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Education Reform for 2010 Session

TALLAHASSEE -- With a focus on children instead of high-stakes tests, Florida House Democrats are proposing bold initiatives to increase public school accountability and prepare every student to compete in the global economy.

House Bill 473 by Rep. Dwight Bullard (D-Miami) calls for comprehensive end-of-course exams in a wide variety of subjects to replace the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) as the nearly exclusive tool to determine student and school performance.

The bill expands the way school accountability is determined by focusing on the entirety of students' work throughout the year in addition to their end-of-course exam scores. The ability for schools to prepare students for promotion and their successful use of innovation and technology in teaching would be taken into account in the new accountability formula.

In most grades, accountability is currently entirely based on the FCAT, a standardized test that offers only a snapshot of students' performance. The FCAT covers core-curriculum subjects such as reading, math, and, to a lesser extent, science and writing, but ignores important subjects such as civics, geography, world history, humanities and the arts.

The specifics of implementing these reforms would be developed over the next three years by a panel of education professionals, parents, teachers, community leaders and research experts. All of the reforms would take effect in the 2014-2015 school year. That will give the state and school districts adequate time to train classroom teachers on the new standards before they are put into practice.

“Our bill puts children first by giving parents, school professionals and the education community the power to work out a plan that everyone can buy into,” said Representative Bullard, the House Democratic Ranking Member on K-12 education policy matters. “The problem with education reforms of the past decade is that ideas were dreamed up in Tallahassee then hammered into the schools, teachers and children whether or not those ideas made sense.

“This plan will help bring Florida’s public school system into the 21st Century.”

Elementary schools would also see the FCAT phased out in the 2014-2015 school year and replaced with subject area assessment tests under the plan. Like middle and high schools, elementary schools would also be assessed on the entirety of students’ work throughout the year.

Realizing that students must reach higher to compete in the new global economy, the plan requires students to pass Geometry, Algebra II, Biology I and an additional high-level physical science to graduate. To help students who will struggle to meet these standards, the bill uses diagnostic tests to assess students in the sixth, eighth and tenth grades. Those who are not on track to meet the standards would be directed toward intervention programs to help them succeed.

Intervention services will be paid for by redirecting money now used to reward high performing schools toward programs to help all struggling students. High-performing schools would continue to be rewarded for excellence by being liberated from certain state mandates and would get more flexibility to develop and fund innovative education programs.

Republicans and Democrats united in 2008 to create a new grading formula for high schools that deemphasized the FCAT and placed more focus on graduation rates, success in advance placement programs and success in preparing students for college. This bill builds on the spirit of those reforms.

“Expanding accountability needs to go beyond high schools,” said Rep. Martin Kiar (D-Davie), the House Democratic Ranking Member on education funding

issues. "It's time to begin assessing elementary and middle schools on everything students are doing, which would provide our children with a better and well rounded education.

"Lawmakers may not agree on everything. But I believe this plan opens the door again for bipartisan education reform," said Kiar.

State Sen. Dan Gelber (D-Miami Beach) has agreed to sponsor the bill in the Florida Senate.

- **Details of HB 473 are provided in an accompanying document.**
- **Press interviews of Representatives Bullard, Kiar and other members of the Florida House Democratic Caucus are available.**

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