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The Florida Lesson

By Chris Braunlich

5/16/2011 – Is Florida an educational wasteland?

It's an important question because some members of the Virginia General Assembly seem to think so and base their decisions on that assumption. More than 33,000 low-income Florida students currently use privately-funded scholarships to attend the private school of their choice. But when a bill arose in the General Assembly to do the same thing, opponents went out of their way to insult the Sunshine State.

Senator Henry Marsh (D-Petersburg), for example, proclaimed, "I understand the public school system in Florida isn't doing too good." Marsh's comments echoed similar ones made in a House Finance Committee hearing, and those made by other Senators, various superintendents and teachers union spokesmen.

But since legislators cracked the door open to comparisons with Florida, its fair game to swing it wide open and the whole story.

While proclaiming how wonderful it is that Virginia is Number 4 on the *Education Week* "Quality Counts" list, educational choice opponents neglected to check where Florida is on that same list – all the way down to ... Number 5.

Worse for the opponents' credibility, no one bothered to brief the Senators on standardized performance between Florida's and Virginia's low-income student population – the students that would be helped by the school choice bill.

For years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been considered "The Nation's Report Card." As a standardized assessment tool, it helps measure what students have learned, free from the peculiarities of state-based assessments. Since no one bases student, school, or district evaluations on NAEP scores, there is no incentive to "teach to the test." It's a pure measurement of "where we stand."

So how does "inferior" Florida compare with Virginia in the basic subjects of reading and math – particularly in 4th grade where, if students have not yet learned to read, they are likely to fall further and further behind in later years?

Among Virginia's low-income fourth graders, 44 percent are "below basic" in their reading skills. In Florida, only 36 percent of poor students are "below basic." Perhaps more importantly, 25 percent of Florida's low-income students are at or above proficiency, while only 18 percent of Virginia's low-income students can read at the same level. In short: Not only do fewer low-income Florida 4th graders lag behind, more of them are also performing at the highest levels.

Math is roughly the same story: One in four low-income Virginia fourth graders score below basic, while in Florida that figure is only one in five.

Among Virginia's low-income eighth graders, 37 percent are below basic in reading, while only 33 percent do that poorly in Florida. Only in eighth grade math is a smaller percentage of Virginia low-income students below basic (40 percent) – by one percentile point.

To be sure, Virginia's students outpace Florida's in science, and the two states are about equal in writing.

But the Sunshine State is far from the educational wasteland education choice opponents claim. In fact, there is strong evidence that the students most likely to be helped – low-income, educationally at-risk children – are receiving the help they need.

To be sure, Florida has offered a wide range of incentives and consequences, including financial rewards (usually used for teacher and staff bonuses) for schools that improve or that maintain the highest ratings, free PSAT testing for 10th graders so they are better prepared for the SATs, Advanced Placement teacher training and bonuses, and an end to social promotion in third grade.

But much of the Florida program created by Governor Jeb Bush has centered around educational choice: Offering state scholarships to students whose schools earned an F for two out of four years and to students with disabilities, providing corporate tax credit scholarships for low income students, massively increasing the number of alternatives available through public charter schools, and initiating one of the nation's most robust online learning programs at both the state and school district levels.

While Virginia clearly deserves its Number 4 ranking in *Education Week's* rankings, there should be no doubt that large numbers of educationally at-risk Virginia students could benefit from programs providing effective academic assistance. Doing so requires a two-pronged approach: targeted state spending for programs that work (not a blank check) and support for providing new opportunities for at-risk children.

Florida has proven that neither demography nor poverty needs to equal a child's destiny. Virginia should do the same.

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