

# SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

## Other side of the story: Florida schools doing well

BY RON MATUS

Between 2011 and 2012, the number of Florida high school graduates passing college-caliber Advanced Placement exams jumped from 36,707 to 39,306 – a robust 71 percent. The increase wasn't an anomaly. Florida ranks No. 4 in the country in the rate of grads passing AP exams. Over the past decade, it ranks No. 2 in gains.

These AP results are but one of the encouraging indicators of progress in Florida schools. But you wouldn't know it from some of the media coverage, which often overlooks them or distorts the context.

The same goes for many critics. Many of them continue to be quoted as credible sources despite assertions that are at odds with credible evidence. That's not to say there aren't things off-kilter with Florida's education system. There are. They deserve scrutiny and, in some cases, strong criticism. But to write about those problems without noting Florida's progress



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over the past 15 years is, at best, incomplete. It also could undermine policies that, while imperfect, have made a real difference for students, particularly the minority students who are now a fast-growing majority in our schools.

In the wake of Education Commissioner Tony Bennett's departure, some particularly harsh spotlights have been put on Florida's school grading system and on former Gov. Jeb Bush. I can't defend some of the recent problems with grading (the errors, the padding) and I do wonder whether there should be more value put on progress than proficiency.

But I have no doubt, from years of reporting on Florida schools, that school grades and other Bush-era policies nudged school districts into putting more time, energy and creativity on the kids who struggle the most. I also have no doubt that those efforts, carried out by hard-working, highly skilled teachers, moved the needle.

To cite but one example: Between 2003 and 2011, Florida comes in at No. 9 among states in closing the achievement gap in fourth-grade reading between low-income students and their more affluent

peers. In closing the gap in eighth-grade math, it comes in at No. 6. But don't believe me. Take it from *Education Week*, the highly regarded publication where those rankings come from.

To those who approach education improvement with an open mind: Isn't it troubling that such stats are rarely reported? And isn't it odd that they're rarely commended by teachers unions, school boards and superintendents? Instead, we routinely get quotes like this one, from a recent story about Jeb Bush's presidential ambitions being hampered by ed reform fumbles: "The long sleep is now over," said Kathleen Oropeza with Fund Education Now. "People are starting to realize that Jeb and his reforms are not good for children and not good for schools. They are meant to privatize public education."

I can't help but scratch my head: Why would people hell bent on privatizing public education constantly point out the progress and achievement of public schools? And why would people who consider themselves defenders of public schools constantly bash them?

Fund Education Now is the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that argues that Florida schools are massively failing their students. Yet in the past five years, *Education Week's* Quality Counts report has ranked Florida No. 11, No. 8, No. 5, No. 11 and No. 6, respectively.

Listen, I'm not saying we should become education Polyannas. I'm sick about the turnover with education commissioners. I worry about the recently flat trend lines on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, a.k.a. "the nation's report card." There is no doubt Florida ed reform has hit a rough patch and, even if it hadn't, still has far, far to go.

But any fair and objective reading of the data has to begin with this acknowledgment: Over the past decade, Florida has made extraordinary progress across key academic indicators and in the face of many demographic challenges.

Is there a good reason why that isn't that part of the story?

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