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EVALUATION OF THE OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

November 2004

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Florida “Opportunity Scholarship Program” (OSP) is a central part of the “A+” educational reform. In accordance with the terms of the A+ Plan, students enrolled in, or assigned to, a school designated as failing are eligible to participate in the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). Students attending schools that received failing grades twice within four years are eligible to receive vouchers to attend a higher performing public school or to apply state generated funding toward private school tuition, including private schools with religious affiliations.

In 2002-03 MDCPS students attended the first full year of school under the OSP. The MDCPS Office of School Choice and Parental Options requested an evaluation of the performance of students participating in the OSP. The objective of the evaluation was to follow the academic progress of the 2002-03 cohort of students who participated in the OSP through the end of the 2003-04 school year.

An analysis of FCAT-SSS performance across a two year period was conducted comparing 1045 students who attended “F” schools in 2002-03 and 2003-04 to 106 students who participated in the OSP. Among the OSP students, 51 attended non-“F” MDCPS schools (OSP-Public) and 55 students attended private schools (OSP-Private) in both 2002-03 and 2003-04.

A comparison of the groups’ background characteristics showed that OSP students, both private and public, are more likely to be Hispanic and LEP and are less likely to be ESE or to qualify for FRL’s. At the time of transfer, OSP students also tended to be more academically advanced, particularly in math, as assessed by the FCAT-SSS, than students in the Comparison group.

The results of FCAT-SSS performance across two years show that students attending “F” schools were more likely to improve their FCAT Level standing in math during the period in question than OSP-Private students. Students attending “F” schools did not differ from OSP-Public students in FCAT Level progress in either math or reading.

It was also observed that the percentage of students achieving math and reading proficiency (Level 3 or greater) in the FCAT decreased significantly among the OSP-Private group between 2002 and 2004. Among “F” school students, the percentage of students reaching math proficiency increased but the percentage reaching reading proficiency decreased. Among the OSP-Public group there were no differences in the percentage who achieved math or reading proficiency across the two year period.

In summary, students participating in the OSP academically performed about the same as students attending “F” schools across a two year period. The exception to this general finding is that OSP-private school students performed worse in math than students attending “F” schools.

Based on the present findings, it is recommended that MDCPS continue to longitudinally examine the academic performance of OSP students.

OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM EVALUATION

INTRODUCTION

The Florida “Opportunity Scholarship Program” (OSP) is a central part of the “A+” educational reform package which was signed into law in June, 1999. In accordance with the terms of the A+ Plan, students enrolled in, or assigned to, a school designated as failing are eligible to participate in the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). According to the A+ plan, a failing school is one that has received a failing grade in the previous year as well as one other failing grade in the previous three years. Students attending schools that received failing grades twice within four years are eligible to receive vouchers to attend a higher performing public school or to apply state-generated funding toward private school tuition, including private schools with religious affiliations.

In 2001-02, students who attended MDCPS schools first became eligible for the OSP. Students who attended MDCPS schools that failed two or more times during the previous four years became eligible for vouchers. In 2002-03 MDCPS students attended the first full year of school under the OSP. Eligible students could choose to attend public schools rated grade category “C” or better, or use the vouchers to attend private schools.

At the present time there is no reported research that has addressed the effect of the OSP on students’ academic performance in the State of Florida. For this reason, the Office of School Choice and Parental Options asked that an evaluation of the performance of students participating in the OSP be conducted. The objective of the evaluation was to follow the academic progress of the 2002-03 cohort of students who participated in the OSP. OSP students are required to participate in the FCAT testing process, scores will be used in the present evaluation to assess students’ academic progress.

The specific evaluation questions to be addressed in this evaluation are the following:

- 1. What is the academic progress of all students who participate in the OSP as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?*
- 2. What is the academic progress of students who participate in the OSP and attend private schools as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?*
- 3. What is the academic progress of students who participate in the OSP and attend MDCPS schools as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?*

METHOD

Sampling. All students who, at the start of the 2002-03 school year, were enrolled in an “F” school (n = 8,306) and students who participated in 2002-03 in the OSP (n = 248) were considered for inclusion in the sample. To be selected, students had to have been promoted all three evaluation years (2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04). Additionally, students had to have participated in the FCAT-SSS, both math and reading, three consecutive years: 2001-02 (to obtain baseline data), 2002-03 and 2003-04. Additional selection criteria are described below.

OSP Samples. Students selected for the OSP sample had to have participated in the OSP through the end of the 2003-04 school year. There are two OSP groups: those choosing to attend private schools (OSP-Private) and those choosing to attend MDCPS schools (OSP-Public). OSP-Public students who attended, were transferred, or promoted to a school classified as “F” during the 2002-03 or 2003-04 school year were eliminated from the sample (see Table 1 for list of “F” schools). Therefore, students in the OSP-Public group did not, at any time, attend an “F” school in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

Table 1
School Performance Grades for 2002-03 and 2003-04

School	2002-03 Rating	2003-04 Rating
North County Charter Sch.	F	D
Rosa Parks Charter Sch.	F	D
Floral Heights El.	F	-
Holmes El.	F	F
Laura Sanders El	F	C
Henry Mack El.	F	F
Miami Edison Sr.	F	F
Miami Jackson Sr.	F	F
Booker T. Washington Sr.	F	D
Downtown Charter Sch.	N	F
Allapattah Middle	D	F
C. Drew Middle	D	F
Madison Middle	D	F
Vankara Academy Charter	N	F
Miami Central Sr.	D	F
School for Applied Tech.	D	F

The performance of the two OSP groups will be examined individually and in combination. When combined these two treatment groups will be referred to as the OSP group (OSP).

Comparison Sample. The comparison group consists of students enrolled in 2002-03 at an MDCPS school classified “F”. From this group, only students who enrolled the following school year (2003-04) at an “F” school were selected. Therefore, comparison students were enrolled at an “F” school in 2002-03 and either continued at that school in 2003-04, transferred or were promoted to a school rated “F” in 2003-04 (see Table 1 for list of “F” schools).

KEY to Sample Groups

OSP-Private. Students who attended “F” school in 2001-02 and attended private schools in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

OSP-Public. Students who attended “F” school in 2001-02 and non-“F” MDCPS schools in 2002-03 and 2003-04.

OSP. OSP-Private and OSP-Public samples combined.

Comparison. Students who chose to attend “F” schools in 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04.

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

The final sample consisted of 1045 Comparison and 106 OSP students. Of the OSP students, 51 were in the OSP-Public sample and 55 were in the OSP-Private sample. As shown in Table 2, all students attended grades 5, 6, 7 or 10 in school year 2003-04. The number of grade levels represented are restricted by the students' need to have taken the FCAT-SSS three years in a row. The FCAT-SSS is administered to students in grades 3-10. The sample sizes for each grade level is also affected by the type/grade level of schools receiving "F" classifications and by the type of private schools accepting OSP's.

Table 2
Frequency of Sample Students by 2003-04 Grade Levels

Grade Level	Treatment Groups		
	Comparison	OSP-Public	OSP-Private
5	283	23	9
6	173	10	14
7	8	16	15
10	581	2	17
Total	1045	51	55

The groups differed in ethnic makeup. As shown in Table 3, the comparison group contained a higher percentage of Black students and a lower ratio of Hispanic students than the OSP-Public group. The Comparison group, which is predominantly Black, is very different in ethnicity as compared to the OSP-Private group, where the majority of students are Hispanic.

Table 3
Ethnicity of Sample Students in Percentages

Ethnicity	Treatment Groups		
	Comparison	OSP-Public	OSP-Private
Black	70	59	29
Hispanic	28	39	69
White	1	2	2
Other	1	0	0

The groups also differed on other demographic variables. As shown in Table 4, OSP-Private students were less likely to receive Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and more likely to be classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) than students in the Comparison group. OSP-Private students were also less likely to apply for and/or receive free or reduced lunches (FRL).

Table 4
Demographic Characteristics of Sample Students in Percentages

Demographic Characteristic	Treatment Groups		
	Comparison	OSP-Public	OSP-Private
Female	53	57	53
ESE*	13	10	2
LEP	9	12	18
FRL	88	65	6

*Excludes Gifted.

A comparison of the students' academic performance on the FCAT-SSS for 2002, the baseline year, shows that Comparison students did not score as well as students in the two OSP groups on the year before the OSP transfers were implemented (2001-02). The percentages of students scoring at Level 3 or above in the FCAT-SSS math and reading tests are shown in Table 5 for all three groups. Students in the Comparison group were less likely to score at Level 3 or above in both the 2002 FCAT-SSS math and reading tests than students in the other two groups. On the other hand, students in the OSP-Public group were more likely to score at Level 3 or above in the 2002 FCAT-SSS math and reading tests than the other two groups.

Table 5
Percentage of Students Scoring at Level 3 or Above on the 2002 FCAT-SSS

FCAT Subtest	Treatment Groups		
	Comparison	OSP-Public	OSP-Private
Math	20	37	25
Reading	20	24	22

Summary. Students in the present sample who participate in the OSP are different from students that choose to stay at "F" schools. That is, OSP students, both private and public, are more likely to be Hispanic and LEP and are less likely to be ESE or to receive FRL's. OSP students also tend to be more academically advanced, particularly in math, as assessed by the FCAT-SSS, than students in the Comparison group. It should be noted that ESE students also participate in a separate voucher program, entitled McKay Scholarships, which allows ESE students to attend private schools. Therefore, it would be expected that the number of ESE students in this OSP sample would be low.

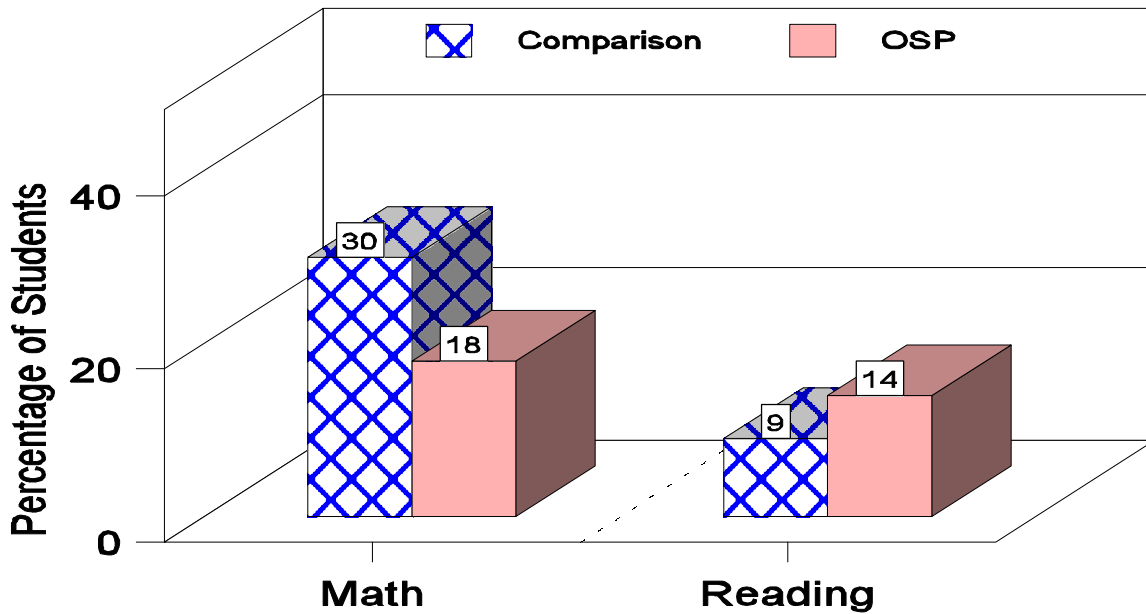
Evaluation Question #1.

What is the academic progress of all students who participate in the OSP as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?

A comparison was made of the students’ rate of improvement on the FCAT-SSS test across a two year period, 2002 to 2004. Specifically, the percentages of students in the two groups who improved one or more FCAT Levels across the two year period were contrasted. As shown in Figure 1, 30 percent of students in the Comparison group and 18 percent of students in the OSP group improved their FCAT math Level during the period in question. Statistical tests show that the rate of improvement in FCAT math Level of the two groups is significantly different. That is, students attending “F” schools were more likely to improve their math skills than students participating in the OSP.

Also as shown in Figure 1, 9 percent of students in the Comparison group improved their FCAT reading Level during the two year period while 14 percent of the OSP students did the same. The rate of improvement in the FCAT reading Level standings of the two groups was found not to be significantly different.

**Figure 1. Increases in FCAT Levels 2002 to 2004:
Comparison of OSP and "F" School Students**



FCAT Test	Treatment Groups		Statistical Test	
	Comparison	OSP	X ²	sig.
Math	30	18	6.45	.011
Reading	9	14	3.27	ns

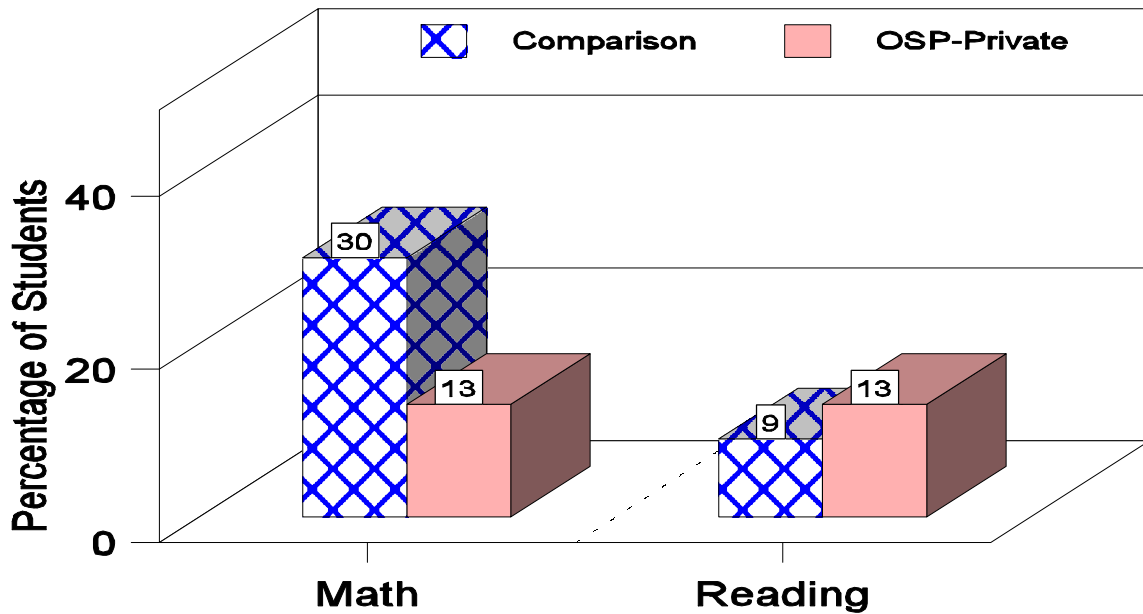
Evaluation Question #2.

What is the academic progress of students who participate in the OSP and attended private schools as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?

The 2002 and 2004 FCAT-SSS test results of students enrolled in “F” schools were contrasted with those of students in the OSP group who attended private schools. As shown in Figure 2, 30 percent of students in the Comparison group improved their math FCAT Levels across the two year period. During the same time period, 13 percent of OSP-Private students improved their FCAT math Levels. Statistical tests show that improvements in the FCAT math Level standing of the groups is significantly different. That is, students attending “F” schools were more likely to improve their math skills than students in the OSP-Private group.

Also as shown in Figure 2, 9 percent of students in the Comparison group and 13 percent of the students in the OSP-Private group improved their FCAT reading Level during the two year period. The rate of improvement in the FCAT reading Level standings of the two groups was found not to be significantly different.

Figure 2. Increases in FCAT Levels 2002 to 2004: Comparison of OSP-Private and “F” School Students



	Treatment Groups		Statistical Test	
	Comparison	OSP-Private	X ²	sig.
Math	30	13	7.31	.007
Reading	9	13	0.98	ns

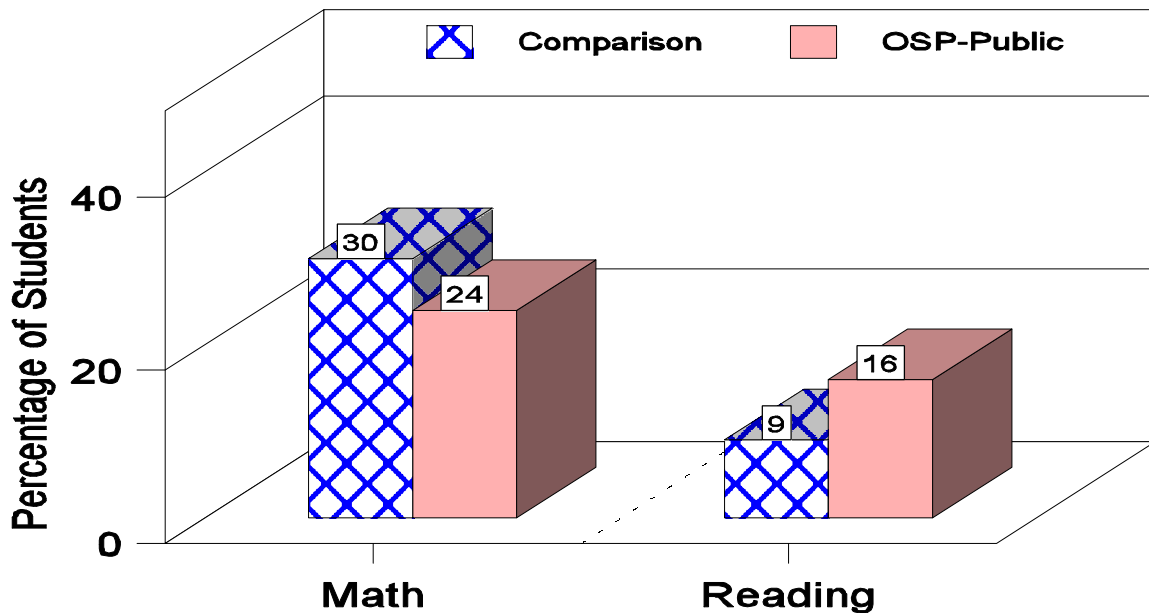
Evaluation Question #3.

What is the academic progress of all students who participate in the OSP and attend MDCPS schools as compared to students who continue to attend “F” schools?

A comparison was made across a two year period contrasting the FCAT-SSS test results of students enrolled in “F” schools to those of OSP students attending MDCPS schools not rated “F”. As shown in Figure 3, 30 percent of students in the Comparison group improved their math FCAT Level standing during the period in question while 24 percent of students in the OSP-Public group did the same. Statistical tests show that changes in the FCAT math Level standing of the groups did not differ significantly.

Also as shown in Figure 3, 9 percent of students in the Comparison group improved their FCAT reading Level during the two year period as compared to 16 percent of the OSP-Public group. The changes in FCAT reading Level standing of the groups was also found not to be significantly different.

Figure 3. Increases in FCAT Levels 2002 to 2004: Comparison of OSP-Public and “F” School Students



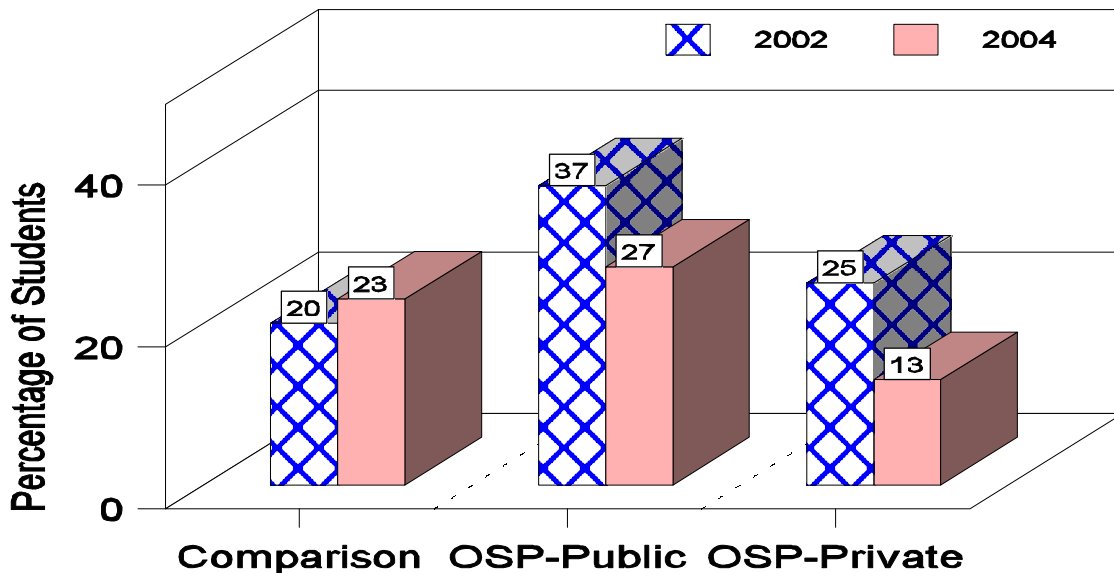
FCAT Test	Treatment Groups		Statistical Test	
	Comparison	OSP-Public	X ²	sig.
Math	30	24	0.88	ns
Reading	9	16	2.78	ns

**Additional Results:
A Comparison of the Percentage of Students Scoring Above Level 3 on FCAT-SSS**

For purposes of the No Child Left Behind’s Annual Yearly Progress determination, FCAT Level 3 is considered proficient. Therefore, an objective of schools is to ensure that students are performing at FCAT Level 3 or above. The following analyses examined progress made toward this outcome for each of the three treatment groups independently. A statistical comparison of the percentage of students scoring at Level 3 or above on the FCAT-SSS in 2002 and 2004 was made, within treatment groups, in both math and reading.

FCAT-SSS Math. As shown in Figure 4, the Comparison group (“F” schools) significantly increased the ratio of students scoring at Level 3 or above in math from 20% in 2002 to 23% in 2004. On the other hand, the OSP-Private group exhibited a significant decrease in the percentage of students scoring at or above Level 3 in math, from 25% to 13%. The percentage of OSP-Public students at Level 3 or above in math also decreased from 37% to 27%, but the difference was not statistically significant.

**Figure 4. Percentage of Students at Level 3 or Above:
Comparison of 2002 and 2004 FCAT-SSS Math Results**

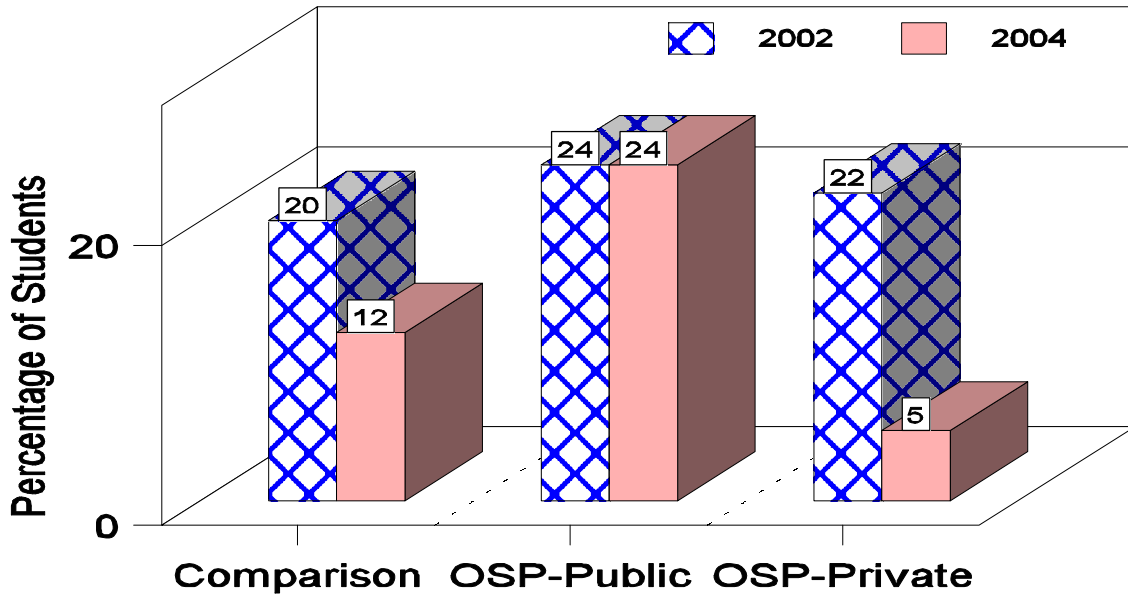


Treatment Groups	N	FCAT Test Year		Statistical Test*	
		2002	2004	t	sig.
Comparison	1045	20	23	1.97	.049
Public	51	37	27	-1.40	ns
Private	55	25	13	-2.44	.018

* Paired t-test.

FCAT-SSS Reading. As shown in Figure 5, the percentage of Comparison group students scoring at Level 3 or above in reading significantly decreased from 20% in 2002 to 12% in 2004. Similarly, the OSP-Private group exhibited a significant decrease in the percentage of students scoring at or above Level 3 in reading between 2002 and 2004 from 22% to 5%. The percentage of OSP-Public students scoring at Level 3 or above in reading remained the same in 2002 and 2004 at 24%.

Figure 5. Percentage of Students at Level 3 or Above: Comparison of 2002 and 2004 FCAT-SSS Reading Results



Treatment Groups	N	FCAT Test Year		Statistical Test*	
		2002	2004	t	sig.
Comparison	1045	20	12	-6.97	.000
Public	51	24	24	0.00	ns
Private	55	22	5	-2.63	.011

* Paired t-test.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The rationale behind the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) is to provide students with a chance to improve their educational environment. It is thought that by transferring away from “F” schools, OSP students have access to a better education that in turn allows them to achieve academic growth. An examination of academic achievement across a two year period, as measured by FCAT-SSS scores, does not support this line of reasoning.

Two measures of achievement were examined: students’ general academic progress, improving one or more Levels in the FCAT-SSS, and their progress toward proficiency, achieving Level 3 or above in the FCAT-SSS. Both math and reading were assessed. The performance of students attending “F” schools were contrasted with that of OSP students attending private schools, and with that of OSP students attending non-“F” MDCPS schools.

The results show that students attending “F” schools were more likely to improve their FCAT Level standing in math during the period in question than OSP students attending private schools. Additionally, the percentage of students achieving math and reading proficiency (Level 3 or above) decreased significantly among the OSP-Private group.

The results also show that students attending “F” schools did not differ from OSP students attending non “F” schools in their math and reading FCAT Level progress. The ratio of OSP students attending non-“F” schools who achieved FCAT proficiency remained constant, neither increasing nor diminishing.

When considered independently, students attending “F” schools exhibited gains in their FCAT math performance and a decline in their reading performance. The percentage of students at those schools reaching math proficiency increased but the percentage reaching reading proficiency decreased.

In summary, students participating in the OSP academically performed about the same as students attending “F” schools across a two year period. The exception being that students attending OSP-private schools actually performed worse in math than students at “F” schools.

The present evaluation is a preliminary study and results should be interpreted accordingly. It should be noted that academic performance in the present evaluation is completely based on FCAT-SSS performance. The FCAT-SSS test was chosen as the central assessment tool because it is a key component in the rating of schools and the graduation of students. It is possible to speculate that private schools are less attentive to preparing students for the FCAT. Additionally, the sample sizes were restricted by the selection process and therefore the OSP groups were small. Students not promoted were dropped from the sample meaning that the students sampled were the best academically from these schools/groups. The selection process was necessary to get the appropriate FCAT test results comparisons. But, the selection process also ensures that academic results for these schools/groups are actually lower than reported here. Future evaluations should consider larger samples and examine the effect of the target school on the students’ performance.

Based on the present findings the recommendation is made that MDCPS continue to longitudinally examine the academic performance of OSP students.