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Council for Education Policy,
Research and Improvement

School Accountability July 2003

Different Rules but a Common Goal

Understanding the impact of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* on Florida's A+ Plan

An At-A-Glance Policy Analysis

"STAYING THE COURSE" WITH FLORIDA'S A+ PLAN

For five years, school accountability in Florida has been largely defined by the **A+ Plan**. Each year since 1999, school accountability letter grades have been issued based upon the results of the **Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)**. In response to the A+ Plan's testing and accountability requirements, the state's public schools have steadily increased student achievement.

Florida's schools will, however, soon have their performance judged in **two ways**—one to meet A+ Plan requirements and the other to comply with new federal rules under the **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**—with potentially confusing and, perhaps, conflicting results.

While Florida's A+ Plan and the No Child Left Behind Act share the same goal of high achievement for all students, the rules by which the two laws measure progress toward the goal differ significantly.

Florida's A+ Plan evaluates schools by taking a **moving picture** of student achievement, using a combination of current student performance along with the amount of improvement in learning from one year to another. The No Child Left Behind Act uses a **one-time snapshot** of student achievement, which produces a different, and, in some ways, less complete picture of school performance.

In addition to its reliance on one-time testing snapshots, the No Child Left Behind Act rates schools based on nine different student subgroups and a minimum of forty-five separate requirements, with a low score in any one of these areas leading to a school rating of "No Annual Yearly Progress."

These basic differences will likely result in a surprising number of the **A, B or C**-graded schools under the A+ Plan, being labeled this summer as "**in need of improvement**" under the No Child Left Behind Act.

To minimize undesirable confusion, and avoid any loss of momentum in the rate of school improvement currently taking place in Florida's classrooms, the new No Child Left Behind Act ratings and labels can best be applied to schools, and explained to the public, as an added, important new measure of school achievement that can be used to **complement, supplement and enhance** the more established and comprehensive A+ Plan.

The significance of the federal No Child Left Behind Act ratings and labels, and how they can best be adapted to Florida's plan for school accountability, should start with the shared understanding that the new "in need of improvement" label be interpreted **not** so much as **failure** on the part of any of the state's schools, as much as an additional piece of information representing a considerably different perspective on how to use FCAT scores to judge schools.

PUTTING DIFFERENCES IN PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the relationship of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act ratings and labels on the A+ Plan school accountability letter grades centers, primarily, on five key differences.

1) Under NCLB, only student subgroup FCAT scores are counted. NCLB requires that FCAT scores be sorted into nine separate categories called **subgroups**, and that **95 percent** of all students in **each subgroup** be tested. To be used for school ratings, each subgroup must contain at least 30 students.

The NCLB subgroups include:

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- American Indian
- Economically Disadvantaged
- Limited English Proficient
- Students with Disabilities
- School as a Whole

Under NCLB, if **any one** of the nine subgroups fails to meet the required FCAT score **or** the 95% tested standard, the “in need of improvement” label is given to the **entire school**.

- **Under the A+ Plan**, only the FCAT scores of each school’s lowest readers are separated from the results of the other students. The scores are then combined with those of the **school as a whole** to

determine the school grade. To receive a grade of A, 95 % of the students must be tested.

2) Under NCLB, FCAT scores are not averaged. NCLB uses a lengthy one-step “Yes” or “No” checklist to rate schools. If a school gets a “No” on **any one** of over **forty-five** separate requirements, it receives a “no annual yearly progress” rating.

- **Under the A+ Plan**, a combination of six different sets of test results is used to grade schools. A high FCAT score in one area is averaged with a low score in another area to calculate the school grade.

This exclusive use of subgroup test scores, and the rule that **every one of the nine subgroups** meet the annual NCLB standards, will account for nearly all of the difference between a school’s A+ Plan letter grade and its new NCLB rating.

3) Under NCLB, progress from year-to-year does not count. NCLB takes a one-time “snapshot” of the current status of student achievement for **one school year** at a time. The amount of learning that takes place for the same students from one year to the next is not considered under NCLB.

- **Under the A+ Plan**, FCAT “snapshot” scores for a single year are counted, along with the amount of learning gained by the same students from one year to the next.

The use of FCAT “annual learning gain” scores, **in addition to** “snapshot” status scores, allows many schools the opportunity to qualify for a higher A+ Plan letter grade.

4) Under NCLB, every FCAT score is counted. The FCAT scores of **all** students, including those of students with severe disabilities and limited English skills, are counted under NCLB.

- **Under the A+ Plan**, all students are tested, but not every score of every student is used for grading the school. The FCAT scores for most students with disabilities and limited English skills are not counted.

5) Under NCLB, every school is rated. All schools, regardless of size or special purpose, receive a yearly NCLB rating.

- **Under the A+ Plan**, newly opened schools, very small schools and many special purpose schools do not receive a school grade.

FACING NEW CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to rating schools, No Child Left Behind presents other significant challenges and opportunities for Florida’s school leaders. The state, for example, must place more importance on recruiting and supporting skilled teachers, providing extra help to disadvantaged students and securing multiple sources of funding.

- **SKILLED TEACHERS.** As a rapidly

growing state facing a class size reduction constitutional mandate, Florida’s need for highly qualified teachers in all “core academic” classes will be greatly increased.

- **EXTRA HELP.** The new NCLB ratings will require that all schools apply effective actions to meet the learning needs of each of their individual student subgroups. That need will be felt most strongly in those schools serving disadvantaged students.
- **FUNDING.** Attracting skilled teachers and giving struggling students and schools assistance will require a stable, long-term financial plan. Federal and state funds must be used in an efficient, flexible and targeted manner to support critical school improvement efforts.

Meeting the No Child Left Behind goal of all students working on, or above, grade-level by 2013-14 is an immense undertaking for any state. Florida’s A+ Plan offers an effective response to the No Child Left Behind Act. Together, the two laws present the state’s schools new challenges and opportunities to close existing academic achievement gaps while continuing to improve the performance of all students and schools.

For more information, visit
<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov>
or <http://www.fldoe.org/NCLB/>