

**FLORIDA'S K-12 REFORM LESSON FOR NEW MEXICO**

**BY**

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## **NEW MEXICO: A STATE LEFT BEHIND?**

Does demography equal K-12 destiny?

If so, say some experts, states such as New Mexico with growing Hispanic populations seem doomed to fail, weighed down with ineffective school systems and abysmal test scores. The Morrison Institute research report *Beat the Odds* relates the story of a demographer who went so far as to predict that southwestern states will become the “Appalachia of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” “Demography is destiny,” he explained. When pressed to elaborate, the demographer explained:

*Latinos are the fastest-growing population group in the Southwest; they will soon make up a majority of public school students; and, as with Appalachian residents in the past, they have chronically low levels of educational achievement – something that has hurt the economic competitiveness of states in the Appalachian region for decades.*

An audience member objected, saying that this dire prediction assumes that southwestern states like New Mexico either will not or cannot improve, the demographer responded:

*Like I said, the Southwest will be the Appalachian region of the 21st Century.<sup>1</sup>*

In New Mexico and other southwestern states, this is no longer a looming future danger, but rather a problem that has arrived. In 2007, the federal government released nationwide Mathematics and Reading achievement scores at both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels. Of these four tests, West Virginia, for decades the state most closely associated with Appalachian poverty, outscored New Mexico on three tests and tied New Mexico on the third.

We have evidence, however, that states can overcome the challenge of difficult demographics. Florida lawmakers put a comprehensive set of education reforms in place in 1999, and student scores have improved substantially- especially those of low-income and minority students. New Mexico lawmakers can follow this example and achieve even greater results, if they have the moral courage to do so.

## **FLORIDA’S LESSONS FOR THE NATION**

Florida spending per student on K-12 (\$8,862) is below the national average and below the average for New Mexico (\$9,368). Florida also has a relatively difficult student demographic profile with 45.6% of low-income students (qualifying for a free or reduced lunch based on federal guidelines). Ethnic minorities constitute the majority of Florida’s K-12 students, with the minority population almost evenly split between Hispanics and African Americans.

New Mexico’s K-12 demographic profile is even more challenging with 60% of students qualifying for a free or reduced lunch and 70% of the student population made up by ethnic minorities. Rather than using this fact as an excuse for poor results, however, New Mexicans

should use them as a justification for reforms even more far-reaching than those undertaken in Florida.

For the present, let us proceed with the understanding that Florida is a comparatively difficult state, spends less than the national average per student, and once had academic results near the bottom in national rankings. We will first focus on the remarkable improvement in Florida's academic achievement before moving on to a discussion of what policies achieved their results.

Florida ended their status in the academic cellar during the previous decade. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serves as the nation's most respected source of K-12 academic data. Overseen by a bipartisan board of directors as a project of the United States Department of Education, NAEP gives academic exams to random samples of students in all 50 states in a variety of grade levels and academic subjects. Unlike state exams, no one bases student, teacher, school or district evaluations on NAEP, meaning there is no incentive to "teach to the test" or otherwise falsify results.

The below figure shows results on the NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading exam from 1998 (the year before the reforms) and 2009 (the most recent results available). Early reading results are crucial due to the time sensitive nature of literacy acquisition. Students failing to learn to read in the early grades typically fall further and further behind grade level with each passing year as the material becomes more challenging. Some describe school as "learning to read" in grades K-3 and "reading to learn" in grades 4 and up.

NAEP utilizes four achievement levels to characterize academic performance- Below Basic, Basic, Proficient and Advanced. As shown in Figure 1, Florida students enjoyed a 37% improvement in the percentage of students scoring Basic or better on 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading between 1998 and 2009. Notice also that this gain did not come at the expense of higher scoring students. The percentage scoring Proficient or better increased by 63% during this period, and the percentage scoring at the Advanced level doubled.

**Figure 1: Florida 4th Grade NAEP Reading Achievement- 1998 and 2009**

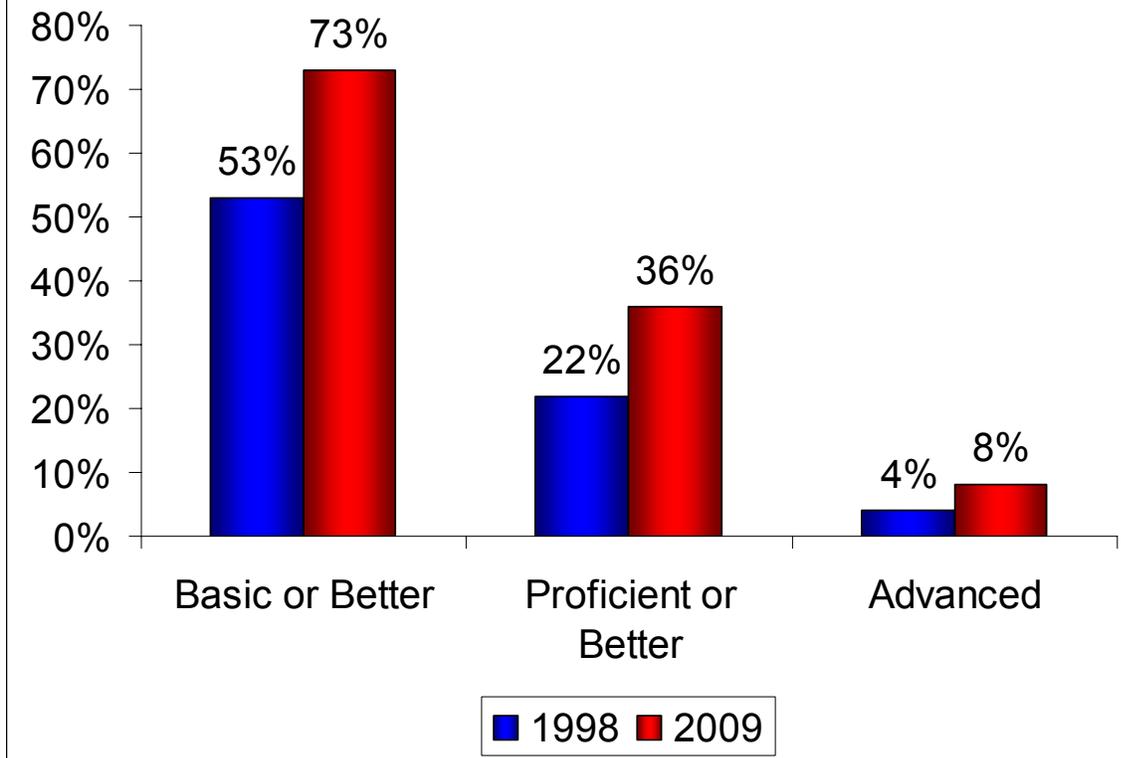
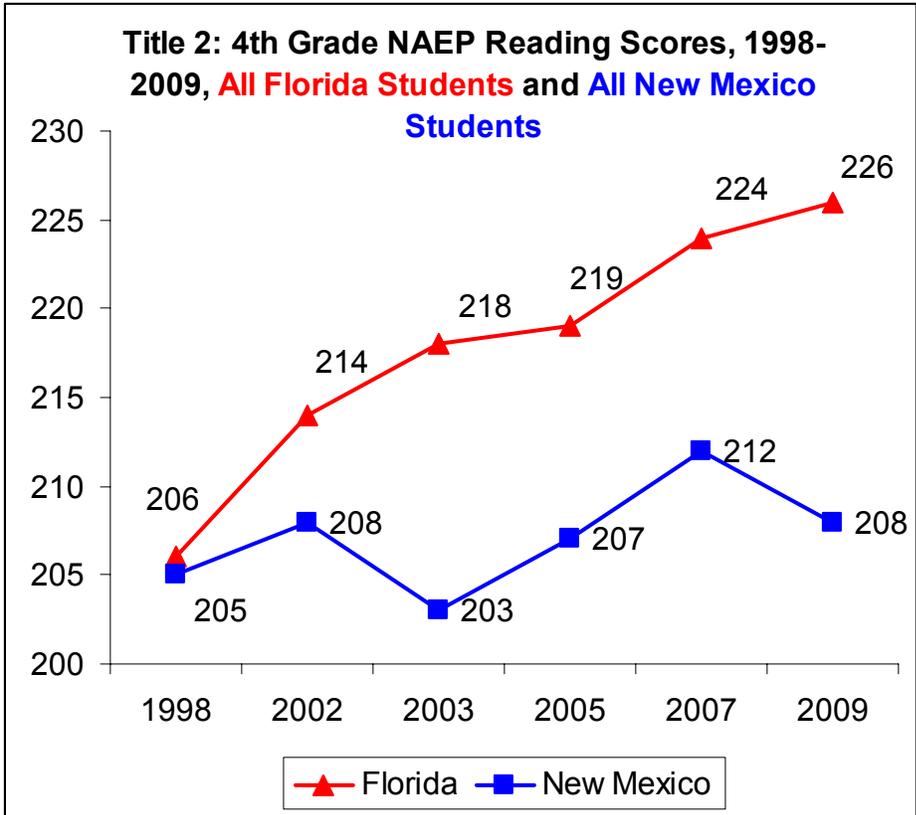


Figure 2 shows trend data from the same 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading exams, but presents average scores rather than achievement levels. NAEP exams range from 0 to 500 points, and a gain of 10 points approximately equals an average grade level worth of learning.

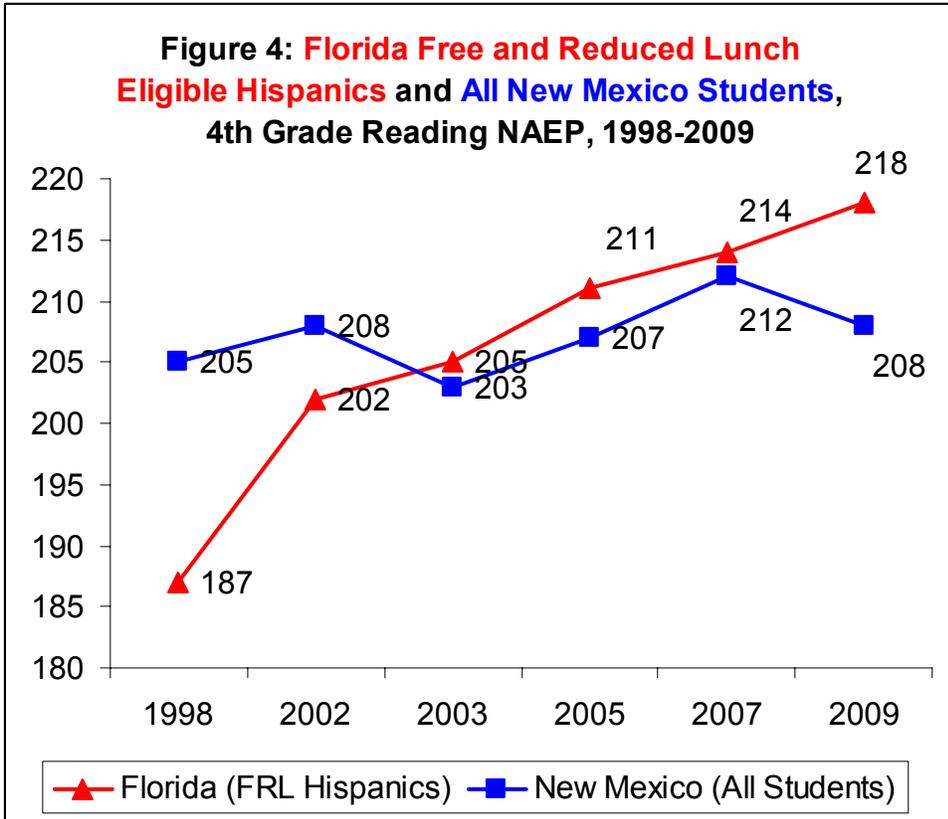
In 1998, New Mexico and Florida essentially tied in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading- scoring 205 and 206 on the exam, respectively. Between 1998 and 2009, however, Florida students improved by 20 points, while New Mexico's students improved by 3 points. In 2009, Florida students scored 18 points higher than the New Mexico average. In 2009, the average Floridian 4<sup>th</sup> grader was scoring more almost two grade levels higher than the average New Mexican on this critical 4<sup>th</sup> grade exam.



**FLORIDA GAINS LED MY IMPROVEMENT BY MINORITY STUDENTS**

Florida’s improvement in reading scores were not isolated to any particular ethnic group, and in fact, minority students helped to drive the overall improvement. Florida’s Hispanic students already eclipse the average academic performance of many states. The following map, produced by the Heritage Foundation, compares the 2009 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores of Florida Hispanic students compared to the statewide average for all students. Florida’s Hispanic students outscored 31 statewide averages- including New Mexico.<sup>2</sup>





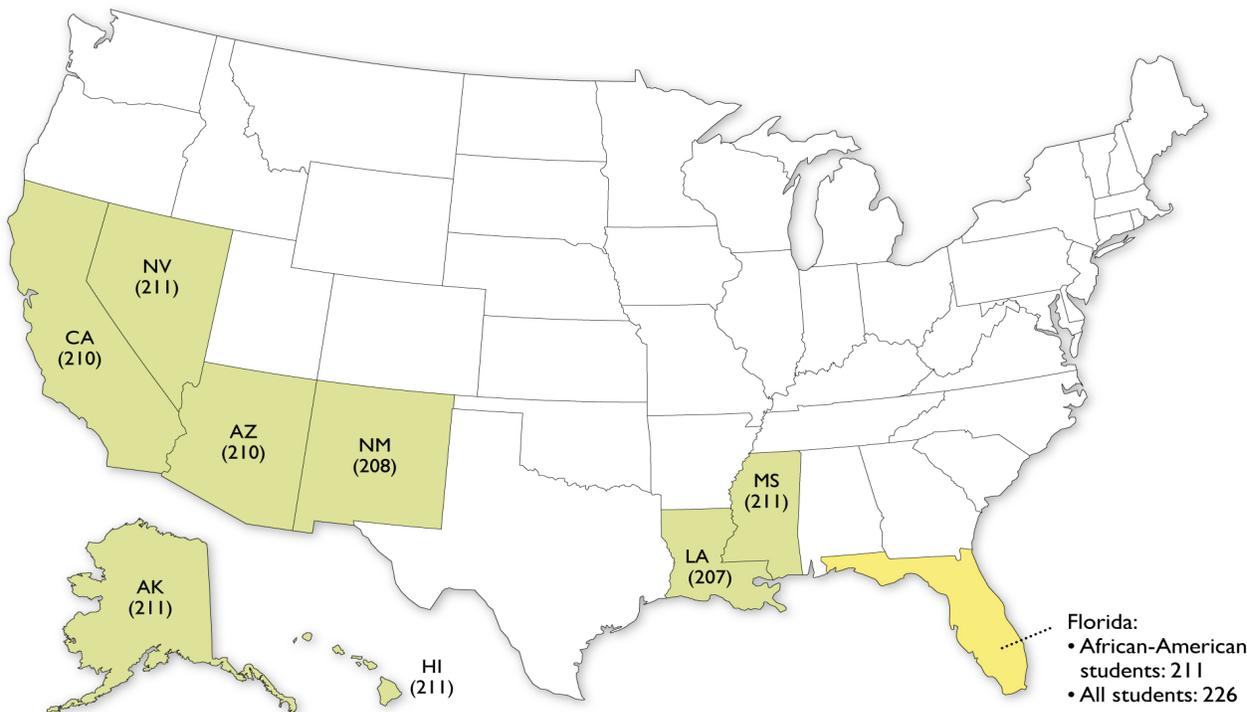
Florida’s African American students made substantial academic gains as well. Figure 5 below presents 4<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP reading scores for Florida’s African American students compared to the statewide average for all students in New Mexico. In 1998, the average New Mexican 4<sup>th</sup> grader scored approximately two grade levels higher than the average African American student in Florida.

By 2009, this once yawning gap on 19 points had reversed to a three point advantage for Florida’s African American students. In fact, in 2009, Florida’s African Americans exceeded or tied eight statewide averages.

**FIGURE 5: FLORIDA AFRICAN AMERICANS AND STATEWIDE AVERAGES ON 4<sup>TH</sup> GRADE READING NAEP (SOURCE: HERITAGE FOUNDATION)**

**COMPARING STATES TO FLORIDA'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS**

African-American students in Florida now outscore or tie the statewide reading average of all students in eight states.



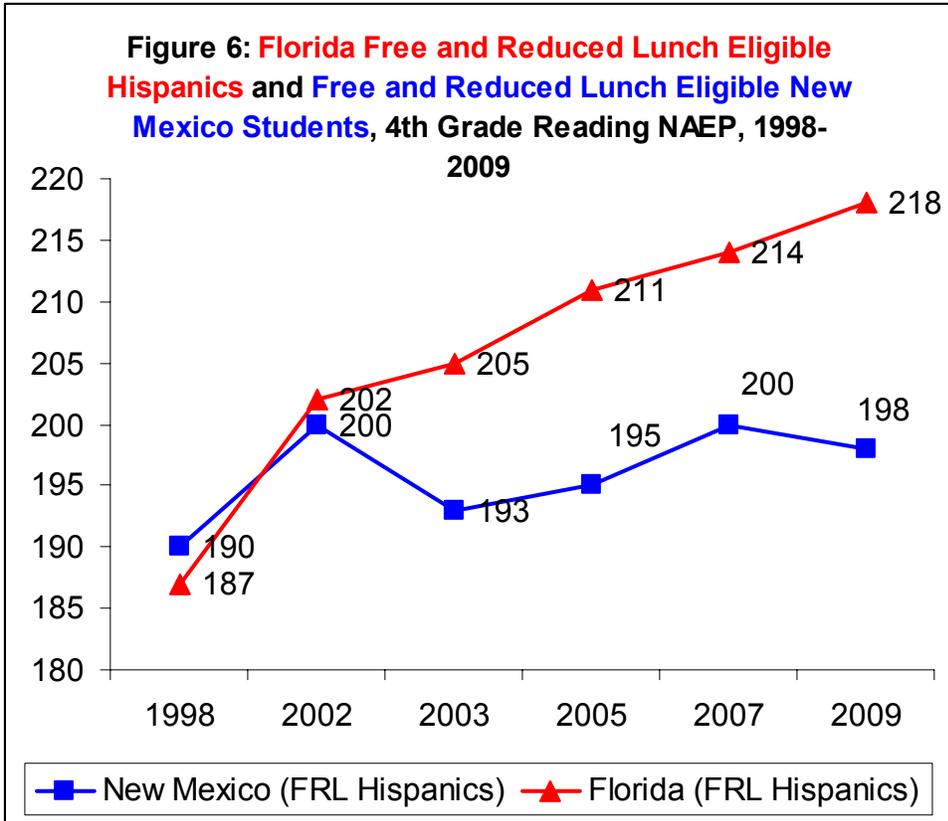
Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

 The Heritage Foundation

Florida's improvement among minority students has been extremely impressive. Even more impressive, however, has been the improvement among low-income and low-income minority students.

**NEITHER DEMOGRAPHY NOR POVERTY EQUALS K-12 DESTINY**

Improvement among low-income Hispanic students will be crucial to improving New Mexico's academic standing. Figure 6 below tracks the academic progress of low-income Hispanic students on NAEP 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading, 1998-2009, for both states. Florida began the period a bit below New Mexico among low-income Hispanics, but in 2009 scored two grade levels ahead. Given the makeup of the New Mexico K-12 student body, replicating this type of success would do more to improve New Mexico's academic achievement than anything would. New Mexico's low-income Hispanic students improved by 10 points during this period, which is hopeful, but overall achievement remains quite low. Florida's low-income Hispanic students improved by 31 points during this period- the type of improvement New Mexico should seek.



Rather than simply a critique of New Mexico’s performance, which obviously must improve, these results deliver a message of hope: demography is not K-12 destiny. New Mexico must not inevitably lurk at the bottom of the academic rankings, if it will adopt the policies necessary to improve performance.

**FLORIDA’S K-12 REFORMS: HOW THEY DID IT**

No single policy change explains Florida’s academic improvement. Instead, Florida adopted a multifaceted reform package in 1999, and then continued to introduce additional reforms incrementally. Newly elected governor, Jeb Bush pushed through a bracing dual strategy of accountability and transparency from both the top down (state testing) and bottom up (parental choice) in 1999. Governor Bush’s A+ Plan emphasized standards for the schools and transparency for parents. Failing schools faced real consequences for prolonged failure, including school vouchers for their students.

*Academic Transparency and Accountability*

Florida policymakers created a set of state academic standards and a state exam (the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or FCAT) to test students against those standards. Such policies became ubiquitous across states after the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. Florida however handled academic transparency differently than many states in communicating results clearly and providing consequences for prolonged failure.

Most state testing systems, as well as the NCLB, use vague terms to describe academic performance. For example, states describe schools as “performing” or as “needing improvement” or “making annual yearly progress.” Florida used their state testing data to assign clear *letter grades* to schools. Florida ranks schools *A, B, C, D* or *F*, basing the grades on a combination of overall scores, student growth, and student growth among the bottom performing 25% of students.

Florida’s system of public school testing provides clear signals to parents, and strong sanctions for failing schools. The Florida Department of Education assigns schools a letter grade, A through F, based on student scores and improvement. The A+ plan made students attending a school ranked “F” two out of any four-year period eligible to receive a voucher. Evaluations from both the Manhattan Institute and the Urban Institute found that the program spurred significant academic improvement in eligible schools.

The Florida Supreme Court ruled this voucher program unconstitutional in 2006. Subsequently, an evaluation by Friedman Foundation Senior Fellow Greg Forster found that progress in schools previously eligible for vouchers noticeably slowed.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, schools that other states might describe as “Performing” received a C or a D in Florida, and an incentive to improve. Improved NAEP scores provide a source of external validation to show that the system has responded.

### ***Parental Choice***

After 1999, Florida became a national leader in charter schooling, private choice programs and virtual schooling.

Florida created the nation’s largest voucher program—the McKay Scholarship Program—for students with disabilities and the Step Up for Students tax credit for economically disadvantaged children. Today, more than 820 Florida private schools educate almost 19,000 children with disabilities through McKay.

A similar number of low-income children exercise choice through the Step Up for Students program. Florida also has a vigorous and growing charter school program, and 379 charter schools (and counting) educate over 106,000 students.

In addition, the Florida Virtual School and other online learning opportunities have made Florida the nation’s leader in virtual education.

### ***Focus on Literacy and Curtailing Social Promotion***

Florida lawmakers curtailed the social promotion by ensuring that third-grade students failing the FCAT reading exam either obtain a basic level of literacy or repeat the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. In 2001, Florida schools retained 6,500 students in third grade. After the implementation of the policy in 2002, Florida schools retained more than 27,000 third-grade students.<sup>4</sup>

Holding back children failing to have acquired basic literacy skills sent a loud and clear message to students, parents, teachers and administrators: Florida is *very serious* about the acquisition of foundational literacy skills in the early grades. Florida's policy included multiple testing opportunities, extra help for struggling students. The policy provides exemptions for students with special circumstances, remedial summer school opportunities, and the chance for students to score their way back into their class. Ultimately, however, the policy places a default at retention for students not learning to read. Accordingly, it creates a powerful incentive for parents and schools to focus on literacy skills at a developmentally critical age.

Evidence suggests that ending social promotion has had a positive impact on students' performance. Dr. Jay Greene and Marcus Winters of the University of Arkansas evaluated the results of the social promotion policy after two years. They reported, "Retained Florida students made significant reading gains relative to the control group of socially promoted students."<sup>5</sup> They found that the academic benefit increased after the second year: "That is, students lacking in basic skills who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the skills they are lacking."<sup>6</sup>

In short, the retained children not only made larger literacy gains than similar students who barely scored high enough to escape retention (or received an exemption). Two years out, the gap had grown larger. The implication: retained students learned how to read, while the comparison group fell further behind grade level.

Beyond the likely benefit of increased remediation, the threat of retention also creates a strong incentive for children to improve their studies to proceed to the next grade with their peers.

In addition, in 2002 Florida lawmakers introduced a statewide program known as "Just Read, Florida!" The effort created new academies to train teachers in reading instruction and provided for the hiring of 2,000 additional reading coaches. Teachers in grades K–3 took mandatory reading training courses. Students in grades 6 through 12 who demonstrated insufficient reading skills received remedial instruction.

## ***Alternative Teacher Certification***

Studies have found little relationship between certification and student test score gains, and suggest that selectively retaining teachers demonstrating gains in early years of teaching would be a far more effective method for increasing teacher quality than mere certification.

Florida established policies to allow for alternative paths to teacher certification. The purpose of these policies is to attract high-quality teachers to the classroom who otherwise would not consider teaching as a profession, given the barrier to entry created by the traditional teacher certification requirements. For example, people who wish to become teachers in Florida can attend “Educator Preparation Institutes,” which facilitate career transitions for qualified professionals who wish to become teachers. Districts are also required to offer their own forms of alternative certification. Today, about half of all new teachers are coming through alternative certification programs in Florida.

## **THE ART OF WINNING AN “UNFAIR GAME” FOR NEW MEXICO KIDS**

Michael Lewis gave his 2003 bestseller *Moneyball* the subtitle *the Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. *Moneyball* chronicled the success of the Oakland Athletics in reaching the Major League Baseball playoffs on a regular basis despite having one of the lowest payrolls for player salaries. The Athletics succeeded by getting a bigger bang for each buck- precisely what New Mexico lawmakers need to achieve in order to make New Mexico a K-12 contender and avoid “Appalachia” labels.

New Mexico has a relatively challenging K-12 population and is not among the highest spending states. Worse still, with economic challenges, New Mexico may not be able to afford the K-12 spending currently in place over the long haul. New Mexico schools can improve nevertheless by focusing on improving the productivity of spending. Policymakers must focus on how to get more with less. If New Mexico wishes to avoid cementing a national reputation as a K-12 backwater, New Mexico’s adults must take bold action. The focus of that action must lie in improving bang for the buck.

If New Mexico lawmakers summon the courage to follow and improve upon Florida’s reforms, they will not only master the art of winning an “unfair game.” Such policies will prove to be a bottom of the ninth Grand Slam New Mexico’s kids.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Jo Waits, Heather E. Campbell, Rebecca Gau, Ellen Jacobs, Tom Rex, and Robert K. Hess. 2006. *Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds and Others Don't*, available on the internet at <http://www.asu.edu/copp/morrison/LatinEd.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ladner, Matthew and Dan Lips. 2009. *How 'No Child Left Behind' Threatens Florida's Successful Education Reforms*. Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #2226, available online at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2226.cfm>.

<sup>3</sup> Forster, Greg. 2009. *Lost Opportunity: An Empirical Analysis of How Vouchers Affected Florida Public Schools*. Publication of the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, available on the internet at <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/downloadFile.do?id=284>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ledyard King, “Some schools denying students free pass to next grade,” *Gannett News Service*, September 26, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “Getting Farther by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida’s Policy to End Social Promotion,” Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 49, September 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*