

The Florida School Recognition Program: Is It Time For A Second Look?

Charles J. Morris¹
Okaloosa Citizens Alliance²

Introduction

In 1973 the Florida Legislature enacted the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) which had the effect of equalizing funding to "...guarantee to each student the availability of programs and services appropriate to his or her educational needs that are substantially equal to those available to any similar student notwithstanding geographic differences and varying local economic factors." To achieve this laudable goal of equivalent funding for all school districts, the FEFP formula takes into account varying local property tax bases, education program costs, costs of living, and costs for equivalent programs due to "sparsity and dispersion of student populations."

By taking these factors into consideration, along with a few others, the Legislature allocates a certain dollar amount per student to each of the 67 districts in the state. This total is then used to determine the millage level (called the Required Local Effort) established for each district. An optional discretionary millage (less than 1 mill), which all districts have adopted in the past, is also made available by the Legislature. Individual districts also have the option of assessing up to 2 mills for capital projects.

In addition to the above, the Legislature has established the School Recognition Program which provides financial awards to schools that have high FCAT scores, sustain those scores over time, or demonstrate improved FCAT scores from one testing period to the next. These funds, which amounted to more than \$129 million in 2007, are awarded in the amount of \$100 per student for each qualifying school. The awards may be used for "...nonrecurring bonuses to the faculty and staff, nonrecurring expenditures for educational equipment or materials, or for temporary personnel to assist the school in maintaining or improving student performance." Somewhat surprisingly, the Department of Education reports that it has no record of how these funds are used, but a survey based on a small sampling of school districts revealed that the majority of the funds are used for teacher bonuses, the apparent presumption being that the teachers in these schools are directly responsible for the test scores that produced these financial awards.

¹ The author lives in Niceville, FL. He is a former Professor of Psychology and Provost at Denison University in Granville, OH. email: cmorris0106@cox.net

² The Okaloosa Citizens Alliance is a non-profit and non-partisan organization whose mission is to promote more efficient and effective government. website: www.ocal787.org

The Current Study

The purpose of this report is to present empirical data which question the assumption that teachers are the main reason for the points earned as part of the School Recognition Program. It will be shown that the strongest correlate of FCAT performance is found in the socio-economic profile of the school districts, rather than the schools themselves. In other words, the reason some districts perform better than others is not due to the quality of the schools themselves, or teachers who are better than those in other districts, but rather to the fact that students from wealthier districts perform better than those from poorer districts.

The Evidence

Consider, first of all, the following scatter plot, which shows the relationship between the total points earned (based on FCAT scores and FCAT gains) as part of the school recognition program and a measure of the poverty level of each district (based on the percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-priced lunches):

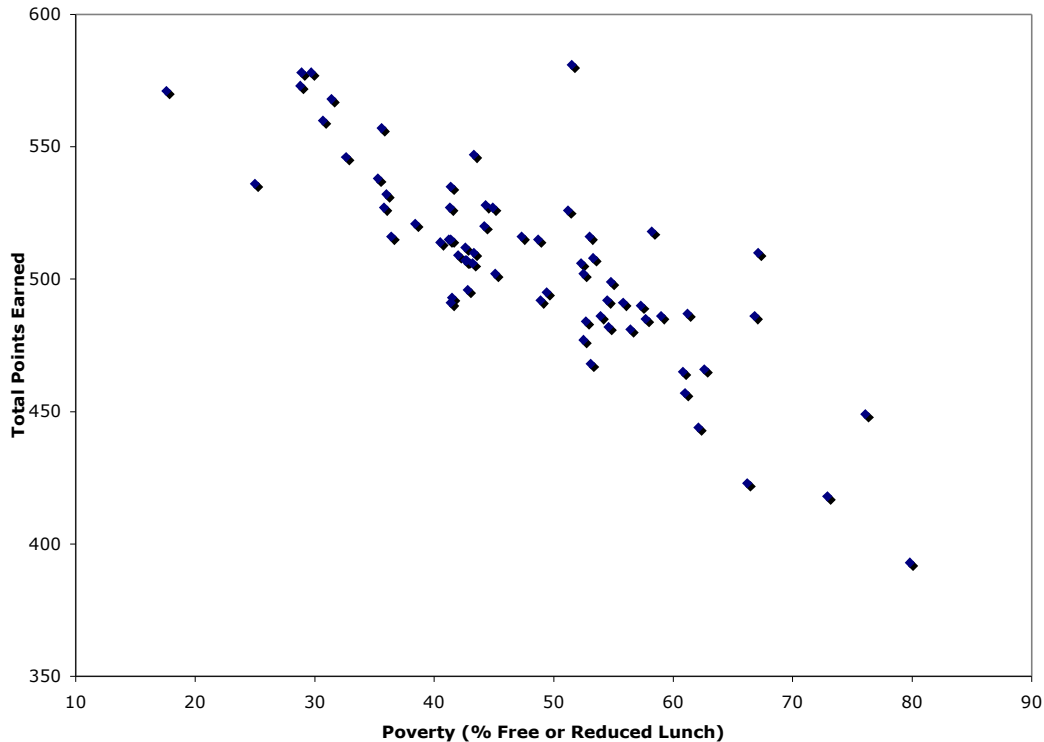


Fig. 1. Scatter plot between poverty level and total points earned based on FCAT scores and FCAT gains (2006-07).

Note the very strong inverse relationship ($r = -.829$) between poverty level and the total points earned by each district. The higher the percentage of students living in poverty, the lower the number of points earned by the district. A stepwise regression analysis of these data revealed that more than two-thirds of the variance in the points earned by each district could be attributed to poverty levels within those districts, as measured by the

percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced price lunches. The analysis further revealed that race (percentage of African American students) raised the variance accounted for by 4%, a statistically significant increase but quite small compared to the 68% “explained” by the poverty measure.

Another way to look at these results is to examine the relationship between the poverty level of each district and the financial awards each district received in 2007. The scatter plot shown below summarizes this relationship, which statistically showed a highly significant inverse correlation ($r = -.677$) between the poverty level and the bonus dollars per student awarded to each district, based upon the total population of the district. By way of further explanation, the 22 districts with the lowest poverty levels averaged \$63 per student in bonus money compared to \$31 per student in the 22 districts with the highest poverty levels. The middle 23 districts were awarded an average of \$47 per student.

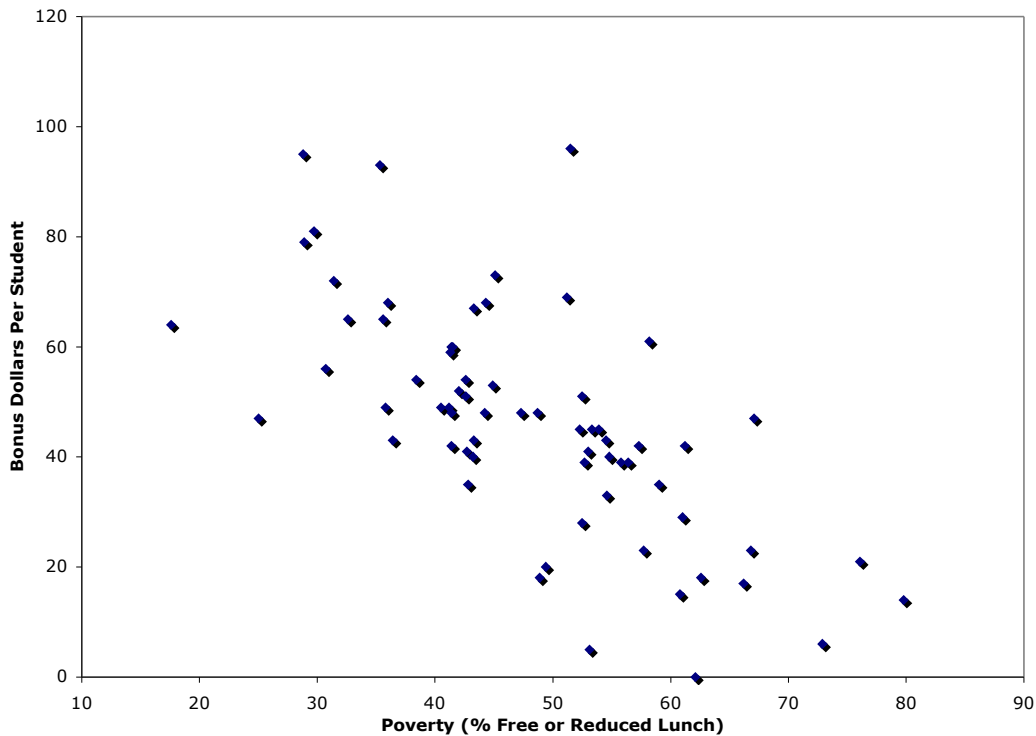


Fig. 2. Scatter plot between poverty level and bonus dollars awarded per student (2006-07).

Discussion

Unless we are willing to argue that the teachers in the wealthiest school districts are vastly superior to those in the poorest districts, these results indicate that socio-economic demographics are the major determinants of FCAT performance and, in turn, the bonus dollars awarded to the schools. Districts with students from poor families receive significantly less bonus money than wealthier districts. As the system works now, it distributes rewards based primarily on where a teacher works rather than on how well the

teacher performs. In light of these results, the current system for distributing bonus money would appear to be unjustified.

Given the important role that poverty plays in the determination of FCAT performance, the question naturally arises as to what it is about impoverished environments that produce these results. We can only speculate at this point, but most experts would probably agree that parental expectations and involvement in the education of their children is a major factor. If so, it would make sense to consider ways to invest in programs that encourage parents to become more involved and as well as more effective mentors for their children. Another strategy might be to offer after school programs that provide additional instruction and mentoring. But, surely, we can all agree that giving these districts less money is not the solution if the goal is to improve student performance. Moreover, we need to reconsider whether spending millions of dollars on what turns out to be teacher bonuses is justified or a wise use of limited educational dollars. Of course, none of this is intended to dismiss the important role teacher's play in the lives of our children. We simply wish to point out that FCAT scores are at best a very weak indicator of teacher effectiveness. It is both inaccurate and demeaning to suggest that the teachers of one district are better than those of another when comparisons are based upon scores which are the likely result of the demographic profiles of the districts themselves.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this report provides strong evidence that the socio-economic profile of a school district is the primary determinant of the FCAT data used to award financial bonuses to Florida schools. Children from disadvantaged communities perform much more poorly on these tests than those from more advantaged communities. This result brings into question the practice of awarding bonuses to teachers for student performance that appears to be largely out of a teacher's control. Moreover, to suggest that teachers from poorer districts are undeserving of recognition fails to acknowledge the enormous challenges these teachers face. It is our view that the process by which schools are rewarded as part of the School Recognition Program is in need of fundamental revision. We further believe that some of the resources now spent on that program would be more fruitfully spent on a better understanding of demographic differences and the implementation of community programs aimed at helping parents play a stronger and more effective role in the education of their children. Efforts of this kind would appear to be a wiser use of our limited education dollars and would also seem to be more consistent with FEFP's objective to meet the education needs of all Florida children.

03/26/2008