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## Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 8/18/11

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## NATIONAL NEWS

### **New Race to Top Spurs Concerns About Testing Preschoolers**

Education Week

By: Maureen Kelleher

August 18, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/18/01early.h31.html?tkn=NXUFHzDMd0J8sb7beQ3TFt5DxDbuJUbnFyX3&cmp=clp-edweek>

The proposed assessment requirements for the new Race to the Top early-learning competition are sparking concerns from some preschool advocates, who fear the provisions could lead to high-stakes testing of young children and unfair accountability measures imposed on educators.

At the same time, other observers suggest the federal competition could generate national models for early assessment.

At least 36 states are expected to compete later this year for a slice of \$500 million in grants under the Early Learning Challenge, which aims to support states as they ramp up both the quality of and access to early-childhood programs.

The initiative comes amid debate about how best to evaluate young children's school readiness, and as some states have been exploring new approaches.

Nearly 350 organizations and individuals weighed in last month on the [draft guidelines](#) from the U.S. Department of Education for the grants, with many suggesting states should be explicitly prohibited from using the required assessments for high-stakes purposes.

The Education Department waived its usual rulemaking process for the guidelines and instead invited comments July 1-11 via a moderated blog.

"We support using assessments as long as they are targeted to improve instruction and classroom environments," said Ben Allen, the public-policy and research director for the National Head Start Association, based in Washington, which was among the groups submitting comments. "We don't want assessments to be used to reward or sanction individual children or teachers. A single assessment should not be used as the sole method to evaluate a program."

Officials at the Education Department say they agree that the kinds of assessments they want to see should not be used to make decisions about whether to defer a child's entry into 1st grade or to fire a kindergarten teacher.

"We think about it as an ongoing process of collecting information around young children's learning and program improvements," said Jacqueline Jones, a senior adviser on early learning to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. "We know there aren't real accountability measures here, and I think that's appropriate. But we want teachers to understand where kids are and how to use that information to inform instruction."

#### *'Absolute Priorities'*

The Early Learning Challenge program seeks to encourage states to align the many players involved in early-childhood education, improve standards and assessment, and advance the quality of early-childhood educators. The state grants, expected to range from \$50 million to \$100 million, will be awarded by year's end. At press time, the application deadline had not yet been announced.

In May, the Obama administration announced that a new wave of \$700 million in Race to the Top aid would be divided into two

pots: \$500 million for the Early Learning Challenge and \$200 million for the nine states that narrowly missed out on last year's K-12 competition. The additional Race to the Top money was provided under a fiscal 2011 budget deal finalized earlier this year, not as part of the 2009 stimulus law. ("[New Race to Top Money Eyed Warily by Some.](#)" June 8, 2011.)

According to the draft guidelines, the Early Learning Challenge's two "absolute priorities"—items states must address in their applications to be considered for grants—are a kindergarten-entry assessment to be administered to all kindergartners by the start of the 2014-15 school year and the development of a Quality Rating and Improvement System tied to child-care licensing that provides training and incentives to encourage providers to participate.

Experts say the new early-learning competition comes in the wake of a significant shift in the federal approach to early assessment, since the National Reporting System—an assessment for 4- and 5-year-olds in Head Start widely criticized as developmentally inappropriate—was scuttled with the 2007 reauthorization of the federal program.

Today, Head Start, along with some states, such as Colorado and Maryland, use benchmarked observational assessments to gauge children's development and improve program quality.

"You don't see observational assessment in K-12," Mr. Allen of the Head Start association said.

At the beginning of each school year, Maryland's kindergarten teachers measure children's school readiness by compiling portfolios of pupils' work and recording their classroom behaviors. Teachers, families, and early-childhood programs receive the [results](#).

The kindergarten assessment carries no formal accountability consequences for children or programs, but the data have become a key tool for quality improvement, budgeting, and policy, said Rolf Grafwallner, Maryland's deputy state superintendent for early-childhood development.

Meanwhile, Colorado's [Results Matter data system](#) asks preschool teachers to quantify their observations of children's development using rubrics. Finding high-quality observational assessments is not easy, notes Nan Verdegna, the director of Results Matter.

"Very few meet our requirements and have been updated to reflect current research and updated state standards," she said.

Colorado recently dropped two tools from its limited menu of options, she added, because of problems with their design and other issues.

Even a high-quality measure should not be the sole yardstick used to assess children and programs, said W. Steven Barnett, the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, based at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, N.J.

"Some kind of triangulation where you use classroom observation, standardized assessments of kids, and some other source—performance assessment, administrator judgment, something else—that's probably the best solution," he said.

In comments on the federal guidelines for the Early Learning Challenge, Mr. Barnett's institute emphasized that assessments should not be used to make high-stakes decisions for children or programs.

It also cautioned that existing state systems for rating and improving the quality of early-childhood offerings may not offer struggling programs enough support to raise quality.

"I'm always concerned states will develop inappropriate assessments, even without the Early Learning Challenge," Mr. Barnett said. "They don't need encouragement."

### *Saving Time for Play*

Even if the new Race to the Top competition spurs an expansion of high-quality assessment tools, said Sharon Lynn Kagan, a co-director of the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University, "the second trick is going to be using them in a way that does not violate a commitment to play and a focus on exploratory learning for children."

Despite such concerns, many early-childhood advocates say a vanguard of state winners could spur improvement across the country, especially if the assessments they develop are shared with other states.

"It would be terrific to use these select Early Learning Challenge states as proofs of concept and use the tools to help other states develop systems, not have the next 30 states reinvent the wheel," said Robert C. Pianta, the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. He has developed a popular evaluation tool.

Nascent interest in K-2 assessment combined with the Early Learning Challenge may eventually spur the two state consortia working on assessments pegged to new common-core standards in English/language arts and mathematics to take a coordinated P-3 approach to early-learning standards and assessment, some officials suggest.

"The cooperation between the states we've seen with the common-core standards and the two assessment consortia has been impressive," said Chris Barron, a spokesman for the Washington state education department. His state is leading the so-called SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium of 28 states.

"If the economic times allow for it," Mr. Barron said, "there's a good chance that states could combine resources for an early-education assessment as well."

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## **FLORIDA NEWS**

### **Florida's ACT scores rise but the state still lags behind national average**

Florida Current

By: Ana Goni-Lessan

August 17, 2011

<http://www.thefloridacurrent.com/article.cfm?id=24209067>

ACT scores [released on Wednesday](#) showed that Florida's average went from 19.5 in 2010 to 19.6 in 2011. However, the state still lags behind the nation which has an average score of 21.1.

Florida's was tied with Kentucky for the 48th best score in the nation among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Only Tennessee and Mississippi had lower scores.

The state, however, does have a higher participation rate than many other states and that can bring down the overall score. More than 117,000 high school graduates - or an estimated 66 percent - took the ACT in the last year.

The test is meant to be a measure of how prepared a student is for college coursework.

The scores showed that only 17 percent of Florida students passed all four benchmarks of the ACT exam-- English, math, reading and science. The national average is 25 percent.

"I was pleased to see increases in both the participation and performance of Florida students on the ACT this year. However, Florida's overall performance on this assessment still remains unacceptably low," said Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson in a statement. "Our current education reform strategies are aligned with this exact goal and I am confident that through the continued hard work of our educators and school leaders we will see significant progress in this area in the years ahead."

The ACT is one of two main college readiness exams that most colleges rely on when determining college admissions. Scores for the other test - the SAT - have not yet been released this year.

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## Union Claims 'Thousands' of School Layoffs, But Where?

Sunshine State News

By: Kenric Ward

August 17, 2011

<http://www.sunshinestatenews.com/story/union-claims-thousands-school-layoffs-but-where>

*Extrapolations in Broward are derived from old data; state says it's too early to tell*

FEA President Andy Ford | Credit: FEAHide

The Florida Education Association is shopping an unsubstantiated story that "thousands of teachers and support staff" will be laid off at public schools this fall.

FEA President Andy Ford made the claim to Florida News Network Tuesday, but offered no specific numbers to back it up.

The state Department of Education could not corroborate Ford's claim, saying it is too soon to make any calculations. With a majority of school districts not yet open, DOE spokeswoman Deborah Higgins said, "They won't lay off people if there are positions to fill."

Pressed by Sunshine State News to substantiate the union's projection, FEA spokeswoman Jacqui Sisto pointed to Broward County, which she said mailed termination letters to 1,400 teachers.

Per union contract, only first- and second-year teachers -- those not grandfathered in with tenure -- received the notices.

Broward County School District spokeswoman Nadine Drew confirmed that 1,447 instructors received letters, but said those notices were mailed last May.

By the end of the school year, however, the district reported just "117 teachers placed on layoff due to lack of full-time vacancies in their subject areas."

Since then, as happens every year, additional retirements, resignations and other attrition are expected to reduce potential layoffs even further.

At last report, the district said it had "over 150 vacancies in mathematics, science and special education."

Broward, the state's second biggest school district, has approximately 16,000 full-time teaching slots.

Elsewhere, the state's largest district, Miami-Dade, is planning no reductions in instructional staff.

Dozens of smaller districts, including St. Lucie County, are reporting no staff reductions in either their teaching or nonteaching ranks.

Still, the teachers' union insists that big layoffs loom across the state.

"Schools got less money, so there are going to be less people working. There will be layoffs because there's less money," Sisto said.

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## Eugene Butler Middle School gets \$1 million donation to help prevent dropouts

Florida Times-Union

By: Topher Sanders

August 18, 2011

<http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2011-08-18/story/eugene-butler-middle-school-gets-1-million-donation-help-prevent>

*School will now take part in United Way's Achievers for Life program.*

August 18, 2011 - 12:00am Eugene Butler Middle School gets \$1 million donation to help prevent dropouts Eugene Butler Middle School received a \$1 million gift Wednesday to help support a new dropout prevention program at the school.

Butler became the seventh Duval County Public Schools' campus to host the United Way of Northeast Florida's Achievers for Life program.

The program, which started in 2007, aims to catch students that have shown signs of falling behind in the sixth grade before the students become serious candidates for dropping out.

Poor attendance, failure in key classes and discipline problems are some of the red flags the program monitors. The initiative focuses on family advocacy, academic help, parent engagement and counseling to get students back on track.

Achievers for Life is also at Arlington, Fort Caroline, J.E.B. Stuart, Jefferson Davis, Matthew Gilbert and Northwestern middle schools

Oscar Munoz, CSX executive vice president and chief financial officer, and his wife, Cathy, donated the money to fund the program.

"We couldn't be happier to do this," Oscar Munoz said. "We're delighted to be a part of it."

Cathy Munoz is an Achievers for Life mentor at Arlington Middle School.

Her husband said some students haven't been afforded the opportunity of a great education and some haven't taken advantage of a great education.

"We need to correct that," he said. "That's what all of this is about."

Connie Hodges, president of the United Way of Northeast Florida, said the families and students at Butler "will forever be changed" because of the Munoz gift.

Butler Principal Maurice NeSmith said he is encouraged by the program's interest in parents.

"I am particularly excited about the focus of the parent engagement piece," NeSmith said. "Because when parents are involved good things always happen."

Sarah Ley, who works for GE Aviation, had to fight back emotion as she spoke about her mentor relationship with 14-year-old Gina Settle.

"We've become friends, we check in on each other, we're a part of each other's lives," Ley said. "I'm not just Gina's mentor, I'm her friend, and that relationship is so special to me."

Gina, who will start classes at Raines High School Monday, was a student at Mathew Gilbert Middle School when she met Ley. Gina said the bond she has with Ley has helped her get through tough times and develop into something more.

"She's like a big sister," Gina said, "someone I can talk to."

They said they hope the students at Butler have the same experiences with their Achievers for Life mentors.

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## **STATE NEWS**

### **Test scores same at Wisconsin public, voucher schools**

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 17, 2011

<http://www.postcrescent.com/article/20110817/APC0101/110817115/Test-scores-same-Wisconsin-public-voucher-schools>

MILWAUKEE— State auditors on Wednesday confirmed a report that found little difference in test scores between students in Milwaukee's school-voucher program and those in the city's public schools.

Wisconsin lawmakers had asked the state Legislative Audit Bureau to evaluate a study, conducted by privately funded education researchers, that analyzed test scores from both groups of students. The study had found no significant difference, a conclusion that state auditors also reached.

The researchers studied the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, a voucher program that allows low-income children in Milwaukee to attend private schools at taxpayers' expense. The two-year budget signed by Gov. Scott Walker in June repealed the enrollment limit for voucher schools in Milwaukee and expanded vouchers to schools in suburban Milwaukee and Racine. Supporters say the voucher option helps students whose only alternative might be a substandard public school, and gives them more control over their own education.

However, opponents say the voucher program hasn't proven any more effective at raising students' test scores. Critics, including Wisconsin state superintendent Tony Evers, have also opposed expanding the program, arguing that lawmakers should focus on improving achievement of all Wisconsin school children before using taxpayer money to bolster vouchers.

The latest report could provide fodder for both sides.

The researchers had compared math and reading scores between both sets of students, and found only slight differences. State auditors evaluated the numbers a little differently. For example, unlike the researchers, the auditors omitted from their analysis any students who transferred between a public school and voucher school during the five-year period covered by the study.

Even so, the auditors arrived at a similar result: that the differences between the test scores weren't statistically significant.

Mike Ford of School Choice Wisconsin, a group that supports voucher programs, said the numbers should silence critics who think voucher schools aren't as robust as public schools.

"This basically confirms that School Choice knows what it's doing," he said.

But the Wisconsin Association of School Boards said it was ridiculous to divert taxpayer money toward schools that perform no better than public schools.

Spending all that money on private schools "without any evidence of improvement is harming all the public schools in Wisconsin," said Joe Quick, a spokesman for the association.

Wednesday's report follows a similar but unrelated study by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction that came out in March.

That DPI study found that students at Milwaukee's public schools outperformed voucher students. However, that study looked at data from a single year, while the research reviewed by the audit bureau is part of a five-year study. The DPI study also looked at the 2010-11 school year, while the researchers evaluated scores up to the previous year.

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## Connecticut Governor Malloy seeks major steps on teacher evaluations

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 17, 2011

<http://www.wtnh.com/dpp/news/politics/malloy-seeks-major-steps-on-teacher-evaluations->

EAST HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) - Gov. Dannel P. Malloy said Wednesday that he hopes the 2012 legislative session brings "major steps" toward better evaluation methods for Connecticut's public school teachers, including fair but firm ways to replace them if necessary.

Malloy told a gathering of school superintendents, school board members and other education officials that he wants evaluations to make teachers' effectiveness the overriding factor, regardless of their seniority.

Lawmakers discussed the evaluation issue at length in last spring's General Assembly session but failed to adopt a proposal that would have set a statewide system for districts to emulate.

A committee of education officials, union representatives and other members is working on a draft model that districts could adopt voluntarily, but it hasn't yet completed its work.

Malloy said Wednesday that improving teacher evaluations would be part of a bigger plan to provide schools with the tools to produce the next generation of Connecticut's workforce, which will set the state's direction on job growth for decades to come.

"We should work with all teachers to make sure they live up to our standards, and if, after a period of time, they're incapable of living up to our standards, then (other) teachers deserve a new colleague in their building," Malloy said. "This is the test: Is every teacher in every building proud of every one of their colleagues? And if they're not, we have to figure out a way to address that."

Each Connecticut district sets its own evaluation process through labor negotiations with employee unions, but many education officials and legislators want a statewide model that sets certain baseline standards and can be tweaked in other areas to fit districts' unique needs.

Some districts already include several measures of students' progress, chronic teacher absenteeism and other factors as part of teachers' evaluations and do not rely solely on seniority when deciding on layoffs.

Others have strict "last in, first out" provisions during layoffs with no consideration of the teachers' evaluations.

Teachers' union representatives have said they favor better evaluation procedures, too, but want to ensure the methods are fair and that struggling teachers are given time and opportunities to improve.

They also worry whether teachers might be judged on factors over which they have limited control and whether enough professional development and mentoring would be provided to help teachers keep pace with districts' expectations.

Advocates say better evaluation systems would help schools keep strong teachers, especially if they are vulnerable to layoffs because they lack seniority. They say it also helps districts retrain poorly performing teachers or, if necessary, dismiss them.

If it comes to that, though, policies should also be set "to allow people to leave the district with dignity," said Mary Loftus Levine, the incoming executive director of the 41,000-member Connecticut Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union.

The issue of overhauling teacher evaluation procedures has been thorny in Connecticut and many states, particularly when some groups or supporters suggest including students' test score trends as a factor in judging their teachers' quality.

"We don't believe a teacher's evaluation should be based solely on a test score that a child takes one day in a few hours and have someone's whole career ride on that score," Levine said.

The American Federation of Teachers, a union with more than 28,000 members in Connecticut, has also been heavily involved in work with lawmakers and state education officials to update evaluation systems.

Malloy said he hopes educators and lawmakers will work with teachers' organizations, superintendents, school boards, parents and other groups to kick-start the overhaul of evaluation procedures in the next legislative session, which starts in February 2012.

"I think that we can take major steps in that direction this legislative session. I think we have to," he said.

On a related note, Malloy also told superintendents and others at Wednesday's gathering that he hopes to name Connecticut's next education commissioner in the next few weeks.

That person will succeed acting Commissioner George Coleman, who stepped into the role when Commissioner Mark McQuillan resigned in January. Coleman didn't apply for the permanent job and has said he plans to retire when his successor is named.

Malloy also said he will be pushing the state Department of Education in coming years to become "more of a leader, less of a bureaucrat; more of a convener, less of someone that's looking over everyone's shoulder."

He added that he will continue his push for more pre-kindergarten services statewide and to encourage city councils, boards of aldermen and local governing agencies to provide enough money to their school districts so they can do their jobs well.

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## **'Growth model' of student achievement in place at valley schools**

Las Vegas Sun

By: Paul Takahashi

August 17, 2011

<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2011/aug/17/growth-model-student-achievement-place-valley-scho/>

The Clark County School District began following a new model this week to measure student achievement. The growth model will complement other measures of student achievement, such as the federal No Child Left Behind mandate for annual testing, said Pedro Martinez, deputy superintendent of instruction.

Nevada is one of 18 states to [follow the growth model](#), which measures a student's academic performance over a period of time rather than by an annual test score. It also tracks school-by-school information.

Parents might find the growth model similar to the medical charts they received for their children when they were infants, Martinez said.

Like a doctor would chart an infant's weight and height to see if a baby is growing at the same rate as peers, the growth model will do the same for schoolchildren with their academics.

Starting this week, parents can log onto [the district's website](#) at to see how individual schools are faring in terms of academic growth. The initial data will reflect the 2010-11 test scores in reading and math for students in fourth through eighth grades. In October, the district will securely release individual student growth data to parents and guardians online through [ParentLink](#) and in teacher-parent conferences.

The district plans to roll out growth model reports for students in all grades in the coming months.

The district website will offer video tutorials on the model and how to read a student's report. Parents may also find online frequently asked questions.

Clark County Schools Superintendent Dwight Jones implemented a similar growth model when he was the commissioner of

education in Colorado. His special assistant Ken Turner — also from Colorado — explained the model to School Board members this month.

The growth model “answers the question, ‘How much progress on statewide assessments did a student or group of students make in one year, as compared to academic peers across the state?’ ” Turner said in a statement. “Examining student academic growth will help districts and schools plan learning experiences to help students achieve higher levels of academic performance.”

One frustration with No Child Left Behind is that the 2001 law deems schools and students passing or failing without regard to how much improvement students made over a year, he said. As a result, [Nevada plans to apply for a waiver](#) to opt out of its stringent all-or-nothing standards.

District officials argue the new growth model is a better measure of student achievement than No Child Left Behind because it takes into account a student’s academic growth regardless of whether they are deemed proficient. Teachers whose students show immense growth — even if the students are technically not proficient — will no longer be penalized.

“The results in the growth model mark an important and different way of viewing student achievement,” Jones said in a statement. “While proficiency continues to remain important for our students, we need to know whether each student [is] on pace to exit high school with the knowledge and skills necessary to enter the workforce or continue their education, whether trade school or college.”

Parents with questions about the new growth model may call a dedicated hotline at 765-9870 or email [growthmodel@interact.ccsd.net](mailto:growthmodel@interact.ccsd.net). All inquiries will be answered within one business day, officials said.

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