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USF Study Finds Florida Teachers Believe FCAT Falls Short of Goal

Many Florida elementary school teachers believe the state’s high-stakes testing program has not achieved its intended goals and may actually hinder student learning, according to findings of a just-completed study by two professors at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

Brett D. Jones and Robert J. Egley, in a report titled “Teachers’ Perceptions of the FCAT,” studied the attitudes of third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers regarding the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Some 708 teachers from 30 school districts throughout the state participated in the on-line survey. The 51-item questionnaire asked the teachers about their current teaching practices and their beliefs about high-stakes testing in Florida. The survey was conducted between February and May, 2002.

“The purpose of this study was to provide data that would be helpful to educators, policymakers, parents, and concerned citizens in understanding how teachers perceive the effects of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT),” the researchers write in the study.

The study does not evaluate the basis for the teachers’ beliefs about the FCAT, Jones said. However, the researchers noted that “Without acknowledging and addressing the concerns of teachers, we cannot expect Florida’s testing program to improve teaching and learning.”

More than 90 percent of the teachers responding believed that students would learn the same or more without the tests, the study found. In fact, about half of the teachers reported that students would learn more if they didn’t have to take the tests.

Noting that this belief is in direct contrast to the stated intent of the testing to increase student achievement, the researchers said “Clearly there is a mismatch between the stated intent of the testing policy and the perceptions of teachers.”

Other findings of the study are:
• About 80 percent of teachers believe that the FCAT is not “taking Florida’s public schools in the right direction.”

• Nearly 94 percent believe that it is not “fair to assign grades to schools based on the FCAT scores.”

• About half of the teachers say that the FCAT has a negative effect on developmentally appropriate practices.

• Almost all teachers — 96.7 percent — report that they feel from “some” to “a lot” of pressure. In fact, 61.8 percent indicate that they feel “a lot of pressure” to improve students’ scores.

• Teachers report spending about 40 percent of their instruction time on “test taking strategies specifically designed to help them score higher on the FCAT.”

• More than half of the teachers report the FCAT has no effect, or a negative effect, on their motivation to do a better job as a teacher.

• At the same time, nearly 60 percent of them report that the possibility of receiving FCAT bonus money at the end of the year has no effect on their motivation.

• Teachers believe the FCAT to be somewhat accurate in assessing students’ knowledge and skills, but not overly accurate.

• Most teachers, 81.4 percent, say that science should not be tested as a “new separate component of the FCAT in elementary school.”

• Teachers find FCAT results to be useful to some degree in assessing students strengths and weaknesses in writing, reading and mathematics, but few teachers find them very useful.

• When asked how the FCAT influences their ability to use effective teaching methods, teachers are evenly divided on whether the influence is negative, positive or has no influence at all.

Jones, an assistant professor of educational psychology, conducted similar research at Duke University, where he taught for two years before coming to USF St. Petersburg in 2001. Egley, an assistant professor of educational leadership, worked for 17 years as an administrator at elementary, middle and high schools in Florida and Mississippi.

The study can be viewed at http://www1.stpt.usf.edu/bjones/survey.htm.

For more information, contact Brett Jones at (727) 553-1053.