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EDITOR'S PAGE

Less Flori-Duh, Please

By Mark R. Howard,

Over the past 20 years, two of the biggest changes in Florida have involved the state's educational institutions.

One — the rise of the state's higher-ed system — has been well chronicled and celebrated. For three years in a row, the U.S. News rankings have named Florida's university and state college system, once mediocre, the best in the country.

The other big change — the improvement in the academic performance of students in the state's K-12 system — hasn't gotten near the attention it deserves. The relevant benchmark here is fourth- and eighth-graders' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in reading and math; NAEP is the largest nationwide assessment of what America's students know.

A sampler: Between the 1990s and 2019, the percentage of Florida fourth-graders meeting basic standards in reading rose from 54% to 70%. The percentage of eighth-graders meeting basic standards in math rose from a little more than half to nearly two-thirds. The percentage of those meeting proficient math standards nearly doubled to 31%.

The best part of the story is that the improvement has extended to all students. More than any other state, Florida narrowed the achievement gap between white students and minorities.

Anyone who's spent any time in education understands how remarkable this is — particularly in Florida, with one of the highest rates of low-income students and one of the lowest rates of per-pupil funding. New York, by contrast, has fewer low-income students than Florida and spends more than any state per student — 2½ times as much as Florida, which ranks 44th in per-student spending. All that spending doesn't buy results, however: New York's fourth-graders rank well behind Florida's — 28th in overall reading scores, 28th in the percentage of those with basic competency and 30th in the percentage of those considered proficient. New York finishes 20th in the Education Week rankings.

Why isn't Florida's improvement more widely acknowledged and appreciated?

Part of the answer is that there's still plenty of room for improvement. As the state Department of Education points out, NAEP scores were flat or fell slightly — nationally and in Florida — between 2017 and 2019, and the gap has widened between the top-performing students and the bottom 25%.

Another part of the answer is that the growth of choice and accountability have been responsible in no small part for the K-12 improvements, but the daily media adheres to an orthodoxy that focuses on per-student expenditures rather than learning results and downplays or ignores just about anything having to do with choice.

Choice programs aren't miracle makers, but they've introduced a level of competition for traditional schools that has prompted hidebound school districts to innovate. Companies and schools become creative when facing the prospect of their

customers taking their business or students, and dollars, elsewhere.

Choice, thankfully, continues to gather momentum.

Nearly half of all K-12 students in Florida now attend a school other than their zoned school, notes Ron Matus, director for policy and public affairs at Step Up for Students, a non-profit organization that administers the state's education choice scholarship programs. More than 650 public charter schools across Florida enroll more than 313,000 (with a disproportionate number of blacks and Hispanics). Thousands more students study in public magnet programs. The state has the largest private school and education choice program in the country — six scholarship programs that serve students who need specialized services, students in foster care and those who've been bullied. Two enable low-income students looking for a different learning environment to attend private schools.

In Miami-Dade County, school Superintendent Alberto Carvalho decided to embrace choice rather than fight it and has made his district the top-performing urban district in the country. Almost three-quarters of the district's students are enrolled in choice programs of one variety or another. Six Miami-Dade County high schools — all either magnet programs or charters — are among the top 10 high schools in Florida and top 100 in the United States, according to the U.S. News rankings.

The pace of change is accelerating in the wake of the pandemic, says Doug Tuthill, a former teacher and former president of the teachers union in Pinellas County who now works as president of Step Up for Students.

Tuthill believes the issues surrounding the reopening of K-12 schools have become a catalyst for even more choice in the system. In deciding whether to allow their children to return to classrooms, he says, families have engaged with the school system "at a much deeper level in reasserting control over how their kids are being educated."

Tuthill says it's the biggest change in education he's seen in his career, pointing to the emergence of "micro-schools, home schools and school co-ops" run by parents. In some cases, he says, "learning pods" have emerged in which groups of families have come together to create a safe learning environment for their children. "This is all happening outside of the traditional brick-and-mortar school system," he says.

All the new models, Tuthill says, are nudging the system out of its assembly-line mode and creating an "opportunity to provide every child with a custom education."

The U.S. education system, from kindergarten through college, is one of the few remaining big institutions that hasn't been disrupted by technology to the same degree as others, including the media. Between parents who want to choose where their children learn and students who can use technology better than most of their teachers, much bigger changes are on the way for both higher ed and K-12.