

ORIGINAL EDITORIAL

Tallahassee Democrat:

State raises bar, but spending lags

By Diane Hirth

DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

Florida sits near the back of the class when it comes to funding per pupil - ranking 47th among the states and the District of Columbia, according to a report released Wednesday by *Education Week*.

Only Arizona, Mississippi, Nevada and Utah were less generous in public-school spending than Florida in 2001-02, the most recent state-by-state figures available from the U.S. Department of Education.

Florida's \$6,492 per student from combined local, state and federal sources was below the national average of \$7,734 and nowhere near the top spending state of New Jersey with \$10,235.

Florida jumps to the head of the class though on school accountability and standards, one of only 12 states receiving an A in this category from the "Quality Counts 2005: No Small Change, Targeting Money Toward Student Performance" report.

Gov. Jeb Bush - who created the A+ accountability plan for grading students and schools based on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores - thinks that's a more accurate measure of the state's educational improvement.

"For the first time in state history, a majority of students systemwide are reading at or above grade level," said Bush press secretary Jacob DiPietre. "The governor is more concerned with rising student achievement than with rankings in studies."

Florida, for example, was the only state showing progress in fourth graders' reading in 2004, according to a national report card.

Later this month, Bush will release his recommended education budget for fiscal year 2005-06, along with his other spending priorities. It's already clear there won't be much room for additional school-spending initiatives. The constitutionally required smaller class sizes effort will eat up an additional \$500 million and the constitutionally mandated prekindergarten program is expected to receive \$300-\$400 million. And about 60,000 additional K-12 students will join the 2.5 million pupils already in public schools, as Florida continues to have one of the fastest growing and most diverse K-12 populations.

In the current year, schools received an extra \$1 billion, but about half went just to slim down class sizes.

Should anyone suggest Florida spend more on performance pay for teachers or better technology in the classroom, expect a refrain from the governor that the class-size amendment must be repealed first.

"The governor has made no secret that he thinks we can make better use of that (class-size reduction) money on increasing teacher pay or classroom equipment," DiPietre said.

Less forgiving of Florida's record of asking schoolchildren to improve their reading, writing and math without giving them the best of resources is the state teachers union.

"If you choose only one measure of success, it's easy to claim victory," said Mark Pudlow of the Florida Education Association. "The gauge for achievement now is a standardized test. There's a whole array of things we ought to be concerned about - how well students think creatively, how well they participate in discussion and how well they absorb things not tested. Public school is more than just learning the basics and filling them out on a standardized test."

In nearly two decades since Floridians created the Lottery to enhance education, "Under both Democratic and Republican governors and legislatures, we've let that slip," said Pudlow of financing public schools.

Florida ranks 43rd among the states on the percent of total taxable resources spent on education, according to the "Quality Counts" report.

EDUCATION RANKING FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

47th in per pupil spending, more than \$1,000 below national average

32 percent of fourth graders reading at or above grade level, compared to 30 percent national average

Graded A on standards, accountability along with 11 other states

Graded C on efforts to improve teacher quality

RESPONSE

Tallahassee Democrat

Jan 11, 2005

School choice levels the playing field

Re: "State raises bar, but spending lags" (news article, Jan. 6)

Your article on Florida's education rating paints a dismal and unfortunately true picture of the state of public schooling. Despite our country's promise of a level playing field for all, only low-income students are trapped in a failing system year after year.

Families who can afford to can move to an area with better schools or enroll their children in private schools. Low-income students have no recourse and often attend the schools with the least funding, fewest electives and little or no college preparatory training.

Luckily, Florida also leads the nation in the school choice movement, empowering students who are not served well by public schools to take charge of their academic success. The results of school choice are undeniably positive: public schools improved through competition, students strengthened through personal choice and a society in which everyone is given a great foundation, not just those who can afford it.

OTIS B. YOUNG

Executive director

Innovation Schools of Excellence

youngo@innovationschools.org