

Miami-Dade County Public Schools
Office of Educational Evaluation
1500 Biscayne Boulevard
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**FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION OF THE
OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Florida Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) was created to afford students at failing schools alternative school choices. In accordance with the terms of the program, 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 Miami-Dade County Public Schools' (M-DCPS) students attended the first full year of school under the OSP. A previous evaluation of the OSP students' academic performance during the first two years of the program found OSP students performing at about the same as students attending "F" schools. One of the recommendations of the initial evaluation was to monitor the performance of students in the OSP. The present evaluation constitutes a follow-up evaluation that tracks the OSP students' performance across a subsequent two-year cycle (2004-05 and 2005-06).

An analysis was conducted comparing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test-Sunshine State Standards (FCAT-SSS) and Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test-Norm Referenced Test (FCAT-NRT) performance of 284 students who attended "F" schools in 2004-05 and 2005-06 to 60 students who attended the OSP during the same two-year period. All students were in the 10th grade during the 2005-06 school year.

A comparison of the groups' background characteristics showed that students who participate in the OSP are different from students who choose to remain at "F" schools. That is, OSP students are more likely to be Hispanic and less likely to be Black. At the time of transfer, OSP students also tended to be more academically advanced, as assessed by the FCAT-SSS, than students in the comparison group.

It was observed that students attending "F" schools were more likely to improve their math skills during the period in question as evidenced by their performance on the FCAT-NRT. The results also show that OSP students did not differ greatly from students attending "F" schools in the development of reading skills.

In summary, students participating in the OSP performed academically at about the same level as students attending "F" schools across a two-year period. The exception to this general finding is that students participating in the OSP had lower math scores than students attending "F" schools.

In January 2005, the Florida Supreme Court ruled to strike down the OSP on the basis that it violated the State's Constitution. Nevertheless, the ruling allows students to continue to have the opportunity to transfer from failing public schools to satisfactorily performing public schools under OSP.

OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM EVALUATION

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 Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) first became eligible for the OSP. Students who attended District 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 approved private schools.

An initial evaluation report examined the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test-Sunshine State Standards (FCAT-SSS) performance gains of OSP students after attending the first two years of the program (2002-03 and 2003-04). In that report, OSP students were compared to students attending "F" schools. Overall, the results showed that students attending the OSP, public and private schools combined, academically performed at about the same level as students attending "F" schools during the two-year period (Abella, 2004).

One of the recommendations of the initial evaluation was to monitor the performance of students in the OSP. As a result, The Office of Specialized Programs requested that a follow-up evaluation be conducted to track the performance of OSP students across the subsequent two-year cycle (2004-05 and 2005-06). As in the previous evaluation, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test-Sunshine State Standards (FCAT-SSS) and Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test-Norm Referenced Test (FCAT-NRT) performance of students participating in the OSP program will be compared to that of students who attend "F" schools.

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

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

How do the two student groups perform on the FCAT-SSS?

How do the two student groups perform on the FCAT-NRT?

METHOD

Sampling. All students who, at the start of the 2003-04 school year, were enrolled in an “F” school (n = 12,707) and students participating in the OSP in 2004-05, as indicated in the M-DCPS database by a transfer code of “x”, “n”, or “v”, were considered for inclusion in the sample (n = 567). To be selected, students had to have been promoted all three evaluation years (2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06). Additionally, students had to have participated in the FCAT-SSS, both math and reading, three consecutive years: 2003-04 (to obtain baseline data), 2004-05, and 2005-06. Additional selection criteria are described below.

OSP Sample

Students selected for the OSP sample had to have participated in the OSP through the end of the 2005-06 school year. There are two OSP groups, those choosing to attend private schools and those choosing to attend MDCPS schools. All OSP students who attended, were transferred, or promoted to a District school classified as “F” during the 2004-05 or 2005-06 school year were eliminated from the sample. Therefore, OSP students attending M-DCPS did not, at any time, attend an “F” school in 2004-05 and 2005-06.

Comparison Sample

The comparison group consists of students enrolled in 2003-04 at an M-DCPS school classified “F”. From this group, only students who enrolled the following two school years (2004-05 and 2005-06) at an “F” school were selected. Therefore, comparison students were enrolled at an “F” school in 2003-04 and either continued at that school in 2004-05 and 2005-06, or were transferred or promoted to a school rated “F” in 2004-05 and/or in 2005-06.

KEY to Sample Groups

OSP-Private: OSP Students who attended private schools in 2004-05 and 2005-06.

OSP-Public: OSP Students who attended non- “F” schools in 2004-05 and 2005-06.

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

Comparison: Students who chose to attend “F” schools in 2003-04, 2004-05, and 2005-06.

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

The final sample consisted of 284 comparison and 100 OSP students. As shown in Table 1, OSP students attended grades 5, 6, 7, 9, or 10 in the 2005-06 school year. All comparison students attended grade 10. 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 through 10. The sample size 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.

Given that all comparison students were in grade 10 in 2005-06, and for the purpose of making appropriate FCAT comparisons, subsequent analysis will only include 10th grade OSP students (n = 60). Of the 10th grade OSP students, 73 percent (n= 44) were in the OSP-Public sample and 27 percent (n = 16) were in the OSP-Private sample.

In addition, due to the small number of students in the OSP-Private group, all subsequent analyses will combine the results of the private and public OSP students (n = 60). These students will be referred to as the OSP group.

Table 1
Frequency of Sample Students by 2005-06 Grade Levels

Grade Level	Treatment Groups		
	Comparison	OSP-Public	OSP-Private
5	0	18	2
6	0	5	0
7	0	1	4
9	0	8	2
10	284	44	16
Total	284	76	24

The results show that the two groups differed in ethnic makeup. As shown in Table 2, the comparison group contained a higher percentage of Black students and a lower ratio of Hispanic students than the OSP group.

Table 2
Ethnicity of Sample Students in Percentages

Ethnicity	Treatment Groups	
	Comparison	OSP
Black	87%	77%
Hispanic	12%	22%
White/Other	1%	1%

A comparison of the students' academic performance on the FCAT-SSS for 2004, the baseline year, shows that comparison students did not score as well as OSP students. The percentages of students scoring at Level 3 or above in the FCAT-SSS math and reading tests are shown in Table 4 for both groups. Students in the comparison group were less likely to score at Level 3 or above in both the 2004 FCAT-SSS math and reading tests than students in the OSP group.

Table 3
Percentage of Students Scoring at Level 3 or Above on the 2004 FCAT-SSS

FCAT Subtest	Treatment Groups	
	Comparison	OSP
Math	17%	27%
Reading	12%	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 are more likely to be Hispanic and less likely to be Black. OSP students also tend to be more academically advanced, as assessed by the FCAT-SSS, than students in the comparison group.

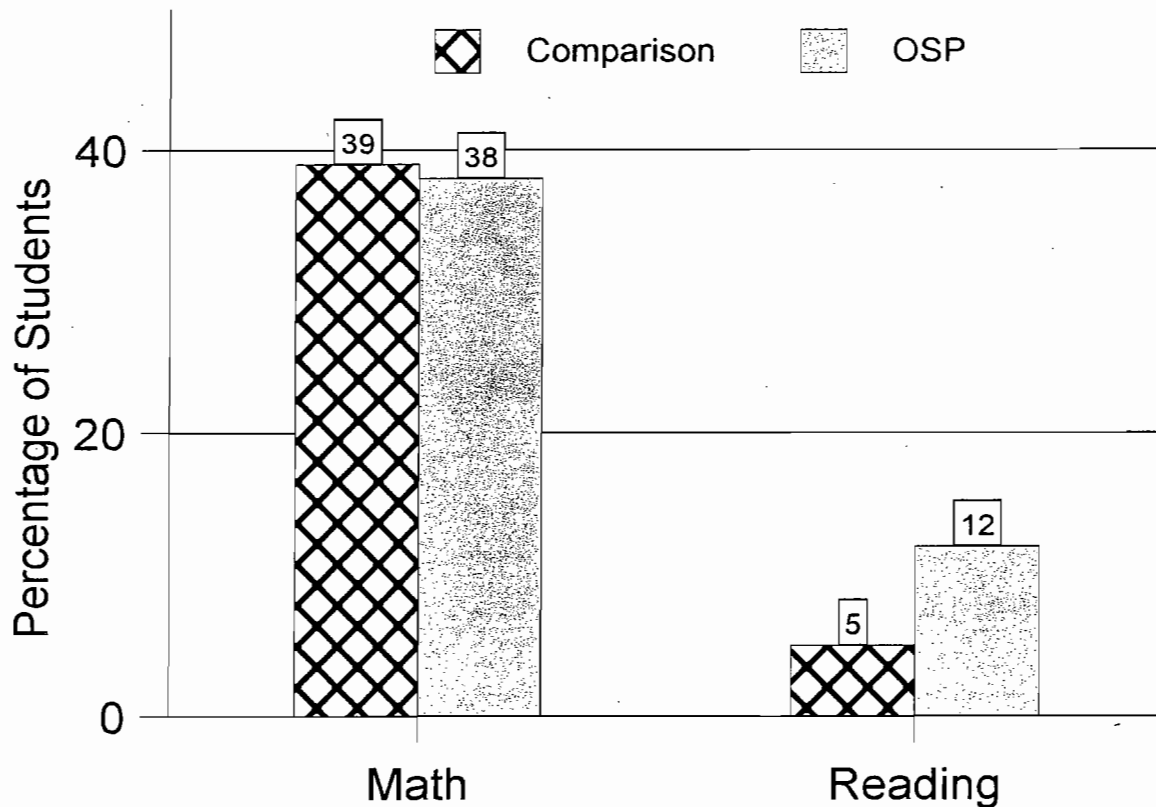
What is the academic progress of all students who participate in the OSP as compared to students who continue to attend "F" schools?

How do the two student groups perform on the FCAT-SSS?

A comparison was made of the students' rate of improvement on the FCAT-SSS test across a two-year period, 2004 to 2006. Specifically, the percentages of students in the two groups who improved one or more FCAT Levels across the two-year period were contrasted. Figure 1 shows that 39 percent of students in the comparison group and 38 percent of students in the OSP group improved their FCAT math Level during the period in question. This difference was not statistically significant, $X^2 = .02$, $p = .89$. Therefore, during this period, students attending "F" schools were as likely to improve their FCAT-SSS math Level standings as students participating in the OSP.

Figure 1 also shows that 5 percent of students in the comparison group improved their FCAT reading Level during the two-year period while 12 percent of the OSP students did the same. The difference was not statistically significant, $X^2 = 3.37$, $p = .07$. Therefore, OSP student were as likely as students attending "F" schools to improve their FCAT-SSS reading Level standings.

**Figure 1. Increases in FCAT Levels 2004 to 2006:
Comparison of OSP and "F" School Gr. 10 Students**



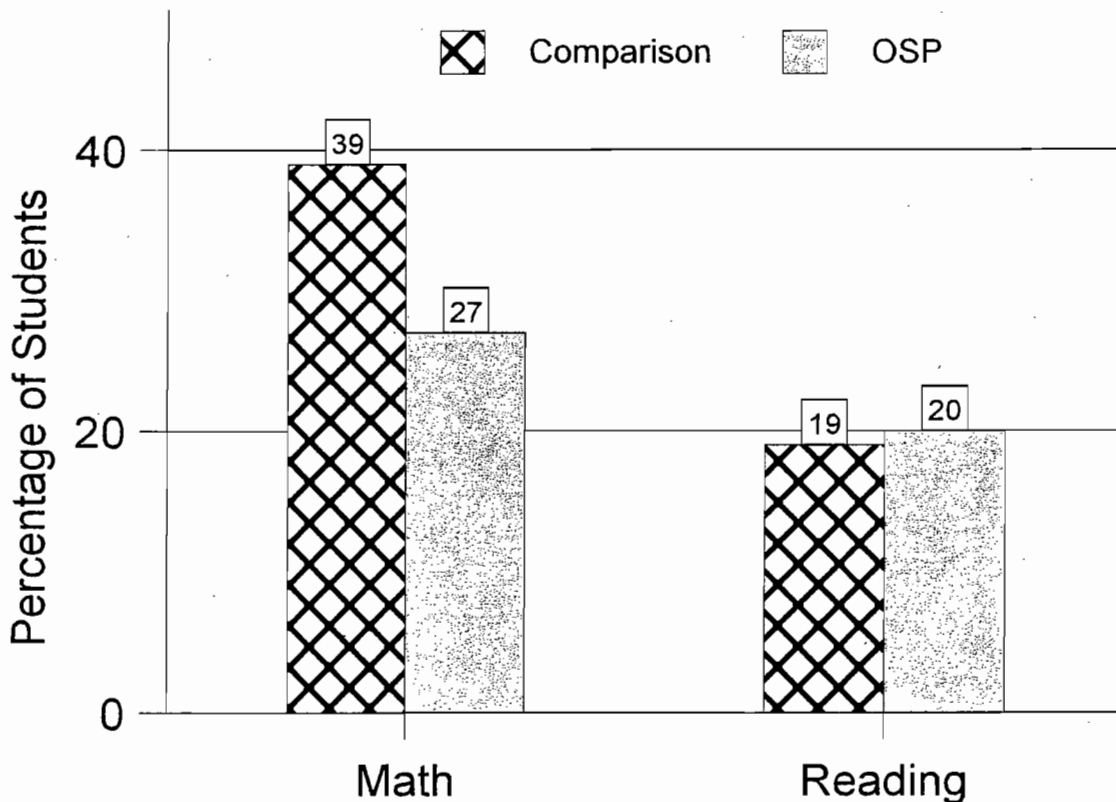
How do the two student groups perform on the FCAT-NRT?

A comparison was made of the students' rate of improvement on the FCAT-NRT across a two-year period, 2004-2006. Specifically the mean math and reading scale scores of grade 10 students in the two groups were contrasted across the two-year period.

As shown in Figure 2, the comparison group ("F" schools) increased their mean score in math 39 scale score points from 654 in grade 8 to 693 in grade 10. During the same period of time, the OSP group increased their mean scores 27 scale score points from 671 to 698. The difference in mean scale score gains among the two groups was statistically significant, $t = 3.37$, $p = .001$. Therefore, according to the FCAT-NRT results, students attending "F" schools improved their math skills more extensively than OSP students across the two-year period.

Also as shown in Figure 2, the comparison group ("F" schools) increased their mean score in reading 19 scale score points, from 663 in grade 8 to 682 in grade 10. During the same period of time, the OSP group increased their mean scores 20 scale score points from 669 to 689. The difference in mean scale score gains among the two groups was not statistically significant, $t = .56$, $p = .58$. Therefore, based on FCAT-NRT results, students attending "F" schools were as likely to improve their reading skills as OSP students.

**Figure 2. Mean Scale Score Increase of Gr.10 Students:
Comparison of 2004 and 2006 FCAT-NRT Math Results**



CONCLUSION

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 and FCAT-NRT results, does not support this line of reasoning.

The results show that grade 10 students attending "F" schools were more likely to improve their math skills during the period in question, as evidenced by their performance on the FCAT-NRT, than OSP students. The results also show that grade 10 students attending "F" schools did not differ greatly from OSP students in the development of reading skills.

In summary, secondary students participating in the OSP performed academically about the same as students attending "F" schools across a two-year period. The exception being that students attending OSP schools actually performed worse in some measures of math skill development than students at "F" schools.

These results mirror those reported in a previous evaluation report (Abella, 2004). In that report, the OSP students' math and reading performances were found not to differ from those of "F" school students. It was also reported that OSP students attending private schools significantly underperformed in math when compared to "F" school students. In the present evaluation it was not feasible, due to a small sample size, to examine the performance of OSP students attending private schools.

It should be noted that in January 2005, the Florida Supreme Court ruled to strike down the Opportunity Scholarship Program on the basis that it violated the State's Constitution "uniformity" clause which guarantees all students a "uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools" (ALEC, 2005). Nevertheless, the ruling allows students to continue to have the opportunity to transfer from failing public schools to satisfactorily performing public schools under OSP (Appendix A).

REFERENCES

Abella, Rodolfo (2004). *Evaluation of the Opportunity Scholarship Program*. Miami, FL. Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program Struck Down by State Supreme Court: Found at www.ALEC.Org.

Appendix A
Interpretation of the Florida Supreme Court's OSP Ruling

Date: January 13, 2006

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OPINION NO.: 06-02

STAFF CONTACT: none

MEMORANDUM OPINION

TO: Virginia Gentles, Office of Independent Education & Parental Choice

FROM: Daniel Woodring
General Counsel

SUBJECT: Effect of *Bush v. Holmes* Florida Supreme Court Decision on the Opportunity Scholarship Program's Public School Attendance Option

QUESTION PRESENTED: Given the Florida Supreme Court's ruling in *Bush v. Holmes* that the granting of private school vouchers pursuant to the Opportunity Scholarship Program ("OSP") is unconstitutional, does the option remain under the OSP for parents of children who attend failing public schools to place their children in an alternate satisfactory performing public school?

CONCLUSION: Yes.

DISCUSSION: On January 5, 2006, the Florida Supreme Court ruled the OSP, §1002.38, Florida Statutes, to contravene article IX, section 1(a) of the Florida Constitution, insofar as it allows children to receive a publicly funded education in private schools. While the Florida Supreme Court's ruling did not explicitly address "severability" of the public versus private school OSP options, its logic and holding clearly distinguished them. *Bush v. Holmes*, slip op. SC04-2324, at 22, 35 (Fla. Sup. Ct., January 5, 2006) ("The OSP violates [article IX, section 1(a)] by devoting the state's resources to the education of children within our state through means other than a system of free public schools . . . Only when the private school option depends upon public funding is choice limited . . . [as] necessitated by the constitutional mandate in article IX, section 1(a) . . . that does not allow the use of state monies to fund a private school education"). Accordingly, the ruling effectively strikes down the grant of vouchers for students to attend private schools, but does not invalidate the OSP's provision for parents to move a child from a failing public school to a satisfactorily performing public school. It is a fundamental principle that where a statute contains both constitutional and unconstitutional parts, the valid part may remain effective provided the parts are severable and the valid part would have been enacted apart from the invalid part. See *Martinez v. Scanlan*, 582 So.2d 1167 (Fla. 1991); *Wright v. State*, 351 So.2d 708 (Fla.1977); *Presbyterian Homes v. Wood*, 297 So.2d 556 (Fla.1974).