



# The Florida Senate

*Interim Project Report 2006-116*

*September 2005*

Committee on Education

Senator Evelyn J. Lynn, Chair

## MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM

### SUMMARY

More students fail 9<sup>th</sup> grade than any other, as evidenced by failure rates 3-5 times higher than that of other grades. This should encourage the need for middle school reform and restructuring and logically lead educators and policy makers to implement middle school reforms to reverse this trend.

While the high school experience must emphasize a preparation for postsecondary life, regardless of whether that entails an immediate entry into a career, the labor market or continued academic pursuits, the most effective way to ensure a successful high school experience is to adequately set the stage and provide a strong foundation for our middle school students prior to their entry into and arrival at high school.

The research on middle grades encourages policy makers to emphasize a rigorous curriculum foundation, which includes effective preparation for postsecondary education and the world of work. These include:

1. Solid literacy skills and a command of more demanding informational and technical type text; and
2. A comprehensive and significant approach to meaningful career exploration – an approach that embraces a learning environment where students naturally make connections between the classroom and the outside world.

### *Research and the Three R's: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships*

While the research surrounding secondary school reform is extensive, the message is recurrent and stresses rigor, relevance, and relationships as the linchpins to successful reform.

**RIGOR** prepares students for the world beyond high school, whether that involves continuing education or entry into the workforce. Rigor supports the belief that all students respond to engaging and demanding curriculum and the research reinforces that unchallenging content only serves to disengage learners.

**RELEVANCE**, also referred to as engagement, authenticity, and connections between school and the real world, enhances the curriculum and requires students to make authentic connections between what they are learning and the real world beyond the classroom. When students are able to make viable connections beyond the classroom, they are motivated to embark upon curriculum previously perceived as unattainable or simply too demanding.

**RELATIONSHIPS** between students and adults are the key to establishing a foundation that promotes and enhances opportunities for students to make sense of and internalize academic rigor and relevance. Meaningful relationships are the springboard for establishing personalized learning environments where every student is known well and supported by the involvement of at least one caring adult. Organizing Florida's large schools into smaller settings that enable every child to be known well can help students successfully navigate and personally apply rigorous educational content.

The Legislature may wish to consider reform efforts specifically targeted to the rigor, relevance and relationships model with a focus on:

- Effective transition from middle to high school, including a policy that requires long term academic plans;
- A rigorous core curriculum for all students;
- A comprehensive guidance model that supports rigor, relevance, and relationships;
- Targeting of Supplemental Academic Instruction funds for high risk middle school students; and
- Continuation of focus on literacy skills and reading in the content area.

## BACKGROUND

**Florida Middle Grades Reform Task Force:** The Florida Middle Grades Task Force was convened as a result of the Middle Grades Reform Act, enacted by the 2004 Legislature.<sup>1</sup> The task force was comprised of educators and policy makers from throughout the state. The task force conveyed in its report entitled, *Study Element: Academic Expectations*, that many students will begin thinking about their goals and how to meet them during their middle school years. As students transition into middle school, it is important that they begin developing postsecondary education and career plans.<sup>2</sup> The task force reviewed research studies on academic performance and expectations primarily for reading and mathematics, as well as attendance and mobility issues, teacher quality, and diagnostic testing. After extensive work by the committee members and input from shareholders from throughout Florida, the task force made the following recommendations:

- Increase rigor at the middle grades to prepare students for success in high school;
- Require a standard grading scale and credit system;
- Eliminate social promotion;
- Change retention policies to address students failing one or two courses;
- Require intensive reading for all students scoring Levels 1 and 2 on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT);
- Establish a comprehensive professional development program for principals; and
- Review Sunshine State Standards for

necessary rigor and to ensure minimum course requirements.

During the 2005 Legislative Session, legislators considered and addressed several studies that potentially impact career education and exploration as well as enhanced literacy skills for middle grades students. The 2005 A++ legislation, Senate Bill 2480, contained recommendations of the Middle Grades Task Force. While the A++ bill was unsuccessful, the proposed middle school component of the legislation would have required a more rigorous standard credit system for students in grades 6-8 as well as intensive remedial or enhanced reading instruction for all students.

### **Florida Career Education Study Task Force:**

Florida convened the Career Education Task Force, under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor Toni Jennings. In its final report of September, 2004, the task force determined that there should be a greater focus on and support of career and professional education. The task force underscored the importance of improving career guidance and counseling as an integral component of career education to ensure that all K-12 students are informed and prepared for future careers. The premise of the task force findings was that students actively engaged in self-awareness, career exploration, and career planning will naturally choose a more rigorous curriculum, work harder, and therefore increase academic achievement and future career options.<sup>3</sup>

**2004 Report by CEPRI: Career and Professional Education: Preparing Florida's Students for the Knowledge Economy:** CEPRI identified career and professional education as an area of primary focus to improve the "quality and effectiveness of Florida's education system." Following a comprehensive study, the council recommended in its report the following: small learning communities; high standards and a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students; and effective and extensive career guidance and counseling. The council's policy recommendations specific to middle school reform efforts include a strong academic foundation at both the elementary and middle grades, and career awareness and exploration of potential career options prior to entry into high school. Several of the recommendations outlined in CEPRI's report were included in SB 2138 filed during the 2005 Legislative Session.

<sup>1</sup> s. 1, ch. 2004-255, L.O.F.

<sup>2</sup> Florida Middle Grades Reform Task Force: Study element #1, Academic Expectations: Academic Advisement

<sup>3</sup> Report of Florida Community Colleges and Workforce Education, September, 2004

**CS/SB 2138 – Career Education:** Committee substitute for Senate bill 2138 included language that mirrored recommendations of the above referenced CEPRI Report. Although the legislation was focused primarily at curriculum, instructional relevance, and Career and Professional Academies (CAPS) at the high school level, the bill when amended as a committee substitute specifically stated that “Career guidance and counseling should be stressed in middle school and continue through high school.”<sup>4</sup>

**CS/HB 1837 – Workforce Education:** HB 1837, filed during the 2005 Legislative Session, also included findings of CEPRI’s report and the Career Education Task Force and promoted use of enhanced online career counseling for middle and high school students as well as preservice training for guidance counselors to include a component for mentor teacher guidance models, an element emphasized throughout the reform research.<sup>5</sup>

**Section 1006.02(1), Florida Statutes,** provides, in pertinent part, that all public K-12 schools prepare students to enter the workforce; include accurate, timely career and curricular counseling to students; and include a delineation of available career opportunities and educational requirements associated with each career. The statute also requires schools to identify individual student interests and aptitudes to enable students to make informed decisions about the curriculum that best addresses these interests and aptitudes and to prepare for postsecondary education and the workforce.

## METHODOLOGY

Committee staff identified and reviewed major research studies, all of which targeted middle school reform, and conducted follow-up reviews with authors and school sites involved in the research. Additionally, visits were made to school districts in beginning stages of deploying major reform initiatives.

Staff gathered implementation level information from the following districts presently receiving federal dollars and implementing smaller learning communities, a key component of secondary school reform efforts outlined in research: Broward, Pinellas,

Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Orange, and Lake Counties.

Staff also requested extensive data from the Florida Department of Education (DOE), reviewed data reports, and met with appropriate DOE staff for follow-up discussions and questions. Information was also reviewed from existing and ongoing studies and reviews that included the Office of Program Policy and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement (CEPRI), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, EdTrust, Inc., National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL).

## FINDINGS

While taking on a slightly different approach and one more foundational in nature, a review of the research on middle grades reform mirrors much of the high school reform research. The message is consistent and clear: rigor, relevance and relationships, not in isolation, but treated as a whole, are the linchpins to successful reform. Florida has made monumental gains, well beyond that of most states, with regard to reading achievement and literacy gains, primarily at the elementary level. These achievement gains, however, reflect a marked decline at the middle grades. Not surprisingly, this decline continues to spiral downward at the high school level as literacy demands increase to more informational, expository-type text.

The research is consistent regarding the harsh and long term implications of declining literacy skills and the profound impact on student remediation rates at the postsecondary level, postsecondary non-completers, and a workforce unprepared to meet the demands of an ever-changing knowledge-based economy.

The DOE recently published an abstract entitled “*Postsecondary Success Begins with High School Preparation.*”<sup>6</sup> The abstract examines the connection between high school preparation and subsequent success at the postsecondary level. However, encouraging more rigorous coursework at the high school level will first require a more solid, academically rigorous foundation in the middle grades.

<sup>4</sup> CS/SB 2138, Education Committee and Senator Baker, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Research references *Advisory, Teachers as Advisors, Small Group Guidance, Teacher Mentors*, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Florida Community Colleges and Workforce Education, Data Trend #33

### Middle and High School Reform Must Be Seamless

The middle grades research echoes the high school research and the importance of rigor, relevance, and relationships. It unveils a clear continuum which begins with very specific directives at the middle grades and expands these essential directives at the high school level. Interestingly, the Education Trust, Inc., in its publication titled *Thinking K-16*, cautions policy makers *not* to tackle high school reform in isolation but to consider a linked set of reforms for grades 6-12.<sup>7</sup>

## RIGOR

### Rigor & Literacy

Rigor prepares middle school students for high school and the future beyond, regardless of whether that future entails continuing education or entry into the workforce. Rigor supports the belief that all students respond to engaging and demanding curriculum and reinforces that unchallenging content only serves to disengage students.

“Clearly, enrollment in more demanding courses does not result in more failures. In fact, the evidence suggests that challenging content, bolstered by a quality student support system, produces lower failure rates. Many students can handle more challenging intellectual assignments than many schools are willing to give them.”<sup>8</sup>

The research is compelling and, surprisingly to some, reflects that most students can successfully engage in rigorous coursework normally attributed to only the top 25 percentile of students. The SREB *Research Brief: Middle Grades to High School* concludes that enrollment in more demanding courses does not result in more failures. It does raise student achievement for all communities of learners. Further findings show that students who took the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) eighth grade reading test and scored in the lowest two quartiles were almost twice as likely to fail ninth grade English if they were placed in a lower-level English course rather than a college preparatory course.<sup>9</sup>

Seventy percent of the thirty fastest growing jobs will require postsecondary education and 40 percent of all new jobs will require minimally an AA degree.<sup>10</sup>

However, only 1 in 17 seventeen year-olds can successfully navigate and extract information from specialized text, for example, technical manuals – something that is required more and more in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> In the area of Language Arts/Reading, Florida’s Sunshine State Standards are broken into four quadrants: 1) Words and Phrases; 2) Main Idea/Purpose; 3) Comparisons; and 4) Reference/Research. The emphasis placed on the Reference/Research quadrant and tested on the FCAT grows from 12 percent at the elementary level, to 14 percent at the middle school level, and then more than doubles to 30 percent at the high school level. Relationally, the percentage of students in Florida scoring at or above grade level spirals downward from 67 percent at grade three, to 44 percent at grade 8, and then downward to 32 percent at grade 10. These two factors, coupled with comparatively dwindling enrollments in reading courses are of significant concern.

### Rigor and “Something Called Algebra”

In *A Review of the Literature*, authors Bempechat & Drago-Severson observe that by the time children reach the fifth or sixth grade, they tend to view their intellectual ability as either fixed or fluid. Higher achievers tend to believe that success is related to ability; lower achievers tend to credit success on external factors, seeing only their failures as an extension of their innate abilities.”<sup>12</sup> Cooney and Bottoms found that eighth-grade students who expect to graduate from college, who study “something called algebra” and who read a great number of books are more likely to take and succeed in higher level courses in grade nine.<sup>13</sup> They also state from their findings that taking algebra by eighth or ninth grade produces as much academic gain for low-achieving students as it does for their more high achieving counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, *The Outlook for College Graduates, 1998-2008*

<sup>11</sup> *Thinking K-16: Youth at the Crossroads – Facing High School and Beyond*, p. 5

<sup>12</sup> *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does the Research Tell Us? – A Review of the Literature*

<sup>13</sup> *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does the Research Tell Us? – A Review of the Literature* (Cooney & Bottoms in *Middle Grades to high school: Mending a Weak Link*, 2002)

<sup>14</sup> *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades: What Does the Research Tell Us? – A Review of the Literature* (Bempechat & Drago-Severson in *Review of Educational*

<sup>7</sup> *Thinking K-16: Youth at the Crossroads – Facing High School and Beyond*, p. 19

<sup>8</sup> SREB *Research Brief: Mending a Weak Link*

<sup>9</sup> *Research Brief: Middle Grades to High School: Mending a Weak Link*, SREB

Seventy-six percent of high performing students indicated that they had at least a semester of algebra in the middle grades and the research suggests that taking algebra or pre-algebra in the middle grades leads to enrollment in higher level mathematics courses in high school and does not increase failure rates.<sup>15</sup>

The School Board of Palm Beach County has committed extensive financial and human resources to implement broad changes to mathematics instruction and pupil progression requirements. The district now requires that all students take Algebra I by the end of the eighth grade.

### **Rigor and Florida’s Review of the Sunshine State Standards**

While Florida has exercised and enjoyed a leadership role nationally with its adoption of rigorous academic standards and a system of accountability, research studies have suggested a possible disconnect (although not specific to Florida) between standards for high school academic achievement and the demands of postsecondary coursework and the needs of the workforce.<sup>16</sup> Florida has begun the process for a systematic review of its state adopted Sunshine State Standards and requested funding in their 2006 budget for this endeavor.<sup>17</sup> This standards review presents a valuable window of opportunity to not only engage postsecondary educators and policy makers as partners, but to also include the expertise of business leaders and the representative workforce who will one day employ many of our students.

### **RELEVANCE**

Relevance, also referred to as genuine engagement, authenticity, and connections to the real world, facilitates and requires students to make legitimate connections between what they are learning in the classroom setting and the real world. The research reinforces the long-held belief of many that when students are able to make viable connections beyond the classroom, personalizing it to the world they know, they are inspired to engage in more demanding curriculum, previously considered appropriate only for the top students.

“When students reach the middle grades, they are more likely to question the value of what they are expected to learn. By connecting learning to the world outside of school, reformers believe that students can find meaning and motivation to do well in school.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Literacy, Relevance, and Career Exploration at the Middle Grades**

Accordingly, it is important to engage middle grades students in opportunities to discover self-interests and aspirations that allow them to explore vast career options, while simultaneously integrating and expanding their literacy skills using research, reference, and writing as the vehicle. Florida’s Sunshine State Standards invite integration of more demanding literacy skills and career exploration as evidenced by the following excerpt from Language Arts, Standard 2:

#### **Standard 2:**

#### **The student constructs meaning from a wide range of texts. (LA.A.2.3)**

5. locates, organizes, and interprets written information for a variety of purposes, including classroom research, collaborative decision making, and performing a school or real-world tasks.
6. uses a variety of reference materials, including indexes, magazines, newspapers, and journals; and tools, including card catalogs and computer catalogs, to gather information for research topics.
7. synthesizes and separates collected information into useful components using a variety of techniques, such as source cards, note cards, spreadsheets, and outlines.
8. checks the validity and accuracy of information obtained from research in such ways as differentiating fact and opinion, identifying strong vs. weak arguments, recognizing that personal values influence the conclusions an author draws.

“The extent to which students’ own interests are incorporated into the school program appears to be significantly related to their academic success.”<sup>19</sup>

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*Research, 1999)*

<sup>15</sup> *Closing Gaps in the Middle Grades*, p. 8

<sup>16</sup> Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – High Schools for the New Millennium

<sup>17</sup> \$700,000, Line Item 35, SBE request 8-16-05

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<sup>19</sup> SREB, *Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades – A Review of the Literature*

## Relevance and Review of Florida's Sunshine State Standards

Many reports encourage state policy makers to align high school standards with the knowledge and skills required for postsecondary education and the workforce.<sup>20</sup> As stated previously, Florida is in the early stages of an extensive review and refinement of the Sunshine State Standards and Benchmarks. The review is expected to consolidate the number of standards and benchmarks and to emphasize rigor and FCAT-tested benchmarks. It will be equally important for the review to focus on alignment of standards for relevance based on the needs of business and industry. The DOE requested budget funds for this analysis and also for evaluation of committee member training and the research associated with Florida's adoption of instructional materials.

## Florida CHOICES AND eCHOICES

Trained, professional career counselors encourage educators to provide occupational information that is developmentally appropriate, usually awareness at the elementary level, exploration at the middle grades, and preparation at the high school and postsecondary levels.

Florida CHOICES<sup>21</sup> is a career information delivery system, available free to Florida students, which includes multiple career assessments, occupational and school databases and career planning assistance.

The Florida Career Education Study Task Force, in its September 2004 report *Improving Career Guidance and Counseling*, recommended that the State Board of Education review CHOICES and the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS.org)<sup>22</sup> usage by school to determine applicability for career decision making. The report also encouraged use of federal dollars to enhance development of and implementation for district career guidance programs.

Florida provides multiple platforms to disseminate career information for secondary students, such as *The Parent Primer on Career Exploration* which can be downloaded from the DOE website. *Career Futures* is an interactive hands-on software program developed for middle grades students, which provides career

exploration opportunities to enhance informed decision making for high school and beyond. (Schools may purchase an annual site license for \$295.) Florida CHOICES (CD version) and eCHOICES (Internet version) are available at no cost to all Florida students, parents and educators.<sup>23</sup> CHOICES provides a comprehensive career exploration platform, which allows students to build and expand portfolio development that begins with personal interest profilers and extends to skills surveys, cutting edge labor market and salary-related information, financial aid and scholarship opportunities, flexible four- and five-year planning tools, and résumé builders. Because of the comprehensive nature of CHOICES, it is most effective when provided to students via the guidance and facilitation of a teacher mentor, teacher advisor, guidance counselor, or career/occupational specialist.

DOE provides usage reports for CHOICES and began this past year to include site identifications (ID) to allow schools to obtain access reports for the internet version of CHOICES (eCHOICES). While the onus is on the school or site to promote the usage of the ID, individuals may still access the system as a visitor. For schools with limited internet access, a CD version is also available. DOE contracts with the CHOICES provider at an annual cost of \$249,000. The present contract runs from June 30 2004 and ends June 30, 2007, with a 3-year option to continue through 2009.<sup>24</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS

Research studies consistently cite the relationship component as the key means of providing effective career exploration and enhancement.<sup>25</sup> Successful schools combine rigor, relevance and relationships. The research is again persistently clear that meaningful relationships between students and adults are a key to inspiring students to make systematic and intentional sense of academic rigor and relevance. The need for establishing sound relationships requires that our learning environments be structured and organized in such a way so that every student is known well and supported by at least one caring, involved adult. One

<sup>23</sup> Florida spends \$295,000 annually to maintain the contract with Bridges, Inc.

<sup>24</sup> FLDOE

<sup>25</sup> Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation: *Personalized Instruction*, James Keefe and John Jenkins, 2005; The National Research Council, December 2003; The National High School Alliance, *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth*; NASSP on MetLife Survey, June, 2005

<sup>20</sup> The American Diploma Project – [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.bridges.com/cpflorida/>

<sup>22</sup> [www.facts.org](http://www.facts.org)

promising strategy in effective schools was the practice of teachers serving as advisors to a small group of students, with regularly scheduled time in the school day for advisement centered activities. The National Association of Secondary School Principals, in their “*Breaking Ranks II Report*” identifies comprehensive advisory programs as a vital policy component to improving overall academic performance for all students.<sup>26</sup>

Florida’s present ratio of students to guidance counselors hinders meaningful adult interaction for most students.<sup>27</sup> In the book titled *Banishing Anonymity*, the author cites John F. Kennedy’s use of the quote “Victory has a hundred fathers but defeat is an orphan” - using this as a springboard to suggest that it is the student scholars, gifted athletes, and our troubled or delinquent students who are most often well-known by the adults in our schools.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that within the discussion of relationships, advisement must be considered and treated as guidance and not guidance counseling, relying on certified guidance counselors to provide the necessary preparation, resources, and oversight for teacher advisors.<sup>29</sup>

Our students live in an era of overwhelming information, appropriately referred to as the “knowledge economy.” Organizing large schools to allow every student to be known well by at least one adult can help create environments where students successfully navigate and personally apply massive amounts of information. Teacher-advisement and similar organizational strategies can create a framework to make this happen, where students synthesize and make sense of academic rigor and relevance in a more personal and efficacious manner. A key finding in support of the relationship component tied to career exploration and planning is the Florida CHOICES usage data report for 2004-2005. This report reflects that while 869,000 users accessed CHOICES, only five percent of those users actually developed a portfolio to reflect any long-term academic and/or career planning. The need for a trained, caring adult who serves as a

guide and facilitator is critical to the educational and career success of the student.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> NASSP: *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*

<sup>27</sup> FLDOE Data Survey 3, 2004-2005: Middle Schools =509:1; High Schools=419:1

<sup>28</sup> *Banishing Anonymity: Middle and High School Advisement Programs*, John M. Jenkins

<sup>29</sup> *Personalized Education*, Phi Delta Kappa Fastback 532, Keefe and Jenkins

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<sup>30</sup> Florida Middle Grades Reform Task Force: Seven Cornerstone Strategies to Improve Student Performance

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Legislature may wish to consider the following recommended reforms to strengthen our middle schools and to prepare middle school students for high school and the world beyond.

- **Market the Urgent Need for Reform Efforts** – Florida should strongly consider a *linked* set of reforms for grades 6-12. It is not a matter of one or the other: reform must occur in both middle and high schools.
- Consider a statewide policy to require a full semester (or equivalent) of comprehensive, cost effective career exploration tied to integrated literacy skills that emphasize research, reference and writing.
- **Institute a policy to require that all eighth graders leave middle school with four- or five-year academic plans/portfolio development** as a concentrated part of career exploration. Students who develop five-year plans are much more likely to stay on track once they enter high school. Academic and career plans, however fluid, give students an essential navigational tool with goals in mind.
- Hold districts and schools accountable to comprehensive guidance programs as outlined in ss. 1006.02 and 1006.025, F.S., and encourage adoption of “guidance best practices” that include small group teacher-advisement models and “looping” of advisors where advisors remain with the same group of students throughout their middle school career.
- Expand existing statutes to require that district policies and guidance plans include uncompromised articulation between advisement/guidance/administration staff of sending eighth graders and advisement/guidance/administration staff of receiving ninth graders for articulation and individual academic plan purposes. (See High School Reform Interim Project 2006-115, Ninth Grade Academies/ Freshman Cornerstone Year.)
- **Require a Rigorous Academic Core for All Students** - Consider the feasibility of requiring Algebra I by the end of grade eight and require school districts to hold middle schools accountable

for increasing annually the percentage of students enrolled in and successfully completing Algebra I. The state must continue emphasis on literacy skills and reading initiatives that include reading in the content areas at the middle school level.

- Require a triage approach to **Supplemental Academic Instruction (SAI) spending that focuses on summer academies for students entering ninth grade**, based on students’ math and reading scores, attendance rates and other factors recommended by teacher advisors and guidance staff.