

Education seminar focuses on college prep for high schoolers

By Gary Rohrer

During an education seminar in Tallahassee on Wednesday, three Florida lawmakers stressed the need to get high school juniors and seniors engaged in learning so they are properly prepared for college-level courses.

Sens. Anitere Flores and **David Simmons**, and **Rep. Erik Fresen**, all Republicans who sit on key education committees, pointed to national test results and increased remedial education at universities and state colleges as evidence Florida's high school graduates need to be challenged more consistently in the two years leading up to graduation.

On the **National Assessment of Educational Progress** tests taken by Florida students every two years, scores have stagnated the past four years after they increased through the first part of the last decade. Also, the last time high school seniors were tested in 2009, just 19 percent tested proficient in math.

Now, some lawmakers and educators are starting to look at ways to keep upperclassmen interested in the classroom. They say after 10th grade, the last time students are required to take the FCAT, even high-level students can take a cooler approach to their studies.

"I believe that if we don't provide an accountability measure for 12th grade, we're going to find from school officials that there's a tendency to slack off in Florida," Simmons said during a panel discussion at Hotel Duval to an audience of school administrators.

He suggested that having NAEP test seniors more often would help keep upperclassmen engaged. But more testing is not necessarily a silver bullet, some educators said. It needs to be backed up with policies aimed at improving performance.

"To measure for measurement's sake, it's an exercise in trivia," said **Pam Stewart**, chancellor of public schools for the **Florida Department of Education**.

Instead, increased rigor and standards should be added in junior and senior years, as well as offering incentives and punishments for performance. Flores suggested tying acceptance to state colleges or universities as a possible carrot to keep upperclassmen eager to learn, but Fresen suggested there might be a need for a stick as well. "Beyond that 10th grade, our policies don't have too many consequences with them," Fresen said.

During a week when Florida students throughout the state are taking the FCAT, talk of test fatigue among teachers, parents and students abounds. For Fresen and other lawmakers, however, even though more testing may not be required to address college readiness, the data gleaned from tests is essential to the education policymaking process. Not everyone, though, was enthralled with the emphasis on quantitative data, measurement and tests that have been the mantra of Republican efforts to reform education since **Gov. Jeb Bush** was in office.

"I think the grading of schools – that's the worst thing that the state has done. The students say, 'Why should I try? I'm in an F school,'" said **Jefferson County School Board member Edward Vollertsen**.

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