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Study of Florida's "A+ Program":

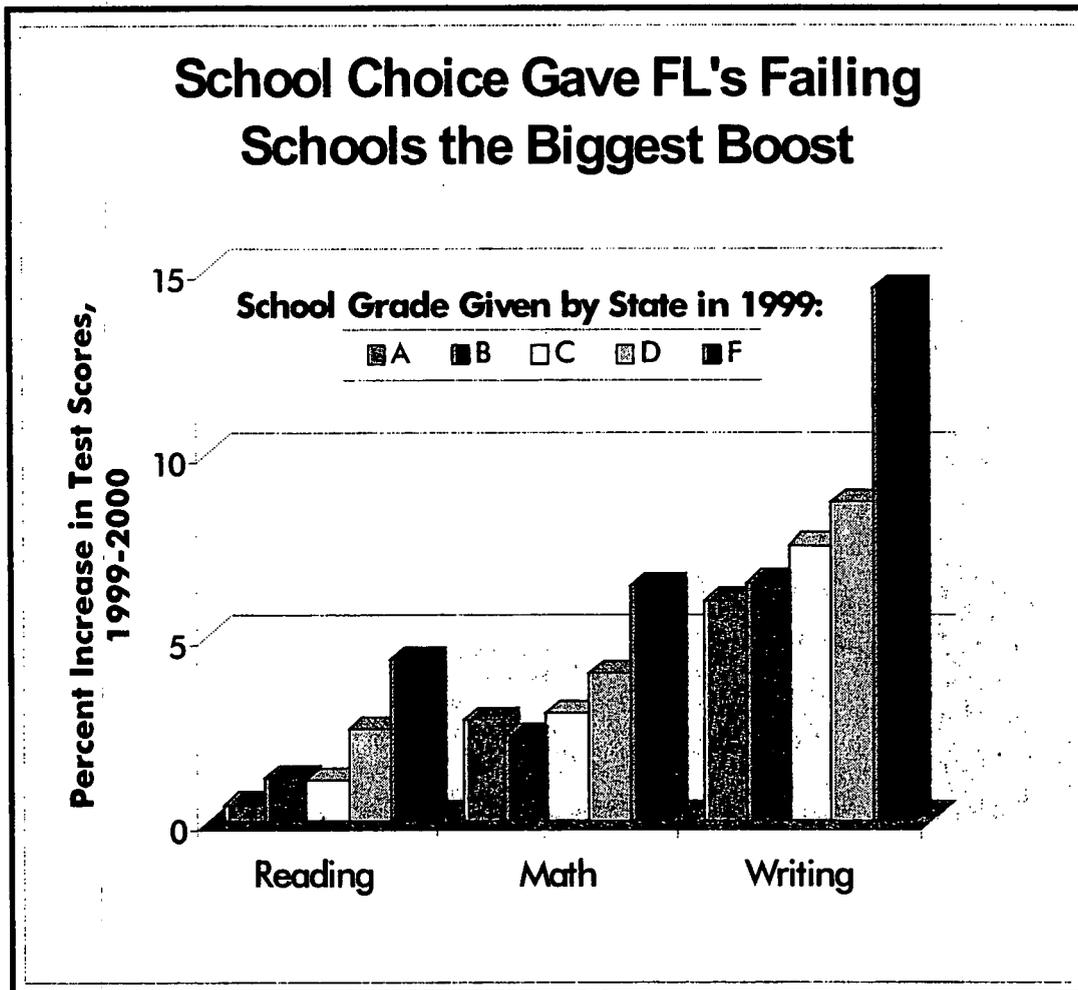
With School Choice, Failing Schools See the Biggest Gains

A joint study by Florida State University, the Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance, and the Manhattan Institute provides fresh evidence that President Bush's plan to bring school choice to kids in failing schools will help turn failing schools around.

The Florida "A+ Program" is similar to President Bush's education blueprint in that both give students in failing schools the option to transfer to a public or private school of their choice. Championed by President Bush's brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, the A+ Program assigns schools a grade of A, B, C, D, or F depending on their students' performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Tests (FCAT). Students in schools that receive two Fs in four years get the option of transferring to a private school or a higher-performing public school. Florida first administered the FCAT in 1998. In 1999, only two schools received a second F grade. No school received a second F grade in 2000, largely due to the program's tough accountability.

- **Under Florida's strict accountability system, schools in every "grade" improved.** Schools that received a B in 1999 improved more than A schools, C schools improved more than B schools, and so on down the line. One reason was the existence of testing: "Schools had some motivation to improve simply to avoid the embarrassment of low FCAT scores."
- **Schools at risk of losing students and funding improved test scores dramatically.** According to the study, "schools that received F grades in 1999 experienced increases in test scores that were more than twice as large as those experienced by schools with higher state-assigned grades." (See chart.)
- **School choice played a key role in improving failing schools.** Despite similar circumstances, high-scoring F schools improved more than low-scoring D schools. This is because only the F schools faced the prospect of losing students and funding if they received an F in 2000. In fact, "The motivational benefits of the prospect of vouchers were larger than [the] class size reduction effect, at least on math and writing scores." These findings confirm what school choice advocates have long argued: the prospect of losing students and funding can turn a failing school around.

- Failing schools' improvement was not due to test manipulation, cheating, or statistical anomalies.** Comparing the FCAT to the highly respected Stanford 9 test, the study found the FCAT results to be "valid measures of student achievement" and "not merely a manipulation of the state's grading system." Further, the study concludes, "the gains observed in the F schools differed from those in the other schools by an amount that is very unlikely to have been produced by chance."



The lesson for Congress is clear: school choice not only allows children to escape failing schools, it improves failing schools for the students who remain behind. The study is available at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_aplus.pdf.

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