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Michael Van Beek: Florida holds lessons for improving student achievement in Michigan

By Michael Van Beek

Detroit Free Press guest writer

The most recent national test of student achievement shows that there's room for a lot of improvement in Michigan.

Based on fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math scores, students here ranked as low as 41st and no better than 28th on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, dubbed "the nation's report card." Controlling for poverty among the states actually makes things worse: Michigan ranked 46th on a report card that compared the NAEP scores from 2003 to 2011 of just low-income students in each state.

Fortunately, there is a model for improving student performance at the state level, and a newly published study by the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#) details how Florida did just that. The study compares the performance of Florida's public schools over roughly the last 15 years to that of Michigan's based on the NAEP. The results are striking.

In the mid-1990s, Florida trailed Michigan and the national average on NAEP's four regularly tested subjects: fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. But by 2009, Florida's average scores surpassed Michigan's on all four tests, and also bested the national average in three out of the four.

Impressively, the students who benefited the most in Florida were those from low-income backgrounds. The average fourth-grade reading score for low-income Florida students jumped 13.4% from 1998 to 2011, and the average in math from 1996 to 2011 increased a whopping 14.2%. Eighth-grade test scores for low-income students in Florida did not increase as much, but they still outpaced Michigan and the national average.

And Florida accomplished all of this without dramatically increasing spending on public schools. If more money was all that mattered, Michigan should easily be outperforming Florida. We consistently spent more per pupil (between 30% and 40% more in some years) than Florida over this entire period.

The rise in student achievement in Florida coincided with a series of reforms that created incentives for schools to improve. Arguably the most significant of these was expanding school choice opportunities for all Florida parents through

charter public schools, private school vouchers, tuition tax credit scholarships and online learning. Florida invested heavily in school choice, and today, the Florida Department of Education brags that the Sunshine State "leads the nation in school choice options."

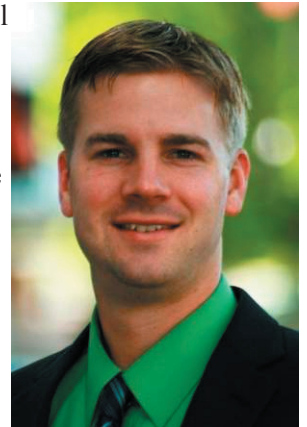
The state also implemented a new easy-to-understand school report card, assigning A-through-F letter grades to every school. Parents and other stakeholders understand what these grades mean, and they create pressure for schools to better their grade. Importantly, schools that did improve were rewarded, and those that consistently did poorly faced real consequences, such as losing students (and the funding that comes with them) to other nearby schools.

Florida also curtailed the practice of "social promotion" by requiring that all third-graders read proficiently before moving on to the fourth-grade. This, no doubt, produced incentives for parents and schools to ensure, at the very minimum, that students were able to read at this critical juncture in their education careers.

Finally, the Sunshine State expanded the supply of high-quality teachers by creating a decentralized alternative teacher certification process. With more certified candidates available, schools had a better chance of finding an excellent teacher for their classrooms. Nearly 40% of new hires in Florida are now alternatively certified.

Not all the Florida reforms have been rigorously studied, and correlation is not causation. But there is reason to believe that these reforms had a significant impact in Florida, and Michigan should consider all of them. Michigan might not be able to replicate all of Florida's success, but if it had performed similarly over the last 15 years, the Great Lakes State would be one of the highest achieving states in the nation — a proposition few would oppose.

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