



Florida's plan to measure students by race riles education experts

By Joshua Rhett Miller - October 15, 2012

A new policy by Florida educators to set student goals in math and reading based on their race is an “ill-advised” plan that is destined to fail, education analysts told FoxNews.com.

By 2018, Florida’s Department of Education wants 90 percent of its Asian students to be reading at or above grade level, compared to 88 percent of white students, 81 percent of Hispanic pupils and 74 percent of African-American children. In math, state educational officials want that figure to be 92 percent for Asian students, or 18 percent higher than that of African-American students and 11 percent higher than their American Indian counterparts.

“Separate but equal is not,” said Kris Amundson of Education Sector, an independent education think tank based in Washington. “I understand that this is recognition that students are beginning at different places — and that’s honest — but I think it is, at best, ill-advised to set different learning standards for students based on the color of their skin.”

Amundson, a former chairwoman of the Fairfax County School Board in Virginia, said the plan “sends the wrong message” to children, adding that the lower standards for minorities closely reflects what President George W. Bush once dubbed the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

“It’s better to say 80 or 90 [percent], or whatever your number is, and then acknowledge that schools aren’t hitting targets because of certain populations,” she said. “That’s more honest than creating a system where everyone gets a trophy.”

The 24-page strategic plan, which was approved in October, also sets differing goals for students who are economically disadvantaged, those with disabilities and children who are still learning English. Florida Department of Education officials were unavailable for comment Monday, but chairwoman Kathleen Shanahan has said the goals are needed to comply with terms of a waiver that Florida and 32 other states have within provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

According to state statistics, 69 percent of white students in Florida scored at or above grade level in reading during the 2011-2012 school year, compared to 53 percent of Hispanic students and 38 percent of their African-American classmates.

Dr. Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Board Association, said the state's plan has been designed in mind to shrink that sizable gap.

"The message could have been portrayed a little clearer, but as far as racism, I see nothing in wanting to raise test scores that would be racist," he said. "You're trying to raise all test scores, not just in one particular group."

Blanton said his agency has no official stance on the new policy as of Monday, but said Florida School Board Association officials will discuss the matter at its meeting next month.

Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank, said Florida education officials are recognizing that some segments of students start at different levels than others. Doing otherwise would be illogical, he said. Still, he understands the justifiable concerns of an African-American parent upset that his or her child won't get the "same push" as other students in the state.

"The root problem here is that it can't deal with kids as individuals, it has to deal with them as groups," McCluskey said. "This is again why we need to move to a system that is rooted in individual kids."

The final result, he said, is that some children won't get the same educational attention due to the color of their skin.

"If you're an African-American or Hispanic student, the first message is: 'I don't have to do that well,'" he said. "There's clearly a negative message being sent to kids based on what racial or ethnic groups they belong to."

A better indicator of potential academic performance, McCluskey said, is perhaps income rather than race.

"We're talking about unique, individual kids," he said. "We have to get to a system that deals with students as individuals, not as members of groups, which means attaching funding to students themselves and letting the parents choose any school they want." Any time race is mentioned regarding education, people become rightfully sensitive and concerned, Andy Ford, president of the Florida Education Association, told FoxNews.com. But recognizing that not all students are on equal ground is a key part of the puzzle, he said.

"It's really an opportunity gap that we're looking at," Ford said. "This is just a recognition of where kids are today. I would like to live in world where race and economic status do not matter, but we're not there yet as a society."

Another national education official, meanwhile, disagreed with the new policy, saying it was well-intentioned but missed the mark.

"The intent is probably honorable, but the execution is kind of insensitive, perhaps to the very groups they are trying to help," said Daniel Domenech, executive director of the

American Association of School Administrators. “Certainly the intent to get some groups to higher standards should remain, but it does show a degree of insensitivity.”

Domenech suggested that the state reconsider and analyze a system that rewards the year-to-year growth of each student.

“The expectations should be the same for all students,” he said. “Let’s not dilute that powerful objective.”