

The A+ Program, Part I: Successes of the A+ Program

Education reform is a perennial public priority, and as a result, a recurring topic of legislative debate and state legislation. A seemingly endless array of academic journal articles, newspaper reports, and books are produced on the topic, and many organizations exist for the sole purpose of examining, promoting, and assisting education reform efforts. Despite this massive array of activity, education reform is notably lacking in two characteristics; demonstrated success and a consistent approach over a sustained period of time. The A+ program is an exception to this pattern.

An evaluation of the A+ program by the Harvard University's Manhattan Institute (Greene, 2001) found that the:

“A-Plus Program has been successful at motivating failing schools to improve their academic performance. In addition, the evidence presented in this report suggests that we should have confidence that the improvement in academic achievement is a real improvement and not merely a manipulation of the state’s testing and grading system”.

The A+ program is the culmination of over 30 years of development of a comprehensive program of K-12 educational reform based on student assessment and public accountability. Florida was the first state to develop and implement a “high stakes” high school graduation test during the 1970’s. This program rapidly evolved into a series of tests beginning in the third grade and continuing through high school which are now called the Florida Academic Skills Tests (FCAT).

Although high stakes testing programs such as FCAT have often been criticized as leading to unsound educational practices, Florida’s program is based on the integration of state educational goals, curriculum frameworks, and student testing into a coherent system. As a result, tests are directly derived from the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) which are curriculum standards adopted by the State Board of Education. The development of test items involves educational testing services and reviews by professional educators in the Department of Education and teachers in the field.

A study by the Institute (Greene, Winters, & Forster; 2003) that examined nine such high stakes testing systems in the U.S. concluded that:

“Florida’s high stakes test is an accurate measure of both student performance and schools’ effects on that performance. The case of Florida shows that a properly designed high stakes accountability program can provide schools with an incentive to improve real learning rather than artificially improving test scores.”

Florida’s system was the only one in this study that was determined to have a high level of accuracy. The full text of these evaluations can be found at the following sites:

http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_aplus.htm

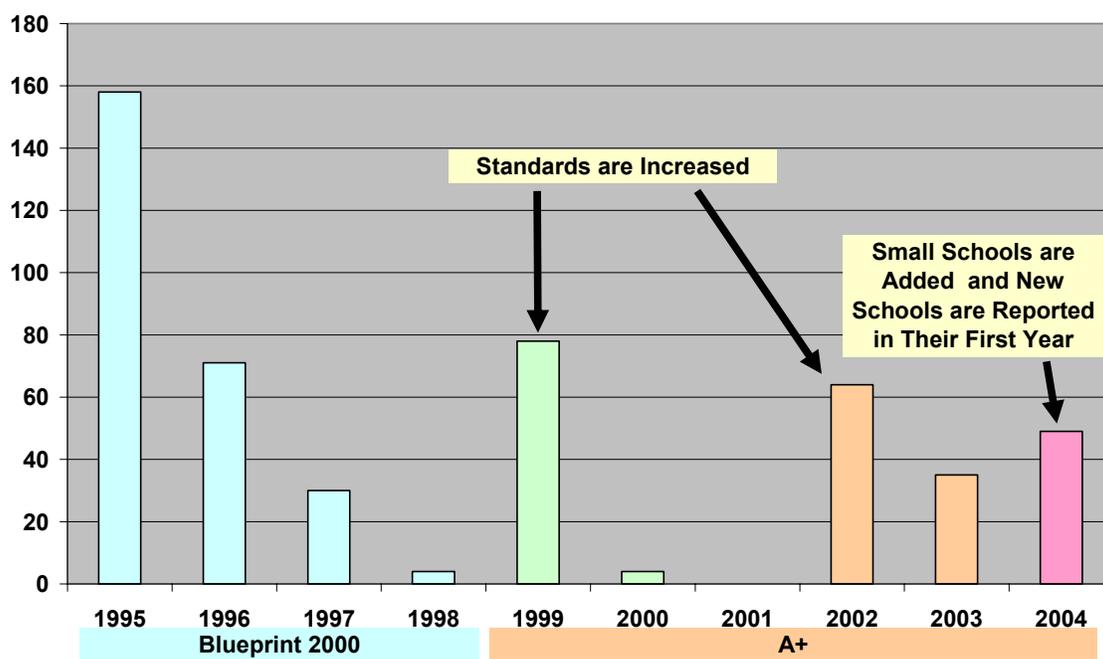
http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_33.pdf

Enacted in 1999, the A+ Plan for Education substantially improved upon earlier reforms, primarily through three new principles: (1) every student should gain a year's worth of

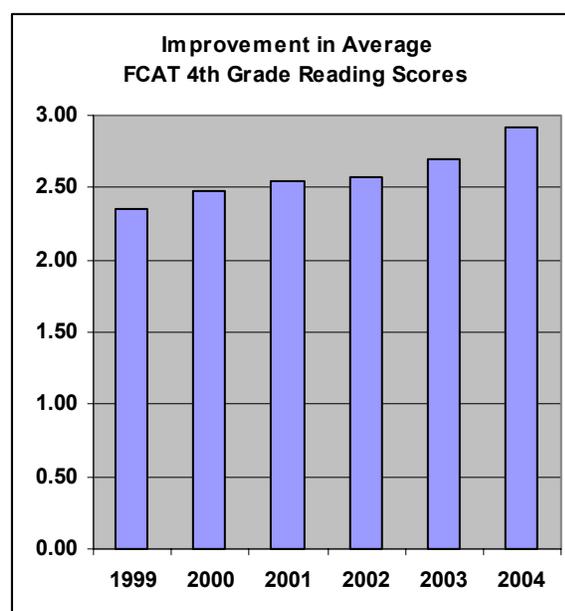
knowledge in a year's time, (2) all schools should be graded, and (3) toughening school grading standards will increase school performance.

Prior to A+, schools were classified as low performing based on FCAT scores, but grades were not given and higher performing schools were not recognized. A+ was designed to allow all schools to receive a grade of A, B, C, D, or F based on achievement and improvement in reading, writing, and mathematics. School grades, which included tougher standards for low performing schools, were initially assigned in 1999. In 2002, the standards were again raised by including measures of student progress, including a separate measure of progress by the lowest performing 25 percent of students. The following chart shows how raising standards has resulted a reduction in the number of lowest performing schools.

Number of Lowest Performing Schools



One of the reasons that education reform is so difficult is the amount of time it takes for the results to appear. Reading is a special focus of the program and details about 4th grade reading scores are readily available from the DOE for the entire period of the A+ program. Students, who began school under the second year of A+ - after the effects of the program began to be felt, reached 4th grade in 2003-4. As a result, 4th grade scores are one reasonable measure of the current level of success or failure of the program. The chart on the right shows reading score improvements during the A+ program.



Why Does A+ Work?

Three components of the A+ program appear to be critical:

1. The development of a valid, technically sound student testing program based on an explicit set of curriculum standards, which has allowed success or failure to be measured.
2. The development of the school grade which provides the public with an easily understood method of measuring the performance of schools in their community. This has resulted in a focus of resources and energy which has in turn produced positive results.
3. The willingness to increase standards in order to continue to focus resources on improvement.

Building on the foundation of a well established testing program, the A+ program added a way to use the information provided by the tests to stimulate more improvements. Despite these achievements, there remain many students who have not fully benefited from the program. In future articles, we will explore opportunities to use Florida's strategy of continuous improvement and building on past success in order to further evolve the A+ program in ways that can extend the benefits of the program to these additional students.