

The Florida Council of 100

Review of

The Bush/Brogan A + Plan
to Improve Education

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6200 Courtney Campbell Causeway, Suite 560

Tampa, Florida 33607

Phone: 813/289-9200 Fax: 813/289-6560 E-mail: flac100@aol.com

INTRODUCTION

Formed in 1961, The Florida Council of 100 is a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of business leaders, which exists to promote the economic growth of Florida and improve the economic well-being and quality of life of its' citizenry. The Council was the first of its kind in the United States, and works in close harmony with the Governor and the state agencies, the Chief Justice, the legislature, as well as with private organizations, to achieve quality of life improvements for the citizens of Florida.

As business leaders, the members of the Council have the determination, to work to improve the economic well-being of all Floridians. The Council mission statement, adopted in 1998, sums up the vision of the members: *To be a forum of strategic thinkers and leaders having a major positive effect on Florida public policy which enhances the quality of life and economic well-being of all Floridians.*

Over the years, Council task forces and committees have been involved in such diverse subjects as agriculture, higher education, K-12 education, economic development, the justice system, transportation, and growth management. In recent years, the Council of 100 responded to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who requested assistance from a business perspective on methods to improve the Justice System. It provided the final push that resulted in the dissolution of the Florida Department of Commerce and the establishment of Enterprise Florida, a public/private partnership for economic development. Working with the leaders of Florida higher education systems and institutions, the Council established the Business/Higher Education Partnership which has already seen many of its proposals adopted. And during 1996-1998, the Council provided the business leadership on the Governor's Commission on Education, a public/private endeavor aimed at education reform.

In keeping with the long-standing tradition of working closely with the Governor and legislature to improve Florida, the Council has established several task forces to work on issues of specific interest to Council members. The *Task Force to Close the Gap in Education*, formed in 1999, is chaired by Peter Rummell of the St. Joe Company in Jacksonville. This task force is working to improve the educational achievement of Florida's economically disadvantaged children. The task force supports the efforts of Governor Bush, Lt Governor Brogan, and Commissioner of Education Gallagher, who are developing and implementing "leading edge" policies for improving educational achievement.

Understanding the basics of the Bush Brogan A+ Plan to improve the state's education system is important to any activities aimed at closing the gap in education. This paper provides highlights of the Council's understanding of the A+ Plan, in question and answer format for easy reading. We conclude with a section on a specific Council program now being piloted throughout Florida in cooperation with the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, to help close the gap in education.

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WHY SUPPORT THE A + PLAN?

Q. Why is the Florida Council of 100 supporting the Bush/Brogan A + Plan?

A. We believe the plan will lead to higher levels of achievement for all Florida students and will particularly help close the achievement gap between average and better students and those who are not even learning the basics now. The plan shines a spotlight on problems that need urgent attention. This should make it easier to direct timely help where it is most needed and will also reinforce what works best. The result should be more students on track academically, able to pursue college ambitions or land good jobs. Nothing is more important to the economic prospects of these young people and of our state.

JUST THE FACTS -THE A+ PLAN AND SCHOOL GRADES

Q. I thought the A+ plan was just vouchers. What else is in it?

A. The plan incorporates annual statewide achievement tests (FCAT) for fourth, fifth, eighth and tenth graders. The FCAT will soon be an annual/assessment in grades 3-10, measuring annual learning gains on the Sunshine State Standards. These are now translated for parents and the public into letter grades for each Florida public school. The first of these grades were released in June. The A+ Plan also provided a \$90 million increase in funds for remediation, plus deregulation of the existing \$525 million for remediation and summer schools -so school districts can use that money in a more timely and targeted way. Schools that achieve outstanding test results or improvement do get a modest incentive bonus (a \$30 million pool statewide, an average of just under \$100,000 per qualifying school). In the next several years, the testing will expand to all grades third through tenth, and the system will include measurements of improvement as well as achievement scores. That, in turn, will strengthen teacher development and assessment, providing school leaders new tools to shape their staffs.

Q. What does it mean if a school is rated F?

A. The definition is important. An F school is one in which 60 percent of the students failed to score at a basic level in reading, writing and mathematics. (A school is rated D if 60 percent scored below basic on one or two of the subjects but not all three). If a school is rated F twice in a four-year period, students are eligible to apply for "opportunity scholarship" vouchers for a private school or to transfer to another public school.

Q. Another public school? I thought the vouchers were just for private schools?

A. No, the law also requires that districts provide an alternative assignment to another public school that scored C or better for families who prefer that. A third option envisions students enrolling in a public school in an adjacent district (and taking their state per-pupil funding with them). For instance students in a low-performing school in Gadsden County could conceivably enroll, were space available, in a school in northern Leon County.

Q. How many F schools are there and where are they?

A. The two schools, which scored F, and had scored F the year before, are both in Escambia County. Another 76 scored F for the first time in 1999 and would be in jeopardy for vouchers and the other mandated alternatives unless they improve. Miami-Dade County has the largest number of these -26, and more than half are in the three large South Florida systems. Others are distributed through the state, though a number of districts, Pinellas and Hillsborough, among the large urban ones, had no F schools.

Q. What does a school need to do to improve its grade?

A. In the case of an F school, at least 40 percent of the students taking the state test next January would need to score at the basic level or above in at least one of the three basic skills tested. Similar (though not identical) improvement would be needed for a school to move from D to C, C to B, or B to A. To earn a grade higher than a 'CC" all lower performing subgroups would have to score above a minimum level on the FCAT.

Q. Most of this discussion has been about the lowest-performing schools and students. What do the first round of FCAT scores and school grades say about average and above-average students.

A. There is also plenty of room for improvement there. Of the 2,500 schools graded, by far the largest number earned C or D. Put another way, there were only 22 per cent graded A or B, compared to 28 percent D or F. A great many schools and students need to improve if they are to achieve at what educators, citizens and the State Board of Education have determined to be a reasonable expectation for a typical student at a given grade level.

Q. I heard some schools did great on the tests but got marked down for other reasons. What is that all about?

A. Particularly at the high school level, schools were required to be average or above in percentage of enrolled students taking the test and attendance; average or below in suspension and dropout rates; and successful with minorities and other sub-groups. Some schools were dropped a letter grade or marked Incomplete as a result. A number of these initial grades were appealed, and 24 appeals were granted. Experience in other states and other standardized tests in Florida shows that these additional criteria are good insurance against schools inflating their grades by not testing all students.

JUST THE FACTS-LEAVING AN F SCHOOL

Q. What can parents do if they prefer not to have a child attend a failing school?

A. They can have the child transferred to another public school or apply for a voucher to a private school.

Q. Who qualifies for the vouchers and transfers?

A. A student whose assigned school has been rated F for two years of the last four may apply.

Q. What is the amount of opportunity scholarship?

A. A basic scholarship is around \$3200, but may be higher, and the participating private school must accept that amount (or less if its tuition is less) for the students it takes. The scholarship is based on the amount of funding earned by the student in the public school system.

Q. Can voucher students keep the vouchers in future years?

A. Yes, but only through the eighth grade (unless the high school the student would attend is graded D or F).

Q. How many schools and students qualified for vouchers this year?

A. Only the two Escambia County elementary schools with a total of 800 students. Ultimately 58 took vouchers, and 75 transferred to another public school. The rest stayed.

Q. How many schools and students are likely to qualify next year?

A. There are 76 additional F schools among 2,500 in the state. Some will do better and get off the list. If 25 schools were repeat F's, perhaps as many as 25,000 students, one percent of Florida's 2.5 million enrollment would qualify to apply for vouchers. In the two Escambia schools only a little more than seven percent did apply and receive a place in participating private schools -but the percentages applying and places made available could be higher in future years as the program is better established.

Q. How many schools and Florida students will ultimately qualify for the vouchers?

A. There is no way to predict since that depends on test performances years from now. If the A + Plan succeeds in driving improvement in most low-performing schools, there will be little or no need for vouchers.

Q. Are there any regulations for the private schools participating?

A. Yes, a number, mostly pertaining to health and safety. Also, their curriculum and attendance policies must be accredited. Another important rule is that a participating private school must have already been operating at least a year. This is a check against fly-by-night startups to capture voucher dollars.

QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIONS - A+ PLAN AND SCHOOL GRADES

Q. Isn't it unfair to schools and students to put so much weight on the results of one standardized test?

A. The test result is a snapshot rather than the full educational story of a student or a school. On the other hand, it is a broad measure of mastery of the key academic areas needed for future learning -reading, writing and mathematics. Also the FCAT is unique to Florida and was specifically written to match the Sunshine State Standards adopted several years ago. So it should match target skills in the curriculum being taught.

Q. Even if FCAT is a fair measure, won't the A+ Plan distort the learning process wasting a lot of everyone's time and effort by teaching to the test?

A. Not necessarily. The writing portion - Florida Writes- has been in place seven years now. After initially disappointing results, teachers and curriculum specialists looked closely at the scoring criteria. By doing more writing instruction focused on the necessary skills, school districts have markedly raised their Florida Writes scores and taught the basics of expository writing to this generation of students in a way writing hadn't been taught before. We view that as progress, rather than a problem. And if schools need to put more focus, time and effort into making sure all their students master the basics of reading and math, that's also all right.

Q. Regarding the school grades. Aren't the lowest performing schools simply the ones serving the most poor and minority students? This whole thing comes off as a mean-spirited exercise in blaming the victim.

A. We don't agree. While nearly all the F schools and many of the D schools serve a high proportion of disadvantaged students, the reverse is not true. Many schools serving equally disadvantaged students are at least modestly improving. Others achieve much higher than expected test scores given their demographics and other difficulties they face. In this case, the exceptions to the pattern are both encouraging and important. Contrary to what some naysayers are telling us, success with these challenging populations is entirely possible. The successful schools we've visited have common characteristics -strong leadership, determined focus on academic basics, high expectations, some flexibility to circumvent obstructive rules. Several national studies have found exactly the same thing.

Q. Still, so many of these youngsters have so many things going against them -broken homes, lack of learning opportunities before they reach school-isn't the last thing they need the stigma of an F grade?

A. We view the first set of school grades as a starting point for measurable improvement not an occasion for wringing our hands. And does it really do students any favor to tell them they're doing fine when they haven't mastered the skills needed for the next level of academics? That is how we end up with high-school graduates unable to do post-secondary work and not qualified for the sorts of jobs that can support a family.

Q. Yes, but aren't the F's demoralizing to the dedicated teachers who take on these tough assignments?

A. It is challenging work, and many of those teachers are doing an outstanding job. We think many others would be more effective with stronger leadership, support and structure. Beginning teachers (and there are often quite a few in low-performing schools) often need more help than they have been getting from strong, senior members of the instructional team or other mentors. And some older teachers, who may have done all right with a different student population 20 years ago, may need to master new skills to be effective in these settings.

Q. But grading a school F is a sort of scarlet letter. Isn't the state, in effect, writing these schools off?

A. Not at all. The two voucher schools in Pensacola presented their improvement plans to the Governor and State Cabinet and were warmly received. They applied for \$200,000 in special state aid and got it. Governor Bush subsequently visited the two schools and even went with one of the principals to coax a truant student back to class. We also see encouraging signs that improving the F schools is an urgent priority within districts, and they are getting attention and resources they may not have previously. Really, the A+ Plan heightens the focus on academic improvement throughout the system.

Q. How come A schools--many of them serving rich, white gifted kids--get bonuses and D and F schools don't?

A. There is a \$30 million bonus pool recognizing the outstanding test performance, distributed directly among A schools and other schools that have improved. Nothing exactly the same goes to low-performing schools. But the D and F schools should be the beneficiaries of a \$90 million increase this year in state remediation funds, deregulation of the existing remediation and summer school funds and increased targeting of Title One and other federal and state grants to their problems. Increasingly too these schools are receiving direct help from the business community.

Q. Will the focus on low-performing schools drain resources from the rest of the schools?

A. No. The A + Plan included a \$750 million education budget increase for operations.

QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIONS-VOUCHERS

Q. Aren't opportunity scholarships untested and possibly unconstitutional?

A. Florida's is the first statewide voucher program -so by definition it is new. However, it begins on a very small scale and phases in gradually. Florida's system is being challenged in court; there is a mixed record in decisions elsewhere - the most recent permitted vouchers.

Q. Isn't the Bush administration jamming this down our throats? Polls show a majority of people opposed to vouchers?

A. Public opinion on this is a moving target. The A+ Plan has some refinements previous voucher plans do not-a better screen for the private schools receiving voucher students and limiting the voucher option to students in the worst situations. Also, the A + Plan -including vouchers-was part of the Bush-Brogan platform the middle of last year and was, in fact, the most debated campaign issue. The plan - including vouchers - is now Florida law. In our opinion, it can be made to work and should be.

Q. How are opportunity scholarships here any better or different from elsewhere?

A. Opportunity scholarships in Florida are available only to students whose schools have failed over several years to teach the basics. And they are one of several options for parents indisposed to wait indefinitely for that school to get better.

Q. Even though there are only two schools this year, isn't the goal to have huge numbers on opportunity scholarships within a few years?

A. We don't think so. If all the F schools improve a grade, and no one else qualifies, that would be a great result. Governor Bush has said that the main point of A+ is not opportunity scholarships per se but "a command focus" at the district level on improving low-performing schools. We share the goal of bringing all Florida public schools up to standard.

Q. But isn't the plan a foot in the door for religious schools and profiteers to rake resources out of the public schools and pay for all their students with public money?

A. So critics claim that, but that is not what the law says. Only students assigned to twice-failed schools qualify.

Q. Won't the private schools pick and choose the best students, skimming them off the top of the affected public schools?

A. No. The law lets private schools decide whether or not they wish to participate in the program and how many spaces to make available. After that, students are assigned by lot from among the applicants. Of the 58 students on opportunity scholarships from the two Escambia schools, a check of their test records showed a typical distribution for the two schools' populations.

Q. There is no accountability for the private schools participating, right? They are not tested like the public schools.

A. Actually, the voucher students do take the FCAT (other students at the private schools do not). So over time there will be comparisons of the progress between those who left and those who stayed.

THE COUNCIL OF 100 AND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Q. Besides supporting the A+ Plan, what is the Florida Council of 100 doing for schools?

A. In partnership with the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, we are launching this fall a pilot program that will intensively involve CEOs from our membership with principals of individual low-performing schools who are seeking to turn around student achievement.

Q. What is the South Florida Annenberg Challenge?

A. It is a very large (\$100 million) effort over at least five years to improve the public schools in Florida's three large Southeast counties. Actually, it is one of 18 related projects nationally backed by \$500 million, from the Annenberg Foundation and comparable private contributions raised locally. The Annenberg Challenge has several dozen reform initiatives started or planned in Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Q. Does that mean the work with individual low-performing schools will only be in those three counties?

A. No. Annenberg is restricted by its charter to making grants only within the three counties, but it will coordinate the program elsewhere. The challenge has already worked with the state Department of Education on a project involving use of test results in evaluation of teachers and principals and another on recruiting and training principals. We expect to have two or three schools in Central and North Florida in the initial pilot group.

Q. Why does the Council of 100 need a partner? I thought it was a long-established organization of the state's largest businesses.

A. It is-the Council has been working directly with Florida governors on projects to improve the state and strengthen its economy since it is founding during Governor Ferris Bryant's administration in 1961. But the Council typically does these projects mainly on the volunteered work of its members; it doesn't lobby or have researchers or program management staff. South Florida Annenberg's up-and-going operating capacity was a real plus since we wanted to get started on the pilots quickly. For this kind of program we needed design and oversight by people experienced in working with schools, which Annenberg has. Also we found that their view and ours of the essential elements in turning around low-performing schools were symmetrical. Finally, they favor bottom-up rather than top-down programs and particularly look for projects linking individual schools. So, altogether was just about a perfect match.

Q. How do you envision working with selected principals of low-performing schools?

A. It is a pretty open agenda. We obviously need to know what goals and needs the principal has identified specific to his or her situation. In a general way, we think business experience in restructuring -especially under time pressure -ought to be useful. We also think incentives and rewards should be part of a school turnaround program. And we expect the partnerships to involve regular work together over a period of three years.

Q. How many schools?

A. Five or six, to start. We would hope to add others as soon as next spring if the partnerships develop as we hope. And more later-maybe even beyond Florida borders.

Q. Does your program have some wider benefit beyond the small number of schools initially targeted?

A. We would certainly hope so. By design, this program tries to improve on previous business involvement by getting more at the core of remaking a school so its students achieve at higher levels. The program will develop a model that can be replicated. So it should be able to expand in Florida or be exportable to other states that have put together all the elements of a standards-based commitment to raise levels of achievement. We think the program has great potenti'al to generate useful lessons for business/school encounters including more informal ones involving businesses of varying sizes.

Q. How does the low-performing school initiative relate to the Council's support of the Bush-Brogan A+ Plan?

A. A+ sets the stage for real school improvement as never before. By being involved with individual low- performing schools we expect to refine our initial impressions of the challenges they face. We also strongly believe that the progress envisioned for low-performing schools and students is possible-and we recognize that school people are looking for collaborative help not just demands from the sidelines. We think working directly with schools is an appropriate commitment of our time, money and effort.

Q. You mentioned that the Council works directly with Florida governors. Did Governor Bush and his staff have a role in the design of this initiative?

A. Yes. The evening after his election he spoke to the Council and asked for our help on several specific matters including ways to help close the longstanding gap in achievement between disadvantaged students and others. We have been working on the design of a response ever since and have consulted Governor Bush, Lieutenant Governor Brogan, Commissioner of Education Gallagher and their respective staffs each step of the way. As you know, the Bush/Brogan A + plan is a cutting-edge reform effort receiving national attention. We hope the Council of 100's collaboration with South Florida Annenberg has some of the same freshness, energy and potential for broad success.

**TASK FORCE
TO
CLOSE THE GAP IN EDUCATION
Task Force Members**

Member	Position & Company	City Area
David Armstrong	Executive Director, Community College System	Tallahassee
Travis Bowden	President and CEO, Gulf Power	Pensacola
Oswald Bronson	President, Bethune-Cookman College	Daytona Beach
Tommy Bronson	Ret. Chairman & CEO, Independent Aggregates	Brooksville
Hugh Brown	President and CEO, BAMSI	Titusville
Carl Cannon	Publisher, The Florida Times-Union	Jacksonville
Joe Chapman	Chairman, Peoples First Properties	Panama City
Jack Critchfield	Ret. Chairman & CEO, Florida Progress	St. Petersburg
Jeff Crowe	Chairman, President & CEO, Landstar System, Inc.	Jacksonville
Pam Davis	President and CEO, PRIDE Enterprises	St. Petersburg
Mike Egan	Chairman, Dancing Bear Investments	Ft Lauderdale
Nelson Fairbanks	President & CEO, US Sugar	Clewiston
Tom Flood	President & CEO, Collier Enterprises	Naples
Bill Graham	President & CEO, The Graham Companies	Miami
Dave Hughes	Chairman & CEO, Hughes Supply	Orlando
Tom James	Chairman and CEO, Raymond James Financial	St. Petersburg
David Lawrence	President, Early Childhood Foundation	Miami
Phil Lewis	Owner, Phil Lewis Real Estate	West Palm Beach
Len Miller	Chairman, Lennar Corp	Miami
Pat Moran	President and CEO, JM Family Enterprises	Ft Lauderdale
Bob Morris	Chairman, Ramar Group	Orlando
Bob Moss	President & CEO, Centex Rooney	Ft Lauderdale
Jon Moyle	President, Moyle, Flanagan. ..P .A	West Palm Beach
Jeanne O'Laughlin	President, Barry University	Miami
Whit Palmer	Chairman & CEO, MFM Investments	Ocala
Peter Rummell	Chairman and CEO, St. Joe Company	Jacksonville
Carlos Saladrigas	Chairman & CEO, Vincam Group	Miami
Gus Stavros	Ret. Chairman, Better Business Forms, Inc.	St. Petersburg
John Sykes	Chairman, Sykes Enterprises	Tampa
Bob Taylor	Chairman, Mariner Group, Inc.	Fort Myers
Dave Wenner	Managing Director, McKinsey & Company	Miami
General Charlie Wilhelm	Commander-in Chief, USSOUTHCOM	Miami