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Mr. Governor, Don't Go Wobbly on Education

By Liam Julian

Governor Crist, you've no doubt seen the latest headlines—Florida education stinks.

You've no doubt read the articles touting *Education Week's* recent study ranking Florida 31st in the nation.

You've no doubt read the editorial pages, which have encouraged you to stop focusing on accountability, and, instead, to raise taxes and dump more money into failing schools.

Governor Crist, you should ignore the headlines. Here's why:

At first glance, Sunshine State schools appear pretty bad, near the bottom of the nation's education barrel. In fourth grade reading, for instance, only twelve states perform worse; in eighth grade math, only fourteen states do.

We know that thanks to federal testing and the federal accountability law—No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB evaluates students on whether they score high enough on standardized tests at one point in time (a snapshot). And snapshots of Florida's students reveal test scores that are woefully low.

But it's not enough to just take a snapshot of where Florida's students are right now. Like photographing a runner in a race, one snapshot of education doesn't tell you if schools are catching up, falling behind, or keeping pace.

And Florida is catching up—rapidly. It's one of just three states in the nation to make statistically significant improvements in math and reading for its most disadvantaged students in the last decade. That positive change is happening because of the innovative accountability-based reform ideas that have been at work in Florida's schools over the past eight years.

At the fore is Florida's state accountability system—the A+ Plan—which preceded federal NCLB. The A+ Plan is arguably the most comprehensive and accurate accountability system in the nation.

Unlike the federal system (which looks at groups), A+ tracks *individual* student achievement, and it grades schools on an A through F scale based largely on how much academic improvement each student demonstrates from one grade to the next.

While NCLB's concern is with getting all students to a certain level of proficiency and identifying and sanctioning schools that don't, Florida's system seeks to identify which schools are making progress with their students. Which schools, A+ asks, are seeing their students *improve*?

That focus on individuals rather than grouped data helps make Florida's system more precise. Because of its refined

grading scale, A+ can pinpoint the schools whose students are making little to no educational progress. Lawmakers, administrators, and educators can then focus energy confronting problems where they're most pronounced. And because A+ focuses on individual student achievement, it can show if little Johnny is actually making any academic gains.

And the data illustrate that the system is working. The number of Florida schools receiving D or F grades is in decline, and the number receiving As or Bs reached record highs in 2006.

To build on those gains, the state could also begin using the A+ system, not just to grade schools, but to help teachers target specific areas in which students are struggling and may need extra classroom attention (and to target areas in which students are excelling, too). With such a tool at teachers' disposal, Florida schools could offer a truly personalized education that challenges all students while giving some the extra help in areas where they need it.

Of course, this means sticking with the much-maligned FCAT. Testing can be a lot of things, distracting and overwhelming among them. But it's the only way the Sunshine State can push educational accountability. The bad old days—when schools may have been less stressful on teachers and students, but when youngsters (especially poor and minority ones) were learning little—are precisely why Florida is currently digging out of an academic ditch.

It's right to believe Florida's schools are nowhere near where they should be. But it's wrong to believe that the state's policies, such as using the FCAT as the basis for a thorough accountability system, need repealing.

Change comes slowly in public education, a bureaucratic system trying to

emerge from decades of stagnation. By education reform standards, though, Florida's improvement has been glittering.

The new focus of public education in the Sunshine State—accountability—is yielding results. Florida's schools don't need to be tripped as they're gaining position to win the race.

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