

After Gulf Gate Elementary School in Florida received an "A" in the Florida school grading system, six teachers and the principal decided to return to the governor the amount of bonus money they would have received. Here is the position paper they submitted to explain why.

Florida's A+ Plus Plan for Education: The Misuse of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test and the Grading of Schools

As individuals some of us refuse to accept our bonuses for being an A school because to do so would mean we approve of the Governor's A+ Plan for Education. We believe this Plan does not promote true school reform. Through its misuse of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test and its unfair grading of schools, this Plan will have a negative effect on our schools. The Florida Comprehensive Test (FCAT) was designed to measure how well schools were teaching the Sunshine State Standards. At first, starting with Florida Writes, these tests had a positive effect. The information gained from the FCAT was being used to make positive changes in schools' curriculums and instruction. Schools across the state were beginning to adopt programs which were designed to develop higher order thinking skills. The Governor A+ Plan for Education has misused this test by using it as the sole measure of student achievement. According to the Governor's Plan, a school's FCAT scores basically determine the grade the school receives. We believe the over emphasis of the FCAT test is a misuse of the test and will cause the following problems:

Instead of focusing on true school reform, teachers and administrators, will be looking for the instructional programs that promise higher test scores. These types of programs usually do little more than prepare students for taking the test. More and more time will be given to teaching to the test and taking practice tests. Schools will become centers for test preparation. Subjects which are not tested such as the fine arts, civics, and extra curriculum activities will be squeezed out of our schools as more and more time and money is dedicated to getting ready for "The Big Test." Legislators will be mandating what will be taught in the classroom. There is something ominous about children learning only what the state wants them to learn. Textbooks will cover only what the state considers to be important. Currently, children must learn to write an expository essay in the style the state has deemed acceptable. If a teacher or student should stray from this path, they will be found out at the time of testing. The result is a loss of creativity on both the part of teachers and students. Fear will do away with any original thoughts. Children will be continually centered on getting the best test scores. Research shows that when students' only motivation is to do well on tests, they begin to lose their interest in learning and their desire to take on new challenges.

Assigning a school a letter grade is a simplistic way of evaluating a school and its faculty. The Governor's method of grading schools does not take into account how much progress each individual child makes. It is based on whether or not this year's group of fourth (or 5th, 8th, 10th) grade students scored higher on a specific subject area of the FCAT than last year's students at that grade level. Because of this misuse of data and its inability to depict individual student growth, we have seen several fine schools and hardworking teachers, who are dedicated to working with poor or disadvantaged children, receive a grade of D or F. As professionals we cannot endorse a program

which treats our colleagues in such an unjust manner.

Finally, we do not support the use of vouchers, and we believe the grading of schools is a ploy of the Governor's voucher program. Students can only qualify for vouchers if their school is graded as failing. As long as the Governor's A+ Plan for Education uses a one size fits all assessment based on using only one test as a measure of student achievement, there will always be F and D schools. Therefore, by unfairly portraying our schools and our teachers as failing to educate, the Governor can justify his voucher program. We believe that if we accept our bonuses we would be endorsing the grading of schools, and providing fuel to promote the voucher program.