



*Dorothy J. Minear*

*Florida's economic viability depends on quality public education that provides a well-integrated continuum. This article details the state's accomplishments and challenges as policy-makers and educators focus on increasing student achievement through higher student and teacher standards, assessments, and accountability mechanisms. Already recognized for its articulation procedures, Florida continues to improve and expand partnerships and agreements between and among educational sectors.*

## **Educational Excellence Through Partnerships in Florida**

Recently, the State University System of Florida began a process to link the long-term development of its educational institutions to dreams and aspirations for Florida and to identify how the system could play a key role in addressing Florida's needs.

Several themes emerged during this strategic planning process. Although effective competition in an increasingly global marketplace requires a highly skilled work force, Florida falls short of the national average in terms of degree production at all levels, especially when compared to states with robust economies. Therefore, one goal of the State University System is to increase baccalaureate and graduate degree production. Economic development is also critically related to research, and more partnerships are being established with business, industry, and government to guide economic development efforts, including those related to research and development.

We must recognize, however, that the state's overall economic viability and vitality, as well as our community and social cohesion and civic future, depend on the quality of the education students receive at all levels. The extent to which all Floridians are well educated enhances the likelihood that our state can compete effectively with other technologically sophisticated states and nations.

### **A Seamless Educational System**

One of the state's most important responsibilities is to maintain a system of quality public education that provides a well-integrated continuum from prekindergarten (PK) experiences through university studies and beyond.

Attaining such a goal is quite a challenge because Florida has such a large and diverse public school system—one that includes over 3,000 schools, 122,000 teachers, and 2.2 million students. Schools that serve economically disadvantaged students in the urban areas present particular challenges. According to data provided by the Florida Department of Education, 10 of the 67 county school districts enroll 63 percent of the public school students, 76 percent of the minority students, 84 percent of the limited English-proficient students, and 59 percent of the exceptional education students (Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, 1998, p. 27).

Florida has a postsecondary structure based on a two-plus-two system that includes 28 public community colleges serving more than 830,000 students (Florida State Board of Community Colleges, 1998) and 10 public universities serving more than 220,000 students. Five of the state universities belong to the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and serve close to 60% of the students in the system (Florida Board of Regents, 1998).

The only way to establish and maintain the kind of seamless educational system needed for Florida's future is to address challenges in a coordinated, simultaneous manner.

### **Strategies for Alignment**

It is important to acknowledge the progress that already has been made in Florida as educators and policymakers have focused on increasing student achievement through the establishment of higher standards, assessments, and accountability mechanisms. Performance standards, known as the "Sunshine State Standards," have been developed across subject areas to identify what K-12 students should know and be able to do at different grade levels.

The *Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test* (FCAT) and "Florida Writes!" serve as high-stakes tests to measure levels of reading, math, and writing as reflected in the "Sunshine State Standards." Reading and writing skills are assessed in grades 4, 8, and 10; math skills are assessed in grades 5, 8, and 10. FCAT scores will be included in the "School Accountability Report" that is used to identify critically low-performing schools as well as high-performing ones. In the future, FCAT scores will be one of the requirements used for student promotion purposes, and, hopefully, the FCAT eventually will replace the High School Competency Test required for graduation.

In an effort to reduce the gap between high school graduation requirements and the skills necessary for successful postsecondary work, the legislature raised high school graduation requirements in 1998. Among other criteria, the requirements now include a minimum of Algebra I or its equivalent. Florida has a common College Placement Test that is linked to K-12 accountability. Each district awards a differentiated College-Ready Diploma to students who pass this test and who successfully complete an advanced high school curriculum tied to state university and community college requirements/recommendations. The FCAT eventually may be required for the College-Ready Diploma and will replace the common College Placement Test.

In an effort to reduce the need for remediation at the postsecondary level, community colleges are piloting a basic skills assessment project in which they administer the College Placement Test to tenth-grade students to identify deficiencies that can be

addressed while the students are still in high school. Concurrently, articulation agreements have been developed that allow students to complete some of their postsecondary degree requirements early through such acceleration mechanisms as dual enrollment, early admission, advanced placement, credit by examination, and the International Baccalaureate Program.

Anecdotal feedback from colleagues in business and industry indicates that many companies need more workers who are college ready, even if hired right out of high school, and Florida educators have implemented multiple initiatives to encourage students to take more challenging courses in high school, regardless of their plans for post-graduation. For instance, the Chancellor of the State University System, the Executive Director of Florida's Community College System, and the Commissioner of Education send a joint letter to public eighth-grade students and their families with recommendations about preparation for postsecondary studies. Currently, the State University System and Florida's Community College System are developing web-based and hard-copy versions of a document called "Preparing for Community College and State University Success: A Guide for Students and Their Families," which outlines specific entrance requirements, as well as other pointers for preparing for college. A Student Transfer Guide is being developed to assist students who begin their baccalaureate careers at one of Florida's community colleges.

### ***Articulation among Educational Sectors***

Florida has long been considered a national leader in developing highly effective articulation at the state and local levels between and among institutions and sectors. The Articulation Coordinating Committee, which serves as the state unit for addressing assessment, alignment, and articulation issues, recently added public school and work force development representatives, as well as those from the independent sector, to its membership. This council is now recognized in state rule as the State PK-16 Council.

Florida has a statewide course numbering system that is designed to improve program planning, increase communication among all postsecondary delivery systems, and facilitate the transfer of students. All public universities, community colleges, postsecondary vocational-technical centers, and some private postsecondary institutions use the numbering system, by which courses with similar designations have been judged by faculty discipline committees to be equivalent and are guaranteed to transfer if the receiving institution offers the courses.

The state has a general education agreement that prohibits universities from requiring students to take additional general education courses if they have already successfully completed a general education sequence at a community college. Courses have been identified that meet general education requirements within the subject areas of communications, mathematics, social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. Faculty committees representing both the community colleges and the universities have also identified common prerequisite courses for more than 600 university baccalaureate majors across all public institutions.

Students with Associate in Arts degrees from Florida's Community College System are guaranteed a place in the state university system. Before graduating from

community colleges or universities, students must demonstrate mastery of college-level competencies in communication and computation via the College Level Academic Skills Test or its equivalent.

A new joint electronic student advising system, known as Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students, has been developed to provide online information to potential and enrolled community college and university students on degree program availability, transcript displays, and local institutional graduation audits. Flexibility has been built into the system to allow for expansion to cover functions such as admissions applications, financial aid, registration, career advisement, and fee payments.

### ***Coordinated Personnel Training Systems***

Florida is making significant progress in the identification of competencies needed for effective teaching and in the initial preparation of its PK-12 teachers in state-approved teacher education programs. The Education Standards Commission identified twelve "Florida Educator Accomplished Practices" that focus on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed by classroom teachers to promote student achievement to the highest level. Increasingly, initial teacher preparation is tied to preparing educators to teach and assess the content in the Sunshine State Standards. Performance criteria were identified for teacher preparation programs in the state so that their continued approval is based on results-oriented outcomes assessment. Florida was the first state to enter into a three-way partnership among the Florida Department of Education, the Florida Board of Regents, and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education to review State University System teacher education programs to ensure that they are preparing candidates who can meet rigorous standards.

Teacher preparation programs in the system have made a commitment to make the curricular changes necessary to ensure that graduates are able to successfully demonstrate:

"(1) the ability to teach and assess the content in the *Sunshine State Standards* in the subject areas and at the grade levels for which they have been prepared to teach; (2) the ability to use the latest educational technologies to enhance teaching and student learning, manage student records, and analyze data for school improvement; (3) the ability to teach students from diverse backgrounds (including disadvantaged urban and rural environments) and students for whom English is a second language; (4) the knowledge and collaborative skills needed to meet the needs of students with exceptional needs; (5) the ability to incorporate real-world experiences into curriculum and teaching to help students develop the thinking skills most required in high performance workplaces; (6) the skills/competencies as identified in the *Florida Educator Accomplished Practices* and related content standards; and (7) that they have had the opportunity to participate in early, varied, and extended clinical field experiences with diverse student populations, often in professional development schools" (State University System, 1998, pp. 70-71). Sites for preservice field experiences must include schools located in urban settings.

When the state established common prerequisites for baccalaureate programs, a core set of three prerequisite courses was established for all teacher preparation programs: "Introduction to Education," "Introduction to Educational Technology," and

“Teaching Diverse Populations.” Two of the courses require field experiences that are designed to give students early exposure to work in the schools.

## **Outstanding Challenges**

### ***Statewide Commitment to Higher Standards***

There are numerous other examples of actions that have been taken in Florida to improve alignment, assessment, and articulation for the purposes of enhancing student achievement, easing students’ transition from one educational level to another, and ensuring that students have qualified teachers. However, we must acknowledge that many challenges still lie before us.

We must stick to the standards-driven, performance-based strategy we have initiated. Simultaneously, we need to put into place the kinds of resources and supports that help all students perform at levels that meet or exceed rigorous, relevant, and realistic standards. Thus, in pursuing our goal, we need to work to eliminate significant performance gaps among students from different economic classes, genders, races, or ethnic groups. We must pay particular attention to the gaps that exist for students in many of the state’s urban and rural areas.

Florida’s postsecondary institutions must take greater responsibility for improving PK-12 schools. To make significant headway on any of the serious challenges we face in higher education—underprepared freshmen, inadequate numbers of minority students, unacceptably low graduation rates, and sometimes, reportedly, low skills among graduates—we must work together across PK-12/higher education lines. The changes taking place in the PK-12 sector cannot fully succeed without corresponding changes in higher education.

It will be important to modify, clarify, and expand the Sunshine State Standards, the FCAT, and related expectations and assessments for educators as is appropriate over time. We need to ensure that all pertinent subject areas are addressed, and that teaching does not neglect any area because of insufficient standards and/or assessments. Education and discipline faculty from the public schools, community colleges, and universities must continue to work together to align content standards, instruction, and assessment for students and teachers. Input from the business community can help with the identification of cross-discipline competencies, knowledge, and skills that are necessary for career and life successes.

We need to move away from confusing and often contradictory signals about what is important to learn at different levels, and replace them with a single set of aligned and consistent expectations. Also, we need to reduce the burden of multiple and conflicting assessments at key transition points—e.g., one set of tests before graduation (FCAT/Florida Writes!), one test for high school graduation (High School Competency Test), one for admission to college (SAT/ACT), and yet another test for placement purposes (College Placement Test). One coherent assessment system with results used at both levels of education would be more appropriate. As mentioned earlier, current plans would achieve this objective, so we need to ensure that common tests truly serve multiple purposes well.

It will be beneficial for us to continue with our efforts to encourage all PK-12 students—including students from diverse backgrounds living in disadvantaged urban and rural environments—to reach for higher standards. One way to accomplish this objective is to continue to disseminate information to students and their families about the courses and academic competencies students need to prepare for successful postsecondary work. The new statewide electronic advising system will be available so that high school counselors can provide students with direct guidance regarding their individual progress against admission requirements for particular programs at specific postsecondary institutions.

### ***Teaching Work Force Needs***

If education is the key to an economically sound and vibrant Florida, then we must have well-prepared, caring, competent, and committed teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school professionals to ensure that our young people are prepared for the challenges of the new millennium. Although some of our teachers are the best prepared teachers we have ever had, others are substantially underqualified to address the challenge of helping all students meet new high performance standards. We must be consistent and vigorous in our support of high standards (including valid and reliable assessments) for educator preparation, certification, and professional development.

Working closely with the Florida Department of Education, local school districts, and other stakeholders, universities must identify specific education work force needs in various regions of the state so that teacher preparation programs can set more specific enrollment goals, and so community college, university, and district personnel can work together to recruit more students into high-need areas. Together, we must seek ways to garner more state, federal, and private resources to recruit talented and diverse individuals into the profession, to train them well, and to provide them with sufficient support once they are in the schools.

Recognizing the growing need for more highly qualified teachers, university, Department of Education, and district personnel should work together to design performance-based alternatives for preparing individuals who are entering the field with undergraduate training in other disciplines. These programs should be designed with intensive assessments to determine a person's level of preparation, and then to provide somewhat individualized performance-based instruction in an accelerated manner so that the individual quickly gains the needed competencies to enter the classroom fully prepared at the same level as candidates who complete state-approved programs.

Beginning teachers must have not only competence in a variety of teaching methods, but also a firm grounding in the content they are hired to teach. Because half or more of this content preparation takes place in community colleges and colleges of arts and sciences, it is critical that faculty from across units and across institutions work together to ensure that content courses are designed to meet future teachers' needs and to engender excitement and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Regents and presidents must hold their institutions as a whole, not just their colleges of education, accountable for the skills and knowledge of the teachers they produce.

Recently, the Articulation Coordinating Committee approved a recommendation from the joint community college/university group that addresses common prerequisites for teacher education programs. The new policy requires a stronger foundation in the liberal arts and sciences for early childhood, elementary, and exceptional student education teachers. Also, Board of Regents staff are working to bring together faculty from colleges of education and colleges of arts and sciences to begin a dialogue leading to constructive action plans to strengthen the content command and knowledge of content-specific teaching strategies for all new teacher candidates graduating from the State University System. In advanced teacher preparation programs, there is a need to focus on providing students with new levels of content knowledge and content-specific teaching skills, so that these individuals can be leaders among the teachers, encouraging all to rise to new levels of performance.

Postsecondary personnel must work with district and school personnel to determine what kinds of professional development our current teachers need in order to help their students meet rigorous academic standards, and how schools, colleges, and universities can organize to get this work done. It is important that we draw on the expertise of appropriate public school, community college, private college, university, and business/industry personnel in the state to establish comprehensive, collaborative professional development programs that improve both teacher preparation and school programs.

To achieve some of these objectives, we must ensure that public schools and teacher preparation programs have the infrastructure needed to prepare teachers and students alike for the technological demands of the present and future. We need to find ways to support financially students who participate in extended internship programs. We also need to work together to design stronger support systems for beginning teachers.

Throughout the state, various schools, colleges, and universities have entered into professional development school agreements. It will be important to establish more well-designed partnerships that will help meet preservice, inservice, and school improvement needs. These schools offer increased opportunities for more direct and continuous involvement of public school educators in the design, delivery, and evaluation of teacher education curriculum and programs. Also, they provide more opportunities for postsecondary faculty to be involved in schools. As partners, postsecondary and school personnel can bring their expertise to the challenge of conducting research about what is working best in the schools.

There are many innovative instructional programs, school service activities, school-based research projects, and partnerships with public schools in place at individual colleges and universities. Now, we need to document the impact of these ventures and find ways to expand, link, and institutionalize those programs that have demonstrated positive effects on teacher quality, student learning, and Florida's educational system in general.

### ***Educational Research Agenda for Florida***

As noted previously, it is important for the State University System to be actively involved in research agendas that support Florida's economic growth and development. However, it also is critical that the system be actively involved in ongoing, collaborative, school-based research that improves classroom practice. It might be help-

ful for us to think more seriously about establishing an educational research agenda for the state of Florida. We need to generate research-based knowledge to improve teaching and learning. We need research on the training and backgrounds of teachers who are successful in getting students to meet higher standards. We need a system for documenting and evaluating partnership activities, in order to improve them and determine their long-term impact. And we need more mechanisms for sharing and disseminating best practices throughout the state and the nation.

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration among educational sectors is critical if we are going to create a new community of learning that strives for all of its members to achieve the highest levels of excellence throughout all levels of education and the work place. Florida educators and policymakers have taken the first steps in attaining these goals. Now, meaningful public school/community college/university partnerships throughout the state must become part of our long-term systemic effort to improve student achievement, reduce the need for remediation, and increase the rates at which students graduate from high school and enroll in and complete postsecondary degree programs.

### ***Suggested Readings***

- Florida Board of Regents, *State University System of Florida Fact Book:1996-97* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Board of Regents, 1998).
- Florida Board of Regents, *State University System of Florida Strategic Plan:1998-2003* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Board of Regents, 1998).
- Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, *Challenges and Choices: The Master Plan for Florida Postsecondary Education* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, 1998).
- Florida State Board of Community Colleges, *Report for the Florida Community College System: The Fact Book* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education, 1998).
- Florida State Board of Community Colleges, *The Florida Community College System: A Strategic Plan for the Millennium, 1998-2003* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education, 1999).