’s education reform has been a failure,” says another, citing no evidence. “Florida is a back-of-the-pack state when it comes to the quality of our public schools,” says a third.

This is bunk. The most common measures of achievement show Florida public schools are not only better than ever, but, in some ways, among the best in America. Yet to many, they’re still Flori-duh.

The tragic result is Florida teachers don’t get credit they deserve. And Floridians have no idea their public schools are on the rise. Consider:

Florida ranks No. 1, 1, 3 and 8 on the four core NAEP tests, when adjusting for demographics.

Florida ranks No. 4 in percentage of graduating high school seniors who’ve passed college-caliber Advanced Placement exams.

Florida’s graduation rate has climbed steadily since the late 1990s, when barely half its students graduated, and reached 82.3 percent in 2017.

For the past decade, Florida has ranked no lower than No. 12 in K-12 Achievement, according to Education Week, the nation’s newspaper of record for education news.

All this, even though Florida has among the highest rates of low-income students, at roughly 60 percent. In fact, “disadvantaged” students are driving Florida’s progress.

Take the explosion in AP success. In 2006, 2,601 low-income students graduating that year had passed an AP exam. In 2016, it was 16,548. That’s a 500 percent increase.

To be sure, tackling quality in public education is complicated. Measures come with caveats. Policies come with trade-offs. We should acknowledge the many thoughtful concerns. We should never forget how far the system has to go.

But for the skeptics, I have to ask: Which states are making more progress?

It’s true Florida doesn’t spend as much on education as most states. It ranks 42nd, at $9,062 per pupil, according to the most recent federal data that allows comparisons. Most people assume strong correlation between spending and quality, even if evidence is iffy.

New York is No. 2, at $21,836 per pupil. On the four core NAEP tests, adjusted for demographics, New York ranks No. 8, 11, 18 and 30. Alaska is No. 1, at $22,051 per pupil. On the adjusted NAEP, it ranks No. 43, 46, 49 and 49.

That’s not to say public education in Florida doesn’t need more funding, or teachers don’t deserve raises. But suggesting there’s an unfolding apocalyse makes no sense.

The same goes for attacks on educational choice. It’s impossible to sustain the charge that charter schools and “vouchers” are decimating public education when results keep showing Florida schools getting better. So deny, deny, deny.

I guess it works. But saying Florida schools are awful doesn’t make it true.

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