

RESEARCH BRIEF

Department of Research Services

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Myth or Reality:

Teachers Express Their Opinions Toward High-Stakes Testing

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The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) has been administered to all Florida public schools for the past few years. The results are used as a basis for the State's school accountability program and the education reform process for school improvement known as the "A-Plus Plan." It is through this program that schools are assigned the letter grades with which the citizens of Florida have, by now, become quite familiar. This test is gradually escalating in importance for school staff, students, and the community at large as broader demands and greater consequences become associated with it. Graduation requirements, teacher paychecks, principal job security, and school attendance options will be increasingly connected with student test performance.

To address some of the concerns expressed by educators, students, and citizens about the FCAT, the Florida Department of Education has released a publication available on their website (<http://www.firn.edu/doel/>) entitled "*FCAT Myths vs. Facts.*" This paper addresses such issues as teaching to the test, bias against minorities, encroachment upon instructional time, and beneficial use of state funds. While the potential negative consequences of these issues are artfully downplayed in this paper, very little evidence is provided to substantiate the given opinions. As the stakes are raised in statewide testing programs, it becomes more important to get opinions on the real state of affairs from those in the trenches – the teachers themselves.

Late in the 2000-2001 school year, the Department of Research Services of M-DCPS sent a survey to a sample of teachers asking their opinions about the FCAT in specific and high-stakes testing in general. While the responsibility for the items remains solely with the Research Services department, suggestions for the survey were solicited from the Office of Educational Planning and Quality Enhancement, the Division of School Quality Improvement, the Division of Student Assessment and Educational Testing, the Division of Schools of Choice, and the United Teachers of Dade. A random sample of 1457 teachers was selected from all grade levels at all regular schools in the district. The teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with approximately 30 statements concerning the FCAT, the A+ Plan, and high-stakes testing. The results of the survey are as follows.

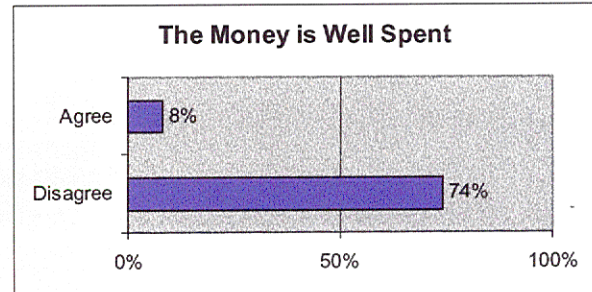
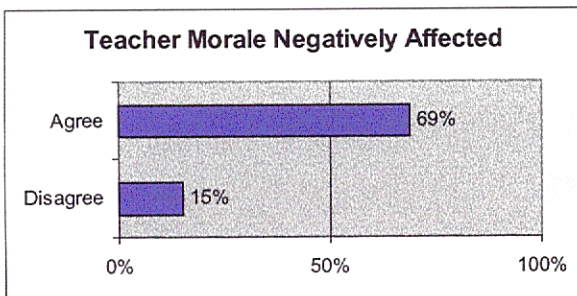
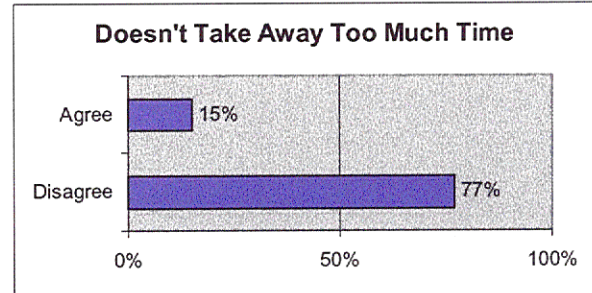
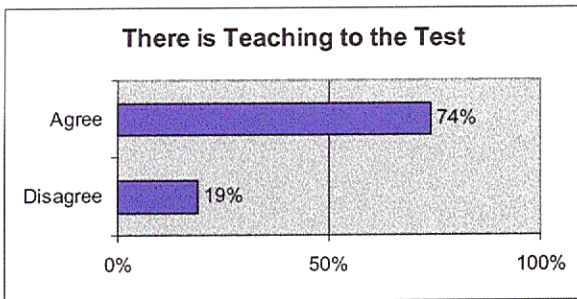
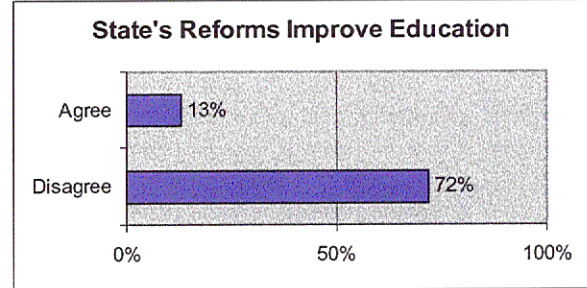
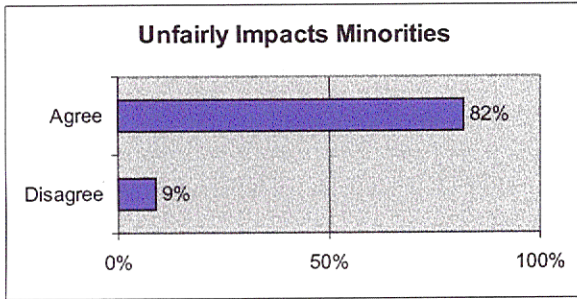
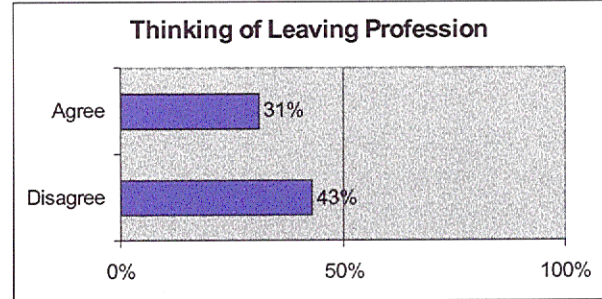
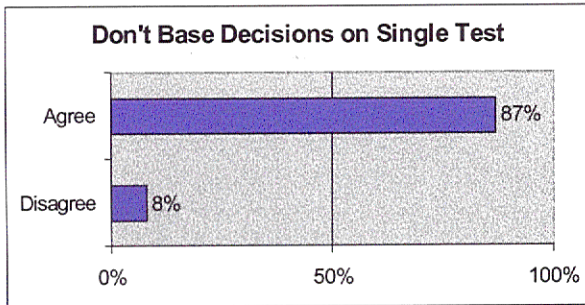
- How many years have you taught in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools?

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|------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| 10% | less than one year | 22% | 6 - 10 years | 13% | 16 - 20 years |
| 22% | 1 - 5 years | 11% | 11 - 15 years | 22% | more than 20 years |
- Which one of the following best describes the academic area you teach most frequently?

| | | | | | |
|------------|----------------|------------|--------------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| 10% | Mathematics | 18% | Language Arts | 9% | Science |
| 7% | Social Studies | 4% | Physical Education | 21% | Self-contained Elementary |
| 4% | Art or Music | 4% | Vocational | 11% | Exceptional Student Education |
| 6% | Bilingual/ESOL | | | 7% | Other |
- Which one of the following categories best describes the grade level of the students in your class(es).

| | | | |
|------------|--------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 34% | Pre-K, Kindergarten, or Grades 1 - 3 | 25% | Elementary (Grades 4 - 6) |
| 19% | Middle School (Grades 6 - 8) | 21% | Senior High (Grades 9 - 12) |
| | | 2% | Other |

Selected Items: Strongly Expressed Opinions



Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 since "not applicable" and "undecided" responses are not shown for purposes of clarity.

| <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Undecided</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> | <i>Items (in order of agreement)</i> |
|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 49% | 38% | 4% | 4% | 4% | 1% | 8. Important decisions, such as graduation or promotion, should NOT be based on the results of a single test. |
| 54% | 28% | 9% | 6% | 3% | 0% | 19. The Governor's A+ Plan unfairly impacts schools that have large numbers of minority students. |
| 32% | 43% | 10% | 11% | 3% | 1% | 21. Classroom grades and/or teacher judgement rather than test scores should determine whether students are promoted to the next higher grade. |
| 40% | 34% | 8% | 13% | 6% | 1% | 16. Teachers must "teach to the test" instead of providing normal instruction for students in my school to perform well on the FCAT. |
| 28% | 45% | 6% | 13% | 7% | 1% | 14. Students will be well-prepared for FCAT if teachers provide quality instruction in the subject matter they ordinarily teach. |
| 32% | 37% | 15% | 12% | 3% | 1% | 12. The morale of teachers at my school has been negatively affected by the Governor's A+ Plan. |
| 28% | 36% | 16% | 14% | 4% | 1% | 20. Classroom grades and/or teacher judgement rather than test scores should determine whether students earn a high school diploma. |
| 32% | 30% | 10% | 21% | 6% | 1% | 5. My school is preoccupied with achievement test scores to the extent that students fail to receive a well-rounded education. |
| 21% | 39% | 11% | 18% | 6% | 4% | 28. The fear and/or threat of receiving an "F" grade has led to the implementation of extensive reforms in curriculum and instruction at my school. |
| 25% | 33% | 15% | 21% | 5% | 1% | 15. FCAT leads teachers to teach in ways that go against their own ideals of good educational practice. |
| 19% | 37% | 22% | 17% | 3% | 1% | 27. State-mandated tests such as FCAT have led to "skills-based instruction" that in essence "dumbs-down" the curriculum. |
| 22% | 34% | 9% | 21% | 11% | 3% | 26. I am frustrated in my ability to implement high quality teaching in the current educational climate. |
| 18% | 31% | 15% | 23% | 7% | 7% | 25. I feel that my job security would be threatened if my students' test scores failed to reach a particular level. |
| 8% | 31% | 9% | 28% | 18% | 5% | 4. As a result of the Governor's A+ Plan, I have raised the educational standards in my classes (i.e., students must successfully complete more criteria and/or more difficult criteria to achieve the same class grade). |
| 8% | 31% | 12% | 35% | 14% | 0% | 9. "Raising the bar" or requiring higher standards motivates all students to achieve more. |
| 9% | 23% | 18% | 28% | 9% | 13% | 13. Evaluation of my performance has been directly or indirectly influenced by my student's FCAT performance. |
| 16% | 15% | 22% | 28% | 15% | 3% | 10. I am thinking about leaving the teaching profession as a direct result of what is being done to Florida schools in the name of "accountability" and "tougher standards." |
| 3% | 27% | 29% | 23% | 17% | 1% | 22. FCAT appears to be a valid test (i.e., measures degree to which students have learned the required reading, writing, and mathematics content). |
| 2% | 22% | 20% | 34% | 22% | 1% | 11. The Governor's A+ Plan helps students achieve objectives of the curriculum. |
| 5% | 17% | 35% | 22% | 13% | 9% | 29. Implementation of the "A-Plus Plan" is responsible for ending the practice of social promotion at my school. |
| 4% | 15% | 17% | 32% | 26% | 6% | 6. As a result of the annual FCAT administration, students in my class(es) are more motivated to perform well in school. |
| 2% | 16% | 33% | 24% | 24% | 1% | 18. FCAT appears to be a reliable test (i.e., yields consistent student scores). |
| 3% | 12% | 20% | 30% | 33% | 2% | 7. My students are receiving a better education as a result of the Governor's A+ Plan. |
| 2% | 13% | 8% | 34% | 43% | 1% | 17. The FCAT administration DOES NOT take too much time away from instruction. |
| 2% | 11% | 25% | 28% | 34% | 0% | 24. The state's present "test-driven" reform movement has and will continue to improve education in Florida. |
| 2% | 6% | 19% | 31% | 43% | 0% | 23. The \$26 million spent per year by the State of Florida on development, administration, and scoring of the FCAT is money well spent. |

30. The following areas have either **DIMINISHED OR DECREASED IN PRIORITY** since Florida implemented the Governor's A+ Plan.

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 73% Teacher morale | 29% Instruction in science including both physical and/or social science |
| 61% Class activities to promote social learning/social development | 24% Instruction in higher-level thinking skills |
| 42% Discussions about current events | 21% Electives for high school students |
| 37% Instruction in art and music | |

31. The following areas have either **IMPROVED OR INCREASED IN PRIORITY** since Florida implemented the Governor's A+ Plan.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 54% Student writing skills | 7% Student self-esteem |
| 51% Student reading skills | 7% Student dropout rate |
| 45% Student mathematics skills | 6% Student conduct |
| 14% Student motivation to perform well in school | 5% Student interest in school |

Only 693, or 47.6%, of the surveys were returned. The margin of error for this sample size is approximately three percentage points. The reader should exercise caution in interpreting the percentages presented here in light of this less than ideal return rate. If all of the teachers from whom we did not hear felt exactly opposite of the teachers who returned the survey, the results would look quite different. But, of course, this extreme bias in non-respondents is highly unlikely. There is no evidence to suggest distortion in the results reported here, nor is there any evidence that the teachers in the population feel contrary to the opinions expressed. In the absence of such evidence, these results represent our "best guess" as to the true attitudes of the teachers as a whole.

Some items were responded to in a way that may imply support for the test-driven reform movement. For example, in the last item approximately half of the teachers indicated that the students had improved in reading, writing, and mathematics skills since the start of the A+ Plan. However, the overall sense of the attitudes expressed by the teachers is one of overwhelming rejection of the promises of high-stakes testing and the practical realities of grading schools.

In some items in which the percentage of disagreement is greater, the percentage of agreement is still large enough to represent substantial numbers. For instance, only 32% of the teachers said they were thinking about leaving the profession as a direct result of the current reform movement. However, if the teachers acted on their feelings, it would constitute a loss of over 6,000 teachers in Miami-Dade County alone. Considering the current shortage of teachers in critical areas, even a modest exodus would be devastating.

Of course, this exploratory research is not the last word on teacher attitudes toward high-stakes testing. If the only result of this survey were to encourage further research investigating teacher opinions, it would have served a useful purpose. In an occupation like teaching, which is traditionally considered to be largely motivated by idealism, it would be prudent to ensure to the highest degree possible that the ideals of our teachers are not corrupted by testing pressures. Before we continue with any educational reform movement, it may be sensible to find out the consequences on the school climate from those who should know – the teachers.