

"Teacher pay reforms are needed for our students"

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I was president of Florida's Senate when the A+ Plan for Education was enacted in 1999.

Opponents of the bill said it would ruin public schools. In fact, the reforms - school grades, school choice, cash bonuses for success - is largely credited by researchers from around the country with the remarkable turnaround in Florida's schools.

In 1998, nearly half of Florida's fourth-graders were functionally illiterate. Today, more than 70 percent of Florida's fourth-graders are reading at grade level, and the biggest gains in recent years have been made by African-American and Hispanic students and students with disabilities.

Principals, teachers, parents and the students themselves deserve huge credit for the hard work it required to achieve these advances. But, the accountability system launched more than a decade ago was the catalyst for change.

For the last 10 years, school grades have been based solely on student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Half of the grade is based on student achievement - how many students are on grade level in reading, writing, math and science.

The other half is based on progress - how many students, with an emphasis on low-performing students, demonstrated progress from one year to the next in reading and math.

The balance between achievement and progress maintains the focus on the ultimate goal, which is students performing on grade level, while still giving credit for progress by students, even if they are below grade level.

Senate Bill 6, and the companion bill in the House, HB 7189, will spur the same synergy for success created by the A+ Plan.

This bill to improve teacher evaluations and compensation provides a similar approach.

Half of the annual evaluation is based on student performance and the other half is based on other factors, which could include principal and peer reviews and educational degrees.

This balance recognizes that student learning is the ultimate goal, but other factors, including purely subjective ones, also need to be considered. Plus, the bill requires input from teachers as the evaluations are developed.

Effective teachers will earn higher salaries.

The bill also directly addresses two of the biggest challenges facing education today.

- First, closing the achievement gap is a moral and economic imperative. Florida is one of just three states to narrow the gap for minority and low-income students. But we must do more.

This bill will further close the achievement gap by providing higher salaries for teachers who work in high-poverty schools, which is a tougher job. Raising the pay for these positions will attract the best to students with the greatest need.

- Second, Florida must prepare students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in the 21st century economy. In short, that means more rigorous math and science courses.

Requiring these subjects to earn a high school diploma, which is another bill advancing in the Florida Legislature, is part of the solution. This bill provides the other part.

Providing for higher salaries for subjects in high-need areas such as math and science will make the teaching profession more competitive.

The same groups that fought accountability a decade ago are back with a vengeance to fight these new reforms.

Had they won a decade ago, Florida might not be experiencing the renaissance in education that we are today.

If they win this battle, Florida's students and teachers will lose.

Toni Jennings is a former lieutenant governor.