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Florida's lesson: School choice builds success

BY Vicki E. Murray, Matthew Ladner

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Assemblyman Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, and retired administrator Larry Aceves want to be California's superintendent of public instruction. Voters should ask the candidates why Florida, though demographically similar to California, continues to trounce the Golden State in student achievement.

Two years ago, significant numbers of Florida's low-income and minority fourth-graders outscored all California fourth-graders in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. The latest results confirm that Florida's success is no fluke.

Low-income and minority students continue to propel Florida's gains while California student performance lags near the bottom. The latest fourth-grade NAEP reading results reveal how California's failure to reform its public schools is putting students at an alarming disadvantage.

Florida began a comprehensive public-education reform effort in 1999 that combined accountability, transparency and parental choice with far-reaching reforms such as alternative teacher certification and financial incentives for school success. Florida pursued those reforms from the top down through state testing and from the bottom up through parental choice.

Florida's approach emphasized standards for schools, transparency for parents and immediate options for students most at risk. The reforms included children trapped in chronically failing schools, from low-income families, from the foster-care system and children with disabilities. In 1998, the year before the Florida reforms began, four NAEP scale-score points separated California and Florida, 202 and 206, respectively. Florida ranked 34th out of 40 states participating in the NAEP reading assessment, and California ranked 37th. After a decade of comprehensive reform, Florida fourth-graders rank among the country's highest performers. The reading performance of California fourth-graders remains stuck near the bottom.

From 1998 to 2009, Florida fourth-graders achieved gains equivalent to two full grade levels in reading ability, 20 NAEP scale-score points. In contrast, California fourth-graders gained eight points, not quite one full grade level. Despite this gain, California tied with one other state for the country's fourth-worst fourth-grade NAEP reading score.

With a 13-point advantage, Florida's Hispanic fourth graders are the equivalent of nearly one-and-a-half grade levels ahead of all California fourth-graders in reading, and they outperform all fourth-graders in 26 other states.

Florida continues to expand its stunning success with bipartisan support. California lags behind because the state has refused to adopt large-scale and commonsense reforms that would allow students to attend schools their parents - not bureaucrats or special interest groups - think are best.

With similar reforms, the Golden State could be a leader in student achievement instead of a cellar dweller. As election day draws near, California voters should be posing tough questions to candidates Torlakson and Aceves - and to every California legislator.

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