



THE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE SHOULD NOT BE ABSENT FROM THE DEBATE ON TEACHER PAY AND TENURE

BY WILLIAM MATTOX

Over the last decade, Florida students have achieved in the classroom as never before. Several key statistics illustrate just how far—and how fast—Florida has risen.

In 1998, half of Florida's fourth graders were considered functionally illiterate, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Today, more than 70 percent of Florida's fourth graders have reading test scores that surpass the national average. And many of these high-achieving Floridians are low-income and/or minority students.

In fact, Florida and North Dakota now have the highest reading test scores in the nation among students who receive free or reduced-cost lunch. Hispanic fourth graders in Florida now read at a level higher than the average student in 31 other states. And reading test scores among African-Americans in Florida now exceed those of the average student in California, Nevada, Alaska, and a number of other states.

To be sure, Florida still has plenty of room for educational improvement. But by nearly every measure of student attainment, at nearly

every grade level, Florida is moving in the right direction. In fact, the Sunshine State currently ranks eighth in the nation—and Number 1 in the Southeast—in overall educational quality, according to *Education Week’s* annual K-12 rankings.

**Two Words:
‘Excellence’
and ‘Choice’**

While a number of factors have contributed to Florida’s dramatic educational turnaround, two factors stand out: (1) Florida has been among the nation’s leaders in setting high standards and in measuring annual student learning gains against these high standards; and (2) Florida now offers more school choices to more students—especially low-income and minority students—than any other state in the Union. (See sidebar above.)

It’s little wonder, then, that *The Wall Street Journal* recently marveled at “Florida’s Unheralded School Revolution.” Or that Tallahassee recently hosted the largest school choice rally ever held in the United States. Or that a majority of the Democratic state legislators in Florida’s Black Caucus—and all but one member of the Hispanic Caucus—helped pass a significant expansion of Florida’s landmark Tax Credit Scholarship Program during

Florida’s the Leader in School Choice

According to James Madison Institute board member John Kirtley of the Step Up for Students Foundation, more than one million Florida students currently benefit from existing school choice programs in the state. They include the following:

| | |
|--|---------|
| ▶ Public school district open enrollment | 343,004 |
| ▶ Magnet school programs | 223,023 |
| ▶ VPK kids in private schools | 121,930 |
| ▶ Charter schools | 118,169 |
| ▶ Florida Virtual School | 71,750 |
| ▶ Home schools | 60,913 |
| ▶ Dual enrollment with higher ed | 35,323 |
| ▶ Career and professional academies | 32,848 |
| ▶ Tax credit scholarships | 28,000 |
| ▶ McKay scholarships | 20,530 |
| ▶ Guaranteed school transfers | 18,111 |

the 2010 legislative session.

Against this backdrop, one would think that a legislative measure designed to reward the teachers most responsible for Florida’s dramatic educational transformation would meet little resistance.

Yet, curiously, the Florida Education Association (FEA) not only balked at the Legislature’s 2010 efforts to offer merit pay to teachers, but it approached any meaningful discussion of this topic with a close-minded stubbornness that surprised—and disappointed—many Floridians.

As Bill Cotterell, a columnist for *The Tallahassee Democrat*, observed,

“The teachers unions’ position on merit pay and tenure has been about as negotiable as the National Rifle Association’s approach to gun control: First, we start with no bill. Then, we’re done.”

Similarly, PolitiFact, a fact-checking service jointly operated by *The Miami Herald* and *The St. Petersburg Times*, cried foul when the FEA objected to House hearings on merit pay being held during spring break for many teachers:

[A] lot of teachers won’t be working and could possibly attend the bill hearing, if they chose. From the teachers’ perspective, that would be a good thing, right? But then we looked back.... The FEA previously was upset that the Senate held its hearings during FCAT testing, when teachers were working. That had us confused. The FEA was upset hearings were held when teachers had to be working. And now the group’s upset because the House is holding hearing when teachers are off.

The FEA’s relentless resistance to merit pay was made all the more curious by the fact that President Obama and his Administration have been actively supporting proposals to link teacher pay and tenure to performance – and have offered “Race to the Top” financial incentives for states to adopt such measures.

Indeed, several weeks after Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed Florida’s merit

pay bill, Colorado’s Democratic Governor, Bill Ritter, signed into law a nearly-identical bill which had been passed by his state’s Democratic-controlled legislature. (So, guess which state improved its chances of getting federal “Race to the Top” money to reward its best teachers?)

Moreover, the FEA’s resistance to S.B. 6 was made “curiouser and curiouser” by the fact that

Florida already embraces the logic of tying educators’ compensation to student achievement. Currently, a school that earns high marks in annual evaluations (based on student FCAT scores) receives extra monies that are typically distributed as one-time “bonuses” to all of the administrators and teachers at the school.

Senate Bill 6 would have simply extended the logic of this school-wide practice to the individual classroom, rewarding excellent teachers with increases in base salary, rather than bonus money, for helping their students make considerable progress in the classroom. Presumably, this would have fueled further increases in Florida student achievement, beyond those that school-based rewards have spawned. At the very least, S.B. 6 would have brought greater justice to Florida’s system of teacher compensation, since excellent teachers at otherwise-mediocre schools would have stood to gain in ways they cannot currently.

Good for Students, Good for Teachers

So, why then did Florida’s teachers’ unions oppose S.B. 6? Why did

Double Trouble

Agents in the sports, literary, and entertainment fields make only a fraction of the income their stars make. Yet, most of the folks at the Florida Education Association manage to make *far more* than the teachers they represent.

According to a report filed with the U.S. Department of Labor, the Florida Education Association employed 80 people in 2009—more than half of whom received more than \$100,000 in annual compensation. (Curiously, the FEA set the reported salary for many of its employees at \$99,532—and then added some generous fringe benefits on top of this.)

In all, the average FEA employee received more than *twice* the average salary received by Florida teachers (\$46,912) according to the National Education Association.

In addition, many FEA employees got some nice travel perks as well. In 2009, the FEA spent more than \$125,000 on hotel expenses at three luxury hotels in San Diego—and more than \$93,000 at a hotel in New Orleans. (And these amounts don't even include some of the big-ticket costs—like airfare—incurred on these trips!)

The monies used to pay for these trips came from FEA dues paid by classroom teachers, many of whom received no pay increase in 2009 because of the economic downturn. ☞

the Florida Education Association object to a proposal that would have greatly benefitted the “best and brightest” of its members?

Some of the unions' resistance can be attributed to the inevitable fears—and questions—that arise with greater accountability. Will objective measurements of student performance be used cavalierly? Will art teachers, special-needs teachers, and others whose work is difficult to measure objectively be treated fairly? Will teachers with a good track record suddenly find themselves out of work because their students underperformed one year?

Not only did the legislative sponsors of S.B. 6 seek to address these concerns by insisting that only one-half of a teacher's evaluation be based on objective test scores, but the educational environment that Florida's reformers have been building for the last decade offers an extra layer of protection for good teachers.

An educational system that rewards excellence and offers lots of different schooling options is good for students—but it's also good for teachers. In such a marketplace, tone-deaf administrators who fail to take into consideration the extenuating circumstances that might explain a good teacher's occasional “bad year” will find themselves losing talented people to other schools (and eventually losing their own jobs because of their failure to breed success).

So, good teachers have little to fear, and much to gain, from a merit-based system—just as good students have little to fear, and

much to gain, from a grading system that rewards excellence.

Sadly, rather than embracing a merit-based system that promotes excellence, the FEA has sought to retain a pay-and-tenure system that is similar to a pass/fail grading system for students. Yes, subjective evaluations have to be passed—but an awful lot of mediocrity is tolerated. And if such a grading system had been used heavily with Florida’s students, it is highly unlikely that the extraordinary student gains of the last decade would have occurred.

Moreover, the longer Florida puts off adopting a merit pay system for teachers like the one recently adopted in Colorado, the harder it will be for Florida to continue its rise in the educational quality rankings—and the harder it will be for most teachers to get the R-E-S-P-E-C-T they deserve.

Indeed, failure to tie pay to performance undermines the professionalism of teaching. It also makes it more difficult to attract top-tier talent to teaching. And this, in turn, fuels despicable put-downs like, “Those who can’t, teach,” and the even meaner, “Those who can’t teach, teach gym.”

Ironically, the folks who teach gym—often the same professionals who coach scholastic sports—know something about linking pay to performance. That linkage is even more evident in coaching at the collegiate and professional levels. Indeed, as former Virginia Governor George Allen notes in his new book, *What Washington Can Learn from the World of Sports*, college and profes-

sional coaches are judged by the won-loss records their teams amass on the field—not by the number of years they log as coaches.

Think Outside the Box?

Sadly, the union officials who claim to represent Florida’s teachers (even though actual union membership lags) appear to have little use for thinking outside the box—for looking at teacher compensation issues in new ways and entertaining the possibility that teachers might actually fare better under a new system.

Instead, the FEA’s reflexive resistance to merit pay reminds one of its opposition to a number of other reforms that have been adopted over the last decade—reforms that are now helping many low-income and minority kids get a better education in Florida than they could get almost anywhere else in the country.

Unless one wants to try to rebuild the old system—and send many of those poor and minority kids back to the failing schools they fled—it’s time for the teachers’ unions to recognize that Florida is now on a much brighter educational path than most other states. Accordingly, FEA officials probably ought to re-think spending teacher’s dues on political activities and on lavish national conventions where much of the advice being dispensed is for people stuck in the last century’s educational paradigm. (See “Double Trouble” on page 10.)

In addition, FEA officials probably ought to re-think the manner in which some of its members lobby the Legislature. In the weeks leading

up to the vote on S.B. 6, lawmakers received an avalanche of phone calls, e-mails, and letters urging them to oppose merit pay. Most of these communiques came from teachers themselves. But some came from students who appear to have been coached by their teachers to spout the FEA's party line. (See sidebar below.)

Now, it would be grossly unfair to suggest that these unscrupulous teachers were somehow representative of all those who opposed S.B. 6. But it would be equally misleading for someone to claim that the FEA actually represented the interests of all Florida teachers—or, especially, all of Florida's best and brightest teachers when it lobbied against merit pay.

Indeed, in a fascinating Florida Chamber of Commerce survey of more than 20,000 Florida teachers,

the respondents divided evenly when asked: "Do you think all teachers with the same number of years in the profession should be paid the same, regardless of their skill level?" Forty percent of the teachers answered yes, 39 percent said no, and the rest were undecided or gave no response.

It is impossible to know for certain just how those numbers shook out. But it stands to reason that Florida's best and brightest teachers would be well represented in the group preferring merit-based pay. All of which begs this question: Having seen the benefits of promoting excellence with students, isn't it time Florida re-structured its pay-and-tenure system to reward excellent teachers? ☞

William Mattox is a resident fellow at The James Madison Institute.

Prompting Pupils to Parrot the Party Line

Using public records law, JMI staff obtained copies of student phone messages, letters, and e-mails to Florida elected officials about S.B. 6. Curiously, many student calls were made during school hours and followed a familiar script. In some, the voice of an adult "prompter" could be heard in the background when students struggled to remember their "lines."

Similarly, a political science instructor at East Ridge High School in Clermont sent a packet of nearly 100 letters that his students wrote to the Senate President as a class assignment. The teacher claimed he presented the bill with "a neutral connotation"—and expressed "total amazement" when all of his students opposed S.B. 6.

Yet, included in the packet—no doubt by accident—was the teacher's actual assignment, which included "talking points" against S.B. 6 that had been copied from a memo (also enclosed) written from teachers unions' perspective. No arguments in support of S.B. 6 were included with the assignment.

Not surprisingly, the students' letters echo arguments found in the "talking points" memo—sometimes word-for-word. To see a sampling of these letters and the teacher's assignment, go to: www.jamesmadison.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/materials/Journal_Summer2010_SB6StudentLetters.pdf. ☞