FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MANDATED STANDARDIZED TEST

Alternatives to Enable Students to Earn a High School Diploma

AN ACTION REPORT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE OF THE COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

REUBIN O’D. ASKEW SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY

BY

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TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA
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William J. Montford, III
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Dear Mr. Montford III:

I am submitting to you “Unintended Consequence of Mandatory Standardized Testing: Alternatives to Enable Students to Earn a High School Diploma”. This report was derived from research on effects of Florida’s FCAT and its role on students seeking a standard diploma. Some students who possess the knowledge and skill of a high school graduate are being denied a standard diploma due to a poor FCAT performance.

Four evaluation criteria were used in order to present the best policy alternative: School level, District level, Federal funding, and Political feasibility. Two policy alternatives were considered – an alternative path to obtaining a standard diploma & revert to the previous policy of not requiring the passing of FCAT to obtain a standard diploma. The recommendation for your agency would be for an alternative path diploma. That option would provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate they possess the knowledge expected of a high school graduate even though they failed the FCAT. A panel would evaluate each student’s grades and credits earned and determine if the student deserves a standard diploma.

The alternative path diploma allows a student who has failed the FCAT, but possesses the knowledge of a high school graduate, to obtain a standard diploma. By implementing this option legislators, district leaders, principals, and teachers will be able to award standard diplomas to students who have earned it.

The recommendation could remedy the errors of the current policy, which denies a standard diploma to student, who have the knowledge.

Respectfully,

Monte T. King

MPA and MSW Graduate Student
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROBLEM: Current policy denies standard diplomas to student who possess the knowledge expected of a high school graduate

In Florida, students who possess the knowledge of a high school graduate have not been permitted to receive a standard diploma due to their poor FCAT performance. The current educational policy, granting a standard diploma only if a student successfully completes the FCAT is flawed, because it uses only one criterion to evaluate a student’s knowledge. That policy reduces deserving students’ life options when they are denied a standard diploma. In addition, state employers are missing a viable pool of qualified individuals who possess the knowledge of a high school graduate.

METHODS

Information for this report was compiled using federal, state, and local government websites; library databases; seven personal interviews (five in Leon and two in Duval District); and educational policy organization websites.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES REVIEWED

The two alternatives identified for this report are as follows:

1. **Alternative path standard diploma** would allow a panel to review the portfolios of students who do not successfully pass the FCAT and determine if they possess the knowledge of a high school student.

2. **Revert to the previous policy** would end the requirement that a particular score be obtained on the FCAT and grant a standard diploma based on the grades and credits earned.

Each alternative was evaluated against four criteria: school level support, district level support, federal funding, and political feasibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Alternative Path Diploma would award only deserving students who possess the knowledge of a high school student with a standard diploma. This policy option would require students to take the FCAT, but also provide a panel to ensure that alternative path students possesses the knowledge of a high school graduate. Schools would be allowed to use their professional judgment to correct the errors produced by the current policy. District officials would gain the ability to use another criterion to evaluate their student and teachers. Federal funding would not be threatened. Current laws would have to be changed to implement this policy option.
I) PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Florida, principals are responsible for the learning achievement of students in their schools as measured by a standardized test. The policy of holding principals responsible for standardized test performance is mandated by the “No Child Left Behind” law (NCLB) (Bohte & Meier, 2000). NCLB forces principals to focus on one performance measure for students -- a standardized test. Principals are rewarded or punished based on their students’ performance on a standardized test. This new policy may increase educational accountability for low performing students, but it did not account for the creation of a new test population. Increasing numbers of students who do not perform well are being placed into the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) population. The increase in that population is an unintended consequence of NCLB.

The purpose of the ESE program in Florida is to support public school students who require special physical, emotional, or educational needs (Florida Government Accountability Report, 2003). Florida’s ESE services range from the gifted (extremely bright) students, to the emotionally and mentally handicapped (mentally and physical challenged) students. Between 1999-2003, the ESE program population grew by 58,245 students. It is probable that some of the growth of the population of ESE students is related to the incentive structure of NCLB (Florida Department of Education, 2002).

NCLB legislation impacts public education by requiring all public education students to pass a standardized testing instrument. The Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) is the state’s standardized testing instrument. If a state performs highly their level of federal funding does not increase. If the state performs
below NCLB’s standards, the state could lose federal funding. States that lose funds would be forced to pass those loses down to the district level. A district that loses state funding would be forced to pass those loses to the individual schools.

Under Florida law schools that perform well will receive additional funding. If a school in the district performs poorly, the school could lose funding. This describes how federal and state law is working together to direct the policy at the district level.

Individual schools within the district are rewarded for a high performance and penalized for a low performance. Performance on the FCAT has become the single most important indicator for evaluating a principal. A repeated low FCAT performance will result in their termination. A principal’s need to avoid a poor FCAT performance may persuade them to covertly alter not the instrument, but the population of students tested (Bohte & Meier, 2000).

Principals can avoid being held accountable for the FCAT performance of certain students. Each school in a district receives a FCAT grade based on their students test performance. The test scores of several types of ESE students are omitted from the school’s FCAT grade. Schools are encouraged to classify more of their students as ESE to avoid being held accountable for their FCAT scores. In addition, there has been a legitimate growth in the number of students needing ESE services, which are not related to the problem of school incentives. Society has become more aware and accepting of learning disabilities. Science has also identified increased age of parents and chemicals in the environment as possible causes for learning disabilities. The growth in the number of ESE students started prior to the passage of NCLB and Florida law. But, the incentives encourage additional growth in the ESE students’ population. Once result of
the growth is a shortage of certified special education teachers.

Under state law a diploma can be withheld from low FCAT performing students. Students who cannot successfully navigate the FCAT are not given an alternative. With holding high school diplomas limits a student’s ability to become a productive citizen. Employers look for a high school diploma and they will not hire persons without it. Testing policy encourages schools to classify students as ESE, which makes it harder for them to graduate from high school. Policies need to be developed to encourage those students to become productive citizens.

The problem is that NCLB and Florida law forces schools to use a test to measure a student’s performance. These laws are encouraging schools to place more students into ESE programs than they should. The laws are also impairing the futures of students by withholding high school diplomas. The purpose of this Action Report is to examine alternative solutions to enable ESE students to earn a high school diploma.
II) Background and Literature Review

This paper examines: (1) the impact of national and Florida law, (2) the growth in the ESE population and the related teacher shortage, and (3) the denial of diplomas to student that score below FCAT standards.

(1) The impact of National and Florida Law

Nine years before NCLB was adopted, standardized testing was already a requirement for promotion out of grades 4, 8, and 10 in Florida. The federal law (NCLB) now reinforces the preexisting Florida law. Both influence how school districts operate. Although federal and state laws now work in tandem, there is a difference. Federal law only cuts funding from state educational systems that do not score within NCLB’s standards. Florida passes the loss of any federal funds on to its districts. Those cuts filter down to the individual schools that have a poor FCAT grade.

What Florida does, that the federal government does not, is reward or penalize individual schools for achieving or fail to achieve NCLB’s standards. The NCLB’s standards measure a school’s teachers, administration, and its use of limited resources, which reflects directly on the principal (ERSNAES & NASSP, 2003). Success on the FCAT by a student body enables continued operation of a school without any threat to the faculty or to its federal funding (ERSNAES & NASSP, 2003). Low-test scores will result in reduced funding, negative opinions by the public, and/or the elimination of the school and its staff (ERSNAES & NASSP, 2003; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1992; Bohte & Meier, 2000; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2003).

Under the new laws that have linked a school’s funding with its FCAT grade,
individual school principals may feel more pressured to produce good school-wide FCAT grades. Florida law states that all ESE students are tested. The scores of most ESE students, however, are not included in the school’s overall FCAT score. There are only two categories of ESE students whose FCAT scores are included in the school’s overall FCAT grade, those who are speech impaired and gifted. Placing students who do not perform well in ESE programs protects a school’s funding by increasing the school’s FCAT score.

Florida’s policy holds the school’s principal responsible for its FCAT score (Brownell, Langley, Seo, & Sindelar, 2002; U. S. Department of Education, 2002; ERSNAESP & NASSP, 2003). State policy, therefore, encourages principals to isolate their students that will be successful testers from those that have a difficult time passing the FCAT. They are encouraged to do this in order to protect themselves from the negative consequences of poor test performance (Bohte & Meier, 2000).

(2) The growth in the ESE population and the related teacher shortage

In 2002-2003, Leon County school district operated 60 schools with ESE programs in each (Leon County Public School District 27, 2002). Between 1998/99 and 2002/03 the program’s population increased by 13.21 percent, whereas non-ESE students only increased by 8.7 percent (Florida Department of Education, 2003). The population’s explosion can be attributed to federal and state law, but it is also a product of society.

The ESE program includes several categories for students. The numbers of students in some of these categories have grown in recent years. For example, in Florida between 1998 and 1999, the Miami Herald has shown a record 573 percent increase in the
ESE disorder autism. The cause of the increase in diagnoses of autism has several different possibilities that include laws, toxic exposure, and biological chemical imbalances. With the development of new research by medical professionals, the number of diagnosed disorders has grown. The number of learning and psychological disorders and the knowledge about them that is included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) has increased substantially. Society has become more alert to mental, emotional, and physical disorders. The stigma that was previously associated with them is being replaced with acceptance.

A serious consequence of the growth of the ESE population is a shortage of certified ESE teachers. There has always been a certified ESE teacher shortage. For some time, Florida has been losing its population of certified teachers at an alarming rate (State Board of Education, 2002). Currently the ESE teacher shortage is double that of the regular classroom or vocational teachers (State Board of Educators, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1992; Anderson & Harry, 1994). The state is producing enough college graduates trained in ESE education to reduce the shortage, but the shortage has remained consistent from 1997 to the present (State Board of Education, 2002).

Florida’s ESE graduates appear not to be interested in pursuing a career in public education due to several reasons (Garnes, Menlove, & Salzderg, 2003). A low salary and increased teacher administrative duties are the primary reasons (State Board of Education, 2002; Garnes, Menlove, & Salzderg, 2003). The Department of Education also attributes the shortage to the challenging nature of the students’ emotional, behavioral, and physical requirements (State Board of Education, 2002). The training and experience that a certified special education teacher has is a valuable tool that schools could use to evaluate
student needs and should not be overlooked. The absence of certified teachers allows uncertified teachers and school administrators to decide the fate of their students.

According to a study by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2003), 84 percent of special education teachers believe, that a single test is not the proper tool to judge a student’s academic progress. Everything from the physical plant (school building) to the student’s year-to-year academic/behavioral improvements should be considered in the students’ evaluation process. A single instrument misleads the measurement of students, because students differ in the degree to which a single test can reveal their knowledge and ability. Each time a student fails the FCAT it lowers their self worth, which must be rebuilt by parents, teachers, and principals in order for that student to succeed (ERSNAES & NASSP, 2003; Neill, 1997).

(3) The denial of diplomas to students that score below FCAT standards

Following the adoption of the FCAT in 1998, Florida’s graduation rate subsequently decreased by 34 percent as of 2003 (State Board of Education, 2003). Florida’s policy withholds a student’s diploma for a low FCAT score even if that student has otherwise earned a high school diploma through their classroom performance.

Florida reports a graduation rate for 2002 of 51% for economically disadvantaged students, 50% for African-American students, and 57% for Hispanic students, compared to 65% for all students (State Board of Education, 2003). This graduation rate includes students who receive GED credentials (State Board of Education, 2003).

Florida has several different programs to discourage students from dropping out. None of the programs addresses the need for student who perform poorly on the FCAT to
earn a standard diploma (The Manhattan Institute, 2002). A national survey of juveniles in correctional facilities found 42 percent had a learning disability, which needed additional assistance in school (The Manhattan Institute, 2002). There is a strong statistical relationship between learning problems, success in school, and delinquency (The Manhattan Institute, 2002). A national survey shows disabled students are four times more likely to display delinquency than the general population’s rate of 10.76 percent (The Manhattan Institute, 2002).

Florida’s policy of denying high school standard diplomas has a dramatic effect on a student’s ability to transition into the role of a productive citizen. This discouragement can be seen when students have a difficult time successfully completing the FCAT. Those students could lose interest in the traditional method of receiving their high school diploma. They would drop out or seek a GED. Those students have a difficult time finding a job, because the majority of employers require a high school diploma or its equivalent (State Board of Education, 2003). A study of 1,046 juvenile offenders in Florida, revealed 70 percent were not in school. They had failed, were expelled, were suspended, or had dropped out of school (Florida Department of Corrections, n.d.; State Board of Education, 2003)

The life choices of individuals who do not have a standard high school diploma are limited. People without a standard high school diploma are likely to live in poverty (State Board of Education, 2003). More than 80 percent of Florida’s inmates are high school dropouts. Some 647,100 individuals in Florida’s correctional system were not allowed to express their political voice through voting in the most recent presidential election (Florida Department of Corrections, n.d.).
Female dropouts are more likely to be teenage mothers. These mothers have a difficult time providing for their families, because they typically have low paying jobs, and are unwed (State Board of Education, 2003). Teens are more likely to have disabled babies, because they are more likely to have low birth weight babies (State Board of Education, 2003). Students who dropout have an unemployment rate double that of high school graduates. A male dropout earns $260,000 less and contributes $78,000 less in taxes during his lifetime than a female who graduates (State Board of Education, 2003). Failing to obtain a high school diploma effectively sentences students to a life of hardship.

III) Methodology and Evaluation

Methodology

The following resources were used in collecting information for this report:

- A review of applicable county data files, laws, rules, and policies in connection with standardized testing and FLDOE’s ESE program;

- A review of academic literature in the databases ERIC, JSTOR, Psyc Info, Science Direct, and World Cat database that is related to goal displacement and mission drift between 1966-present; and

- Five anonymous were conducted unstructured 15-20 minute interviews performed with Leon County School administrators and classroom teachers.

The organization that is examined in this study is Florida’s Leon County School District. The district has operated an ESE program for 30+ years. The racial and ethnic makeup of the district’s student population is typical of the central and north Florida regions, but Leon County does have the highest per capita level of education in Florida. Leon County is subject to the state’s FCAT laws and its interpretation of federal laws. Leon County
provides several factors that are necessary to conduct this study. The county published a Data Book listing all quantitative data necessary for studying its ESE program (Leon County Public School District 27, 2002).

Five anonymous interviews were conducted in person. The interviewees included two ESE teachers, one high school principal, and two district level officials in Leon County. Requests for interviews were sent out to fifteen teachers, seven high school principals (five in Leon and two in Duval District), and five appointed district level officials. The principal that was interviewed was in Leon County. Interviews were conducted with every person who agreed to be interviewed. The reluctance of persons to be interviewed suggests the sensitivity of the topic.

The interviewees were promised anonymity to encourage candid responses. The interviewer believes that the responses were candid. The interviewees did not want their direct opinions published due to their fear of being identified, so they will be paraphrased. The interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s job. The question and answer sessions ranged from 15-20 minutes. All of the questions were open-ended.

Exhibit “A” is the type of table that will be used to illustrate individual criterion and cumulative policy option scores. A completed table will be presented in the conclusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative Path</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>District level</th>
<th>Federal funding</th>
<th>Political feasibility</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revert and studying previous policy</td>
<td>“Exhibit A”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The researcher will assign and calculate the values entered into the table. The scores will have a range from one to five. One will be the least favorable and five will be the most favorable. Each policy alternative can have a maximum score of twenty. The policy that receives the highest score would be considered the most viable policy alternative.

**Evaluation Criteria**

The evaluation criteria proposed are: Principal support, Federal funding feasibility, District leaders support, and Political feasibility. Each criterion will be evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being least favorable and five being the most favorable. The calculated scores for each criterion are based on the analyst’s assessment (Hatry, Blair, Fisk, and Kimmel, 1987; Patton & Sawicki, 1986; National Dissemination Center National Research Center, 2002).

1. School level support is the researcher’s opinion as to whether principals and certified teachers would support the policy options. The researcher’s opinion is based upon interviews with certified teachers and a principal.

2. Federal funding feasibility rates the cost associated with implementing the policy options. The data source will be interviews, academic literature, and Leon County Data Book.

3. District leaders support is the researcher’s opinion of the acceptability of the policy option to district superintendents and elected board members.

4. Political feasibility is the likelihood of state level elected officials supporting the policy option.

The selected criteria represent considerations made in the evaluation of the policy alternatives. Other criteria such as improvements in individual ESE student’s test scores were not evaluated due to a lack of information.
Other limitations exist in this study. A limited number of interviews were conducted, only three persons in two schools. The sensitivity of Florida’s standardized testing laws generated a reluctance to be interviewed.

District level support criterion is not the same as political feasibility. District level administrators do not create school policy, they are policy implementers. State policy is created and implemented by the legislators and the governor. District level administrators have the responsibility to advocate policy options to elected officials.
Section IV explains two alternatives to the current policy which effectively prevents students from obtaining a standard high school diploma. The alternatives are to:

(1) create an alternative path to a standard diploma for ESE and other students who cannot obtain passing FCAT scores and (2) revert to the policy of basing a student's high school diploma solely upon the credits and grades earned. Each alternative is evaluated by the four criteria detailed previously: school support, federal funding feasibility, district leaders support, and political feasibility.

(1) Create an alternative path to a standard high school diploma

Current state laws require students to earn a certain number of credits with acceptable grades. Neither the credits earned nor classroom performances are sufficient for students to receive a standard diploma under the current law. The current law requires students to pass the standardized FCAT test. The alternative path to a standard high school diploma will provide an option to Florida’s students who have a difficult time meeting the standardized test requirements. To receive the current standard diploma, students must perform well on the state’s standardized test. There is no evidence indicating that students who perform well on standardized tests are more likely to perform well in a work environment than those that do not perform well on standardized tests.

The alternative evaluation method will be similar to the IEP evaluation of an ESE student. A diverse committee will make an evaluation of the student’s alternative path standard diploma. The committee will be comprised of several members of the student’s
school faculty (teachers, principals, and guidance counselors) and school board representatives. The student’s parents or guardians will have the opportunity to review the committee’s decision. After repeated attempts to pass the FCAT, the student may request the alternative path standard diploma. The committee would then hear their case. The committee would evaluate several areas that demonstrate the student’s academic ability. The committee would evaluate each student’s portfolio which consists of work products, as well as, classroom performance, behavior, and grades. The committee would be required to reach a majority decision as to whether the student has grasped the educational base that the FCAT tests. Upon reaching a common conclusion about the student’s knowledge of the required curriculum, the committee would either grant or deny the student's request to receive an alternative standard diploma.

School level support:

School officials would have to accept the responsibility that will come from implementing the alternative path standard diploma. They are likely to accept responsibility for several reasons. Principals and teachers do not believe that a single indicator should be used to determine a student’s academic performance. School officials realize the importance of a standard diploma for their high school students. This policy option provides school officials the ability to exercise their professional judgment to determine whether a student has earned and will receive a standard diploma.

School officials would have to believe that the additional work required by this option would benefit them as well as their students. Additional records must be kept so a student’s portfolio review would demonstrate an overall skill level. Principals and
teachers are aware that not all students test equally (Bryant, Capa, & Loadman, 2002). Students have varied abilities; educational policy should be designed to measure all aspects of these abilities (Anon., 3/24/2004). The student’s portfolio would be an anthology of their high school experiences. A student’s portfolio would begin as soon as they start high school. From that point, the students’ academic achievement and behavior records would be maintained in their individual portfolios, which would chronicle the student’s achievement until their senior year.

Teachers are relatively close to their students. Their expertise would serve as a valuable tool to measure the skills of a student who has mastered the curriculum but is unable to obtain a standard diploma because of poor FCAT performance. The student portfolio would demonstrate skill development that may not be conveyed accurately by standardized tests. An alternative standard diploma would be awarded by the committee only to students that have successfully mastered the curriculum and earned the proper number of academic credits for graduation.

Two items would ensure that the alternative diploma is awarded properly. Committee members would be trained to ensure that they understand the standards to which a student must be held to receive an alternative standard diploma. Also, they would be trained on how to apply the methods to be used in the portfolio review process. The state’s DOE will once a year randomly audit the committee decisions. The purpose of the audit would be to ensure that the committees are not rubber stamping the applications for the alternative standard diploma.

Federal funding:
Federal law requires all states to administer a standardized test to receive federal funds (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2003). Therefore, all of Florida’s school districts must administer the FCAT. Federal law does not require that a student pass a states’ standardized test to receive a standard diploma. Federal law does not prohibit the use of the alternative path diploma.

Leon County Public School officials would not be concerned about the impact that an alternative path standard diploma would have on its receipt of federal funds (Anon., 3/16/2004). Through this option, Florida’s legislators can offer students an alternative while complying with the federal educational funding policy. The portion of Florida’s educational system that is supported by federal funds would be secure. DOE’s policy is not to lose federal funds (Florida Department of Education, 2003; Anon., 3/16/2004). DOE’s endorsement of the alternative path would not cause the department to lose those federal funds.

Currently Florida law obstructs the use of an alternative path standard diploma. In order for this policy option to take place current laws would have to be changed. The new standardized test law would continue administering tests to students, but offer students an alternative path to a standard diploma via a portfolio review.

District leaders support:

One district administrator interviewed saw this policy option as one that would provide a means for deserving students to receive a standard high school diploma. Current law offers district leaders only one criterion (standardized test performance) to measure their high school students. This policy option provides district leaders the same
advantage as their students, an alternative path to evaluating skills of their teachers, and administrators, as well as of their students.

By having the portfolios at hand, district leaders will be able to determine which skills are difficult for their students. Once district leaders identify the skills that their students are deficient in, they would be able to introduce remedies to boost students’ skills. In addition, through portfolio reviews, district leaders would be able to monitor not only students’ skill levels but also the curriculum used by schools.

Standardized tests tell district leaders not only the skill level of that student, but also how well that student’s school prepares them for the FCAT. In the committee portfolio reviews, district leaders could better identify skills that are being taught effectively at the school level. This policy option would promote more interaction between the school level and district level.

District leaders would likely support this policy option because it expands their ability to offer an alternative to standard diploma seeking students. The policy option would also give them additional information to evaluate the performance of their students and their schools.

Political feasibility:

This policy would allow politicians to continue on the standardized testing path designated by Florida’s gubernatorial branch. The alternative path standard diploma permits state and federal public officials to continue supporting the current standardized testing laws. Several political figures placed their reputations on the line to promote and enact state and federal standardized testing laws. The abandonment of current testing
laws within such a short time of their implementation could give the perception to constituents that lawmakers did not thoroughly study these policies. Politicians could lose future votes if the current policy reduces graduation rates and that causes an increase in crime rates. This alternative policy would present politicians the opportunity to sustain standardized testing and not appear indecisive to voters.

This alternative will provide an opportunity for state politicians to remove themselves from being accountable for the decision process, but ensures their constituents through DOE’s audit that the alternative standard diploma is awarded correctly. Politicians have a responsibility to citizens to produce an educated populace for the state (Anon., 3/16/2004). Alternative standard diplomas offer politicians the opportunity to appear unwavering to the promise of a productive educational system.

(2) Revert to the policy of basing a student’s diploma solely on credits and grades earned

Prior to the educational policy being changed to standardized testing the skill level of those students was assessed through course grades. Negative comments about the poor skills of Florida’s high school standard diploma graduates to state legislators from various companies in Florida prompted legislators to initiate the new standardized testing policy. With the proposed policy option number two, students would no longer be required to pass a standardized test to receive a standard diploma. A study would be conducted to determine if the skills students learned through regular curriculum are equivalent to those skills tested by the FCAT. Educational leaders and students will be able to gain a clearer understanding of which policy option works best, standardized testing or grades/credits earned.
This policy option would award a standard diploma to high school students who have earned the grades and credits required. Other states currently award high school standard diplomas based solely on grades and credits earned. Only Florida, Texas, and California require the passage of a standardized test to obtain a standard diploma.

Florida’s Department of Education would conduct a major study to compare the knowledge obtained by high school graduates who were required to take exams against those who were not. Random samples of graduates seeking a standard diploma from across the state would be selected. The first sample would be a group required to take the FCAT for graduation. Following the suspension of the FCAT requirement the subsequent graduating class would be sampled. Both studies would be subjected to a rigorous study performed by a panel of experts to determine if they have the knowledge and skills expected of a high school graduate. Once the information is gathered, the state would compare student skill levels between the present and proposed policy options.

This would be the state’s first study to compare the skill levels of students who have received a standard diploma through grades/credits earned versus those who also had to pass the FCAT for graduation. This research is necessary to ascertain the validity of the FCAT. Currently there is no research to ascertain that how often the FCAT denies a student a diploma who has the knowledge and skills of a high school graduate. This study would allow DOE to present a scientific evaluation to state legislators, educational leaders, and other interested parties.

Upon the implementation of this policy, a safe guard would have to be installed to deter social graduation. Florida could continue to use the FCAT to determine if an increasing number of students are performing poorly. A panel of educational professional
could be used to identify individual cases where students have earned the credits but lack the knowledge and skills that should be possessed by a high school graduate. Once social graduation is shown to be a problem, schools should be pressured into retaining those students until they obtain the knowledge and skills that are required by the sunshine state standards.

**School level support:**

Schools would have the opportunity to present the sunshine state curriculum that is geared towards a standard diploma, and students would be able to concentrate on the sunshine state curriculum rather than deviating from it towards a standardized test curriculum. A problem that teachers have is the conflict that exists between the sunshine law and standardized testing law. By law, teachers are compelled to cover the sunshine state curriculum. However, they are evaluated by how well their students perform on the FCAT. It focuses mostly on math and reading and ignores other sunshine state standards.

Standardized testing presents a dilemma to teachers because it only tests two subject matters. By using a standardized test that only involves reading and math to evaluate students, teachers are strongly encouraged to concentrate mostly on those tested subjects. The removal of the FCAT requirement for graduation would allow teachers to teach the full sunshine state curriculum. Therefore, through this policy option teachers would have the ability to offer a balanced curriculum to their students.

School level accountability would be continued through the use of standardized testing. But the process of awarding a standard diploma would not be influenced by a students standardized test performance. Instead, students will be evaluated based on
grades and credits earned. There would not be any additional costs with this policy option.

**Federal funding:**

Federal funding would not be affected by this policy option. This alternative suggests that standardized tests be administered to evaluate school performance, but not be used to deny high school diplomas to individual students.

This policy option does follow current political ideology nationally. Schools and teachers are evaluated according to students’ performance on standardized tests. This policy would group Florida with the 47 other states that do not use standardized testing as the gatekeeper of standard diplomas. Federal funding does not have any stipulations preventing the use of student grades and credits alone to award a standard diploma.

Florida law would have to be revised to allow districts to administer this policy option, because Florida law currently requires districts to use standardized testing as a requirement for graduation.

**District leaders support:**

This policy option does not remove District leaders from being held accountable for school performance as measured by FCAT. This policy option would provide District leaders the opportunity to exercise their judgment. District leaders would be able to create the panels that would oversee student performance. Through this policy option an alternative will be presented to District leaders who are confronted by parents of students who are seeking a standard diploma, but denied because of FCAT. District leader who
are able to assistance those parents would most likely receive their votes.

**Political feasibility:**

This policy option is the prevailing policy in 47 states. Florida has been using standardized testing of high school students for at least half a century. Governor Bush’s administration was the first to require the passing of a standardized test as a requirement to graduate from high school.

This policy option strongly suggests that current policy is not measuring up and needs to be re-evaluated. Proponents of this new policy would be district leaders, school principals, and teachers who would gain a greater authority to exercise their judgment. They would have the challenge of convincing political representatives that the current policy needs to be revamped. On the other hand, some politicians feel the need to continue pushing standardized testing as the only means to a successful education system in Florida, despite empirical evidence as to how often the FCAT is used to erroneously deny student a diploma.

The approval of this new policy option might have to await a new governor. Some politicians fought hard for the current policy. Florida’s maximum of eight years term limits has removed most of the legislators who enacted the current policy. Newly elected legislators may not be as committed to the current policy. The study described above could give them the information that would prompt them to reconsider the current policy.
V. Conclusion

The report has presented two policy option alternatives that enable students who possess the knowledge and skill of a high school graduate with a standard diploma. Both of the policies were evaluated under four criteria school level, district level, federal funding, and political feasibility. The results are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>District level</th>
<th>Federal funding</th>
<th>Political feasibility</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Path</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revert and studying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>previous policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Scale: 1 to 5 rating with 1 being the least favorable and 5 being the most favorable

The Alternative Path to a standard diploma was assigned a score for each criterion. School level support was awarded a score of four because those school level officials would be allowed to exercise professional judgment to correct the errors of the current policy. District level support was awarded a score of four also because of a greater level of flexibility. Federal funding was scored a four because the alternative does not threaten DOE’s ability to receive federal funds. Political feasibility received the poorest score, a two, because leaders would have to admit that the current policy is flawed.

Reverting to the previous policy and studying its effects scored lower. School level support was scored in the mid-range with a three. This policy option allows schools to present a more balanced curriculum. District leaders support received the highest score, a four. Districts could allow students who demonstrate the requisite knowledge to
obtain a standard diploma. Federal funding was scored a three, because federal funding would not be affected. Political feasibility was scored a one, because this alternative is an admission to the rest of the country that the current policy was fundamentally flawed.

These two policy options would be good alternatives to the current policy that restricts a deserving student from obtaining a standard diploma due to an unsuccessful FCAT performance. The Department of Education should keep in mind the evaluation criteria are specifically tailored for Florida.

Policy option number one offers an alternative path to students seeking a standard diploma. The criteria related to school level and district level support and funding feasibility faired well with each having a score of four. The remaining criterion, political feasibility, scored not so well with a grade of two. The total score for this policy option was 14 out of 20.

Policy option number two, reversion to the previous policy, emphasizes a study of knowledge and skills of students’ who are required to pass the FCAT and those who are not required to pass the FCAT. District level support scored a four the highest, while school level and federal funding scored a three, and political feasibility scored a one. The total score for this policy option was 11 out of 20.

According to the numbers the alternative path scores the highest. The alternative path would serve the purposes of not only the schools but also the districts, by instituting an alternative method to evaluate a student’s skills and knowledge. This policy option would enable deserving students to receive a standard diploma. The committee review could identify and assist those students who possess the knowledge and skills of a high school graduate, but unable to pass the FCAT. It is my recommendation that this policy
option be implemented because of its ability to enable students to earn a standard high school diploma.
About the Author

Monte Tearle King (BSW, Florida State University, and a MPA, MSW, Florida State University) has served an internship with the American Red Cross of Tallahassee, FL. Mr. King is interested in public education policy and emergency management policy. He is currently a full-time student at Florida State University.
Reference:


National Dissemination Center National Research Center. (2002). Exemplary Career-


