

# Florida schools climb to 5th in national ranking

by Leslie Postal | STAFF WRITER

Florida, once criticized for its “lackadaisical” attitude toward education, ranks fifth in a new national report on education quality released today.

The annual “Quality Counts” report grades the 50 states and the District of Columbia on their education policies and performance.

The nation earned a C. Top-performing Maryland got a B-plus. Florida earned a B-minus.

“I am very, very pleased with the results,” said Education Commissioner Eric Smith. “I think it does speak volumes about the kind of work that’s going on

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Nation’s top 5 and worst 5 performers. **A8**

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in our schools.”

Florida earned its fifth-in-the-nation showing propelled by strong academic standards and school-accountability rules and by big improvements — on national tests and in high-school-graduation rates — that its students posted this decade, according to the annual report published by Education Week.

Florida was among top-tier states when it came to fourth- and eighth-graders’ gains on the National Assessment of Education Progress tests, for example, while high-schoolers’ improved their scores on Advanced Placement exams.

The state also earned top marks for closing the gap between the performance of students from poor and more affluent families.

The four states ahead of Florida on the overall rankings were Maryland, New York, Massachusetts and Virginia.

### Contrast to '90s

“If we think back to where Florida was in the early 1990s, it’s made tremendous improvements,” said Christopher Swanson, vice president of Educational Projects in Education, the nonprofit organization that publishes Education Week.

The grading criteria has changed since the report started 15 years ago. But Florida has made impressive gains on the annual review, particularly in recent years. It was in 14th place in 2008, in 10th place in 2009 and in eighth place last year.

There were no national rankings in the first Quality Counts report in 1997. But that year, the publication said Florida’s “problems in education tend to overshadow its progress.”

### Best and worst performers

#### Top overall:

Maryland  
New York  
Massachusetts  
Virginia  
Florida

#### Worst overall:

Montana  
Mississippi  
South Dakota  
Washington D.C.  
Nebraska

SOURCE: Quality Counts 2011 by Education Week

It noted an interest in reform but said the state, like others in the South, was still wrestling with “a legacy of being lackadaisical about education.”

These days, the state is very “active” when it comes to setting education policy and was among the earliest to adopt a system to hold schools accountable based on state standards, Swanson said.

Florida grades all schools A-to-F based on student performance on state tests. Other states have since created similar systems, but Florida is “ahead of the pack,” though has some “missing pieces” in making sure students leave high school ready for college.

The Quality Counts report grades states in six broad categories, although not all the information is updated every year. The categories look at both state policies, such as academic standards and laws governing teachers, and the performance of students on national benchmarks.

### ‘F’ in spending

As in years past, Florida looked worst in the school spending category, where it got an F this year. But it earned a B plus for spend-

ing equity, meaning its limited funding is shared fairly equally among its school districts.

The Florida Education Association, the state teachers union, said it was happy with Florida’s high ranking on the Quality Counts report and hoped it would improve the state’s showing in “the areas where the state lags behind, like in properly funding and investing in our schools,” said Mark Puldow, the association’s spokesman.

Teachers have “done everything asked of them during the reform efforts of the 1990s and in the Jeb Bush era and beyond,” Puldow said, referring to the reform efforts started after Bush’s gubernatorial election in 1998. The state’s class-size rules — imposed by voters in 2002 and pushed by the union — also helped improve student achievement by shrinking classes and giving students more individual attention, he added.

Smith agreed that Florida’s performance across the board, particularly in the “college readiness” arena, is “not where we want to be.”

On the K-12 achievement index, for example, Florida shines more on how well it has improved in the past decade than for its current performance. It came in 24th place based on current achievement, well below top-ranked Massachusetts. But it ranked sixth when improvement and equity among different groups of students were considered.

Florida’s continued focus on reform and accountability should help even more students master needed academic skills, Smith added.

“I think you’re going to continue to see Florida move,” he said.

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