

Educational Accountability and Assessment in Florida: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?

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Introduction

Like many states, Florida has struggled with uneven performance, high drop-out rates and persistent criticism of its public schools. It has sought to remedy those conditions for over thirty years through state policies of accountability and assessments (Herrington, 2001). The most recent accountability legislation in Florida—the 1999 *A+ Plan*—is similar in its major components to the 2001 reauthorization of Title One, *No Child Left Behind* Act. What can the thirty-year experience in Florida tell us about accountability’s effectiveness as a state strategy for school reform? What can its most recent version lead us to expect, as other states implementing federal law enact similar provisions?

This paper will provide a brief historical overview of Florida’s political culture and educational policies and then will discuss the *A+ Plan* in some detail as the most recent incarnation of the state’s reform efforts. The final section of the paper will analyze the controversies and strengths and weaknesses of the *A+ Plan*.

Context for Understanding the *A+ Plan*

Uneven Student Achievement

K-12 student achievement in Florida has been chronically low compared to other states. Recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), however, indicate that Florida’s students are improving relative to the nation’s, particularly in writing and 4th-grade reading; in some subjects and grades, racial/ethnic minorities are also showing gains. However, a sizeable proportion of Florida students still score below proficiency in reading and mathematics on NAEP and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Except in writing and in 4th-grade reading, most gains are modest, including those made by minorities, and racial/ethnic gaps persist in most grades/subjects. Students in the upper grades, particularly in high school, are showing little progress and in some cases are losing ground. Mathematics proficiency has been rising, but shows signs of leveling off.

Much ink has been spilled trying to understand why student achievement varies from state to state, always with unsatisfying results. However, some conditions that might explain relatively low achievement in Florida include cultural-political factors such as the traditionally poor appetite for education common to southern states, a condition perhaps exacerbated in Florida where there is also a high percentage of retirees; demographic features such as high rates of child poverty and large numbers of minority and limited English-speaking students; and economic factors such as low taxes and a predominantly service economy with low wages and low levels of benefits.

Educational conditions cited typically include large school districts, large schools, large classes and their separate and confounding effects. Other factors are low teacher

salaries, concentration of poverty in schools, and concentration of minority students. The contribution of these individual factors to student achievement is unclear, and their cumulative effects are even less well understood.

Thirty Years of Educational Reform in Florida

No state has a longer or more persistent record of employing accountability and assessment as a reform strategy than the State of Florida. The Florida Legislature has enacted sweeping legislation repeatedly over the three and a half decades under the rubric of accountability. Florida was the first state in the union to

- require annual testing of every student in select grades and select subjects every year.
- attach significant stakes to test results. In 1978, it required a passing score on a high school exit exam for receipt of a high school diploma.
- require a sophomore exit exam at all state community colleges and universities for advancement to upper division.
- require testing of all teachers prior to certification.

Between 1970 and 2000, Florida repeatedly enacted into law comprehensive educational reform packages, all with the word “accountability” prominently in their titles. The *1973 Educational Accountability Act*—one of the first and arguably the most comprehensive of any that have followed—called for state curriculum standards to be set in all core subjects and for students to be tested in every grade. The assessments were to allow for comparisons among students, schools, districts, states and other countries. The *Education Accountability Act of 1976*, which sought to implement the earlier act, reduced the testing to only two subjects—mathematics and reading—and to its administration in only one grade each in elementary, middle and high schools and added a high school exit exam. In the 1980s, another comprehensive legislative initiative—the 1983 RAISE bill and its 1984 companion—addressed high school academic credits, length of high school day, merit pay, reduction of lower level math and English courses and enhancements in math, science and computer instruction.

In 1990 and 1991, the state legislature enacted *Blueprint 2000*, another accountability initiative resulting in the elaboration of seven (later eight) state education goals, ratcheting up the rigor and number of state assessments. A school improvement process was established, with incentives and sanctions based on progress on the state goals. The measure called for schools to assess their own yearly progress and for district and eventually state intervention if progress was not forthcoming after three years. When virtually no schools were willing to voluntarily self-assess as not making adequate progress—even when students in many schools were clearly not learning at grade level—the state tightened the accountability system, focusing only on student achievement. In

1995, the state identified 158 low-performing public schools in Florida as “critically low” (Florida Department of Education, 2004).

The most recent accountability act—the 1999 *A+ Plan*—is in large part a continuation of the direction set in the previous two decades. Also, it is highly similar to the federal legislation subsequently proposed by the Governor’s brother, President George W. Bush, and enacted by Congress in 2001, reauthorizing Title One as the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

Components of the *A+ Plan*

The Florida Legislature enacted the *A+ Plan* in June 1999. The *A+ Plan*, like its predecessor accountability plans, is composed of four components. Taken together, these components represent a state strategy to stimulate greater effort and greater performance at district, school and student levels and to provide more information to the public about school and student performance. The *A+ Plan* built upon many of the existing components of Florida Law, some dating back more than three decades. Two significant new components were monetary rewards to schools based on performance and vouchers for students in low-performing schools.

Standards

The foundation of the *A+ Plan* is the state-developed performance standards. Florida’s standards, referred to as the Sunshine State Standards, had been in development in Florida with input from state and local educators during the first half of the 1990s and had been officially adopted by the state board of education in 1996.

Assessment

The *A+ Plan* expanded the state assessment system, the FCAT, adding science as a fourth subject matter (along with reading, writing, and mathematics); extended student assessments for mathematics and reading to grades 3 through 10 (previous policies included only one grade per school level); and called for the assessment system to measure annual learning gains as well as mastery of grade-level criteria.

Public Reporting

Florida already had extensive requirements regarding publication of school-level data on students, teachers, and finances. The first such requirements date back to the 1970s. The requirements were stiffened in 1991 when the state specified in considerably more detail the content, distribution and utilization of the school reports. Eventually two

different reports were required: a shorter version for parents and the community and a more extensive version for use by the school advisory councils for school improvement and planning.

In 1991, the state also required each school, on the basis of the annual school reports, to determine if the school was making adequate progress toward the eight state goals and, if not, to institute a school improvement plan. After a number of years in which only a handful of schools self-designated as making inadequate progress, the state revised its policy. It added a mechanism for state-designation of inadequate school progress based solely on student achievement, state goal number three.

In 1995, the state released a list of schools designated “critically low.” The following year, the state substituted the single designation of critically low with a five-point rating system, 1-5, with lower scores based entirely on student achievement on state assessments and the higher scores based on additional factors such as attendance rates, performance of sub-groups and incidence of school discipline.

The 1999 *A+ Plan* replaced the numerical (1-5) rating system with an alphabetical one—A, B, C, D and F—similar to student report cards. The school rating system has continued to evolve. Non-academic measures, such as discipline indicators, were dropped while measures related to annual learning gains and the lowest quartile student performance were added. Since 2001-02, the rating system has factored in improvement over time and requires improvements in the lower quartile of students for a school to receive a high grade.

Consequences

The *A+ Plan* included a number of positive and negative incentives for schools and for students, based on student achievement. It retained from previous Florida Law, dating back to 1976, the requirement that the high school assessment be passed before a student could receive a regular high school diploma. However, it substituted the former basic skills test with the more demanding 10th-grade FCAT. The plan also required districts to give first priority in expenditure of funds to remediation or other intensive support for students not meeting grade-level achievement expectations. As amended in 2002, the law also placed more stringent prohibitions on social promotion. However, it is only at the 3rd-grade level that the state absolutely required schools to retain students if they had not met an acceptable performance level on the FCAT. The law provides for limited override of this provision at the local level. The plan also includes both sanctions and rewards for schools based on performance. Schools that rate an “A” or show significant improvement are eligible for cash rewards.

The *A+ Plan* includes a very prominent choice option and, in this regard, breaks precedent with earlier state reform packages. Students in schools that receive an “F” that

is are determined not to be making adequate progress for two out of four consecutive years, may attend another public school with additional space in the same or an adjoining district, or they may receive an “Opportunity Scholarship” (state voucher) to attend a private school.

The *A+ Plan* also gives a special role to reading. Students are to be retained at the end of the 3rd grade if reading at the lowest level (level 1) on the FCAT. Holding schools accountable first and foremost for reading proficiency is another aspect of the Florida *A+ Plan* that parallels the federal *No Child Left Behind* law.

Finally the *A+ Plan* reinforces the focus on school-based management and school advisory councils, which were particularly emphasized in the 1973 and 1991 accountability legislation. The *A+ Plan* gives an even greater role to school advisory councils in budgeting and planning and in evaluation of principals.

Contested Assumptions Underlying Florida’s Accountability and Assessment System

The *A+ Plan*, like its predecessors, unleashed a torrent of praise and criticism. Different stakeholders and constituencies have lauded and attacked the *A+ Plan* and its specific features. This section of the paper will analyze the intentions of the supporters of the *A+ Plan* and the concerns of its critics. It will take a step back from the heated atmosphere and review the intentions of the *A+ Plan* and possible weaknesses. The paper will end with an analysis of where the state should go next to minimize concerns and fulfill the goal that critics and proponents share—student achievement commensurate with society’s demands, a professional cadre of instructors motivated to achieve this goal and a legal framework that respects the values of the intergovernmental system within a democratic framework.

Two background issues demand attention immediately: the assumptions of local control and of an apolitical educational system. Both concepts hold powerful sway in the mental constructs of policy makers, educators and the general public, and they help explain a good deal about why the *A+ Plan* was constructed in the first place and why it has provoked such concern.

The Assumption of Local Control

The United States is the only large, industrialized country in the world to place responsibility for decision making and for operation of public schools in the control of locally elected school boards. The U.S. Constitution does not mention education. State constitutions place the responsibility for public schools at the state level. The U.S. federalist system gives states the ultimate authority for public education, but states in practice have allowed local school boards discretion. And in the minds of most citizens, it is the local school board that they see as responsible for public schools and to whom they turn for

redress. Only since World War II have states attempted to use the authority that they have always had. The general public and education establishment have generally perceived these attempts as conflicting with assumptions that schools should be controlled locally.

The Assumption of Apolitical Education

An equally strong assumption is that politics have no place in public schooling. Again, one cannot overstate the power of the assumption nor its purchase in the minds of the public in general and educators in particular. Its origins lie in attempts to curb graft and corruption rampant in large cities at the turn of the last century and the subsequent attempts to “clean up” local government. While these reforms ran through all aspects of local government, they were particularly pronounced for schooling. The reformers, in an attempt to distance public education from other local governmental services, set up independent governing boards (local school boards), independent revenue sources (dedicated property tax), and independent electoral cycles (school board elections are generally separate from other elections) and prohibited political party affiliation for school board candidates. Attempts to separate public schooling from the control of local city and county governments and local politicians was a popular move—most people thought then and think now that public schools are too important a service to be confused with other services such as policing, waste management, and road construction. And there is no question that the separation of public education from the control of local politicians “professionalized” education by putting more control into the hands of educators. However, education has never been free of politics and arguably in a democracy one would not wish it to be so.

The phalanx of these two assumptions butt up against states’ efforts in the last few decades to assert what constitutionally has always been their responsibility. Many teachers and parents believe that state involvement in the delivery of education and the assessing of student performance violates both assumptions: that schools should be controlled locally and that politics has no place in education. Uneasiness about an increased role of the state government has only been exacerbated by the new and expanded roles of the federal government established in the *No Child Left Behind* Act.

Expanded Role of the State in the *A+ Plan*

Much of the most heated discussions around the *A+ Plan* can be subsumed under the issue of control. Who should control the public education system? State legislatures, state school boards, local school boards, local administrators, local schools, teachers, parents or citizens? Of course the answer is probably all of the above. But given that, how should control be divided? Who should get what? The issue of control breaks out along different

axes: different levels of government—federal, state and local; different levels of lay involvement—appointed state boards of education, district or school advisory committees, and parents; and different policy areas—fiscal policy, instructional policy, and implementation.

The *A+ Plan* clearly enlarges the role of the state in public education. For that matter, one could argue that state accountability systems per se are an attempt to redefine the role of the state. Through these systems, the Governor and the state legislature assert that states clearly should have control in some areas but the control should be limited. The articulation of an accountability system is in fact an attempt to better draw these boundaries. Standards and assessments, in the logic of accountability, appear to be appropriate roles for the states. Standards determine what children should learn without being too prescriptive in terms of instructional strategies or curriculum. Assessments provide a measure of learning without dictating daily practice.

One rationale for setting standards at the state level comes from the private sector. A series of management reports which first appeared in the early 1980s argued that successful companies granted more decision-making authority to units lower in the corporation's hierarchy but retained certain quality standards and performance indicators at the central level. Applied to the public sector, the theory came to be encapsulated in a three-word admonition, "steer, not row" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

State governments took the cue from the corporate sector and also adopted the management theory. In the educational sector, the "steer, not row" approach has lacked the evidence of effectiveness that was present in the corporate sector. However, it appealed to policy makers for another reason. Centralizing standards and measurement of their attainment at the state level honors the norm of local control without abdicating state responsibility.

A second reason for the appeal of state standards to state policy makers is the issue of tax-dollar support, which has its own source of potency. There is a strong and inherently very logical assumption in public policy that control should relate to the governmental jurisdiction that raises the funds. That is to say, if the state is to contribute a large amount of the support for public education, then the state should have a proportionate say in how the funds are spent. This is not just an issue of power politics. It is also deeply ingrained in motivational theory of tax policy. If elected officials (in this case, state legislators) have little control over education, would they be willing to maintain higher taxing policies? They would take the heat for raising taxes but then would not be able to assure that funds are being well spent, or more accurately, spent on their priorities. Florida has had a traditionally high level of contribution from the state, and therefore it is not surprising that the state has tried to carve out a proportionately significant role in educational policy.

Other arguments have more to do with the actual delivery of education. The proponents of state accountability systems identify the question of quality as a problem posed by control being held only at the local level. Pressures to lower standards may be stronger at the local level. In the absence of a countervailing external pressure, social promotion and grade inflation may more easily arise. The language of the *A+ Plan* refers repeatedly to the problem of low standards, low performance and the importance of eliminating social promotion.

Professional Challenges to *A+ Plan*

Arguably, it is professionals who have been most concerned about erosion of their traditional roles and who have been the most organized and outspoken about points of disagreement with the *A+ Plan*. Teachers argue that it is the person closest to the child and to instruction who can best determine adequate standards and their mastery. Professional educators are extremely reluctant to give up their historically uncontested prerogatives: selection of curricula, allocation of classroom time and resources, instructional approaches and priorities, and assessment of student mastery thereof.

Educators are, in a sense, challenging one of the primary aims—stated or unstated—of state accountability and assessment systems: the tight coupling of curriculum standards, classroom practice and state standards. They argue, in fact, that the tight but internal coupling that naturally occurs in the classroom through teaching, learning and teacher-administered assessments makes for better teaching, better learning and more accurate assessment. It would be difficult to overemphasize how deeply affronted some educators are by the attempt of the state to tighten its control over curriculum and classroom practices through standardized tests.

Confusion over exactly what is being assessed may be key to the intensity of the beliefs. What are assessments assessing—student achievement or educator effectiveness? This is a key question, and advocates and critics of accountability systems often exploit the confusion as they argue their points of view.

In the eyes of many educators, the shift in the *A+ Plan* from the previous policy of evaluating schools by a list of critically low-performing schools and a number system (1-5) to assigning a letter grade to each school marked a radical departure from a student-performance orientation to one judging school and teacher performance. It is clear that many teachers believe that publicly naming schools as A, B, C, D or F is more than just a statement about the level of knowledge of the students. It is a statement about the effort and effectiveness of the teachers and, in a sense, has taken over from educators their ability to assess their own effectiveness, a key prerogative that traditionally separates professional from non-professional groups.

Technical Challenges to the A+ Plan

The issue of who should control public education—the state or local governments, educators or politicians, teachers or parents—is further complicated by the enormous technical challenges related to student assessment that seriously undermine public and professional support for accountability systems.

The issue of standards continues to raise controversy within a smaller community of people who focus on the standard-setting process. For example, at least one group has criticized Florida's standards for not focusing enough on content in some of the areas and relying too heavily on application to personal experiences, for example in literature (Braden et al, 2000). While these debates may seem a little arcane, they do speak to long-standing debates among educators over the degree to which children should be taught specific facts or be encouraged to apply their knowledge. These issues have remained unresolved for decades. But it is in the context of assessments with consequences attached that the debate may spill out to a wider audience. The point is that these debates reveal how little professional or technical consensus exists around educational standards (and, by extension, the assessments).

The State of Florida, like virtually all states that have standards in place, lacks strong evidence that the standards have external validity. While professional judgment, the source for the standards, is a strong source, the fact remains that the state is vulnerable to charges that they are arbitrary, a vulnerability more important if stakes are attached (see Elmore, 2002). An analysis of state proficiency standards as compared to national proficiency standards established by the National Educational Governance Board indicated that these standards can vary widely (Olson, 2002). For example, in 2000, one state (Arkansas) indicated that 41% of its students were achieving at proficient levels as measured by the state test for 4th-grade math but only 13% as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The percentages for Texas were 43% vs. 27%; for Connecticut 60% v. 32%; and for Georgia 62% v. 18%. There were no 2000 data for Florida because the state did not participate in the NAEP that year due to scheduling conflicts with administration of the FCAT. However, 2002 results for 4th graders in Florida indicate a similar discrepancy, although in the reverse direction. The percentage scoring at proficient levels was 54% as measured by the FCAT (Florida Department of Education, 2003) and 76% as measured by the NAEP (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

Assessments continue to be controversial in Florida, despite the fact that the state has a long history of statewide assessments and of linking high school graduation and grade-level promotion to them. In the eyes of many teachers and parents, assessments are too crude an instrument to drive anything really important such as student progression or school funding. Many of the basic design features are problematic: how many times and when in the school year are students assessed, which students may be legitimately

excluded from testing, how comparable are student cohorts from one year to the next, how long should the test be, what types of questions should be asked and should complete extended answers be required or would short or multiple-choice answers be acceptable? These issues are further complicated because results and judgments on student achievement and educator effectiveness can be highly sensitive to small changes in these design features (Linn, 1998).

The determination of successful performance is highly contested. A common critique is that overly strong reliance on standardized test results pushes out other ways of understanding school and student performance, ways that might more directly be used to identify strategies for improvement. Examples of other assessments include student portfolios and classroom assessments.

The *A+ Plan* called for the state to shift from a system that judges schools on a flat student performance scale to one that judges year-to-year improvement. This “value-added” approach has the virtue of a more accurate appraisal of effort to improve but it, too, has its problems. One of the most troubling unintended consequences is the increase in the possibility of inaccuracies, what statisticians refer to as “noise.” If the original assessment had some inaccuracies built into it, these flaws will be compounded when gains are computed using assessments from one year to the next.

Perhaps the most oft-repeated critique leveled at state assessment systems has been their impact on curriculum. Many critics (e.g., Resnick & Resnick, 1992; Darling-Hammond et al, 1995; McNeil, 2000) have charged state assessments with restricting the scope of the curriculum as teachers focus only on the areas that will be tested.

The consequences of assessment are the most problematic. After all, the biggest change introduced by the *A+ Plan* was not the FCAT (developed in the mid-1990s), but rather the consequences that were attached to it. Some, such as monetary rewards for high-performing schools, are best described as positive, but the negative consequences provoke the most concern. Consequences include, for students, failure to be promoted to the 4th grade or to graduate from high school and, for schools, the embarrassment of a poor grade or the loss of students to private or other public schools.

Defenders of accountability systems, however, argue that without consequences—positive and negative—poor performance will be too easily tolerated. Some have argued that releasing performance information will drive greater effort and improve student learning. However, the Florida experience does not support that assertion. Florida has published school-level data on achievement, discipline, staffing and other areas for years. Even in cases where chronic school failure was evident, schools would not self-designate as failing to make adequate progress. Some might assert that local schools and school districts did not start paying attention until 1995 when the state took over that role. By 1998, the number of critically low schools had declined from 158 to 4 (Florida

Department of Education, 2004). The *A+ Plan* built upon this concept, giving parents and the general public an annual assessment on all schools, not just the low-performing schools—using an “A” through “F” designation that would be better understood by the public. More importantly, it raised the bar to meet higher standards and added additional incentives and consequences for schools and students.

Florida’s involvement in accountability suggests a serious commitment to school improvement. Florida has established and tinkered with accountability for three decades, but evidence of substantial improvement remains uneven.

Does Accountability Work?

Generally, Florida’s student achievement trends are moving in the right direction. Something is working, particularly in areas where the most dramatic changes have occurred: writing and 4th-grade reading. In other areas, such as mathematics and reading at the upper grades, modest gains (or declines in some cases) indicate that more needs to be done.

In cases where improvements are occurring, the exact causes are often difficult to determine. If we look at the gains the state made in reading, mathematics and writing and look at state pressures or supports, such as professional development or targeted resources, one finds a different combination each time. The gains in 4th-grade reading clearly occurred between 1998 and 2003 when the *A+ Plan* was instituted and when Governor Jeb Bush launched his reading initiative. Just Read, Florida! is a comprehensive initiative designed to improve K-12 reading through early assessment, research-based reading programs, interventions for students reading below grade level, teacher preparation and professional development, and parental and mentor involvement (Executive Office of the Governor, 2001). In this case, one could argue that pressure and support together led to significant gains. However, prior to 1998, with the only limited state-level pressure that existed prior to the *A+ Plan* and with no focused state-level support comparable to the Just Read, Florida! program, Florida showed gains in mathematics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Finally, the gains Florida also showed in writing during the 1990s may logically be attributed to the consistent and sustained attention to writing throughout the nineties stimulated by pressure—the threat of being on the critically low-performing list—but not supported by additional state programmatic initiatives or targeted resources.

Could the *A+ Plan*, by itself, have made the difference? If so, why did Florida see progress in some areas but not others? Fourth-grade reading improved remarkably, but the trends in the upper grades have been fairly flat, while mathematics gains at all levels have been modest at best. Clearly, accountability is not a simple solution.

Is it the combined effects of both the reading initiative and the *A+* accountability measures (e.g., school grading, threat of vouchers) that made the difference? Or were there other changes occurring at the same time (e.g., alignment of curriculum with standards) that also could explain these results? Currently, we are unable to tease apart these effects. Accountability as a whole, or the *A+ Plan* in particular, may be making a positive contribution. However, it may not be powerful enough in and of itself to overcome all obstacles. It may be a “necessary but not sufficient” condition to achieve the desired magnitude of impact on student performance.

In addition to the analyses of student achievement as measured by FCAT during the *A+ Plan*, analyses of the voucher and school grading provisions of the *A+ Plan* have been undertaken by a number of researchers. These findings have suggested that the sanctions of low school grades have produced greater student achievement gains at schools at risk of receiving a low letter grade—and thus subject to vouchers—than at other schools not at risk (Greene, 2001). Researchers disagree as to whether it is the school’s desire to avoid the stigma of a low school grade or the threat of competition from vouchers that accounts for the greater performance (Harris, 2001). Another possible explanation is the increased investment in low-performing schools. Similar results were seen in North Carolina where the accountability system does not include a voucher component (Ladd & Zelli, 2001).

Another concern has been that sanction-based motivation for improvement may produce only short-term, initial spurts of effort that cannot be sustained over time in the absence of increased capacity. A recent study (Mintrop, 2002), drawing from experiences in schools labeled as low-performing in Maryland and Kentucky, suggests this dynamic may arise. Mintrop’s findings suggest that schools were modestly energized by the label and were able to make some improvements by remedying gross inefficiencies, but failed to penetrate to any notable degree into the more complex realm of classroom instruction, which of course is the aim of standards-based reform. Reasons given for the modest impacts included teacher’s low commitment to stay, their skepticism about the rightfulness of the accountability system and looming deficiencies in the capacity to effect sustained, pedagogical improvements. On the other hand, research conducted in Great Britain on the now almost two-decade attempts to introduce more accountability and competition in the British public school system offers some guidance. While gains there have been disputed, there is some evidence that the right mix of pressure for improvement and support in doing so may produce significant improvements in student learning (Barber & Phillips, 2000).

Has the *A+ Plan* made a difference? Student performance has improved since 1999 on some measures. What we do not know is what made the difference—the stigma of a low grade? the threat of vouchers? increased resources for low-performing schools? raising the bar? To what extent are these results real versus the by-product of perverse

incentives for schools to “game” the system, for example, by placing their best teachers in the grades tested or focusing attention on the “cusp” students who fall just below the bar (Rubin, 2004)? Florida’s most impressive gains have been in reading, the area in which the state has also put the most effort in building the capacity for instructional effectiveness through the *Just Read, Florida!* initiative. This would suggest that a combination of motivation through accountability and increased effectiveness through professional development may be a promising combination.

It often happens in education that the results of initiatives are never as promising as proponents claim or as dire as opponents predict. Both proponents and opponents of the *A+ Plan* have argued their cases passionately in the media, in the courts, in the legislative chambers and on the campaign trail. It’s time to tone down the one-sided rhetoric and re-examine accountability, looking at both sides of the balance sheet.

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