

## Grading Florida (op ed from the Hays Daily News)

By now, most Kansans paying attention to K-12 public education are aware change is coming both in terms of school finance as well as how students are taught. Gov. Sam Brownback has promised as much. We're just not sure exactly what to expect.

For reasons not clear to us, the governor repeatedly has held up Florida's education system as the model he'd like to see implemented in Kansas. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush joined Brownback last fall while he still was running for office, touting the Sunshine State's education successes. In January, the newly elected Brownback brought Matthew Ladner of Arizona's Goldwater Institute to Wichita and Topeka in order to prove Florida's superiority over Kansas. Ladner spoke at forums sponsored by the Kansas Policy Institute, a conservative think-tank known for its anti-public-education stance.

Ladner is co-author of "Report Card on American Education," a book that utilized National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores to grade each state's performance. Another grade was subjectively given for reform efforts.

The first comparative noted relatively flat scores in reading for Kansas fourth-graders, while Florida's Hispanic fourth-graders were improving dramatically. This much is true. In 1998, Kansas fourth-graders scored 221 on the reading test. In 2009, it was 224. And Florida's Hispanic fourth-graders were at 198 in 1998 and at 223 in 2009. Ladner cited that improvement "a remarkable amount of progress." And we'd agree, although we wouldn't downplay the fact Kansas scores were higher.

For education reform, Florida received a B-plus while a D-minus was given to Kansas because of our laws on charter schools. While Floridians were being handed vouchers allowing them to choose their children's schools, Kansas school districts were the only entities that could create charter schools. Again, all true.

Reports also indicated that Florida's teachers were in general agreement that the reform efforts were working. Ladner asserted Kansas could improve its scores if it adopted Florida's approach.

Our concern at the time was what members of the Senate Education Committee, Brownback and others at the forums were not being told about Florida schools. In particular:

- \* During the final year of Gov. Bush's administration, Florida's graduation rate was 63.6 percent, compared to the national average of 73.2 percent and Kansas' 77.6 percent, according to National Center for Education Statistics.

- \* Florida's high-school graduation rate is 45th in the country and Florida's officials have found that more than half of students entering two-year or four-year colleges in Florida require remediation in mathematics, reading, and/or writing.

- \* Florida's drop-out rate improved from 4.4 percent in 2002 to 3.3 percent in 2008, while Kansas' drop-out rate went from 3.2 percent to 2.5 percent.

- \* Florida's voucher program was ruled unconstitutional by the Florida Supreme Court.

- \* One of Florida's reforms was a requirement that third-grade students pass the reading portions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in order to be promoted to fourth grade. In other words, after 1999 the fourth-graders being tested did not include low performers. They remained in the third grade.

The Kansas Association of School Boards pointed out that Kansas still ranks significantly above Florida according to several national measures of educational achievement, despite the latter's more rapid improvement in recent years. In fact, by almost any measure, Kansas schools outperform Florida.

New figures from National Assessment of Educational Progress, released just this week, reconfirm the comparison. From 2009 to 2011, Kansas fourth- and eighth-graders either remained level or improved in both reading and math. In Florida, decreases were noted in all four categories. The percentages of students at or above proficiency levels follow the same pattern. Kansas students not only fare better than Florida's, they showed improvement. Florida's numbers dropped in each category.

We hope all the statistics lay to rest any claims by the governor's office that we should follow Florida's lead. Brownback himself shouldn't be able to support anything Florida is doing in regarding to student performance.

Perhaps he never has been. Maybe, just maybe, it's been the economics of the situation that Brownback was examining. When Jeb Bush was governor, the state's share of public education funding dropped from 62 percent to 44 percent. This past May, Florida lawmakers slashed another \$1.35 billion. Even if teaching costs merely are being transferred to the local level, such "savings" do tend to catch the eye.

But at what cost? Do we want students performing in the bottom half of the nation like Florida or do we prefer the top 10 ranking Kansas has?

We would argue overall costs of K-12 public education are too high in Kansas. Too many districts are top-heavy with administrators -- and there simply are too many districts to begin with. Change is needed.

But the Florida model is not worthy of emulation.

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