

## POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF



research • communication • advocacy • support

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### *Our Students Will Rise Higher than Our Expectations*

A Case For Engaging Students In Education Policy Development

Florida lawmakers will soon consider legislation that will raise high school graduation requirements, a daunting prospect to some representatives, students, and parents. House Bill 1293 (recently passed full House), introduced by Representative Erik Fresen (R-Miami) and Senate Bill 2654 (postponed in PreK-12 Committee), co-sponsored by Senators Thad Altman (R-Melbourne) and Stephen Wise (R-Jacksonville) adds more rigorous math and science courses required for graduation. Students entering the 9th grade in the 2012-2013 School Year will be required to earn four credits in mathematics, including Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. They will have to earn three credits in Science, including Biology I, Chemistry, and one credit in a higher-level science course.

In a previous policy brief, ENLACE Florida endorsed the establishment of a college prep curriculum as the default curriculum for all Florida high school students. Inspired by the recommendations of the American Diploma project (which also serves as a benchmark for the legislation under consideration), as well as the data coming out of districts and states that have imposed a college prep curriculum, ENLACE Florida remains confident that our high school students will rise to the challenge of more rigorous and relevant courses in the high school curriculum.

However, “conventional wisdom” holds that if we raise high school graduation requirements we will only increase the number of drop outs, mostly limited income, African American, and Hispanic students. Apparently, many people cling to the belief that we can’t demand more from these students because they cannot improve their academic performance. The experience of many school districts, however, demonstrates that higher academic requirements do not necessarily lead to higher drop out rates. In San José, California, for example, educators implemented a college prep curriculum known as the A-G Curriculum as the standard course of study for all students. Despite the initial objections of students and parents about the negative impact that this more challenging curriculum would have on students, mostly Hispanics, the high school graduation rates in the San José school district increased from 73% in 1999 to 79% in 2003. The achievement gap between white and Latino students in reading and math also decreased 55% and 43%, respectively, during this same time.<sup>1</sup>

While the data from California and other states lead us to believe that Hispanic and African American students in Florida can also pass tougher courses, we are compelled to endorse a more rigorous, college prep curriculum for all high school students because the students we serve have endorsed such a reform. Sixty-two students from eight universities assembled in Boca Raton on February 27, 2009 to deliberate and recommend solutions to four critical education policy issues at the first annual Florida Student Education Policy Conference (FSEPC). At the conference the students passed a resolution calling on the state and its school districts to develop a tougher and more challenging high school curriculum. They then took this same message to legislators and policy makers in Tallahassee. Vincent Evans, a student at Florida A&M who had to take a remedial math course his freshman year, spoke in support of higher standards in testimony before the

<sup>1</sup> Jayesh D’Souza and Paul Dosal, “Toward a College Preparatory High School Curriculum in Florida,” ENLACE FLORIDA Policy Brief, Vol. II, Issue 6 (June 2008). Go to: [www.enlaceflorida.org](http://www.enlaceflorida.org)

House Council on Education and Economic Development on March 18. He explained that “I simply wasn’t prepared [in high school] to take on the very important challenge of math at the collegiate level.”<sup>2</sup>

While ENLACE Florida has concerns about the immediate impact on some students and the availability of funding to both train and recruit qualified teachers, it is difficult to ignore Vincent’s plea that we demand more of him. Policy initiatives launched in Tallahassee (or Washington) rarely benefit from student input, primarily because students are rarely engaged in the policy-making process. If we take the time to listen to and respect the opinions of recent graduates, we will improve the policy-making process and craft policies that are more likely to produce the desired outcome for students following in their footsteps. The Florida Student Education Policy Conference, the first of its kind in the state of Florida, offers a model for student leadership development and advocacy that can help the state in its efforts to improve academic achievement. Having seen the enthusiasm and quality of the students who participated, ENLACE FLORIDA is confident that our students will rise *higher* than our level of expectations.

### Purpose of the Student Education Policy Conference

The mission of ENLACE Florida is to promote college readiness, access, and success by engaging communities for education. As part of that effort, ENLACE movements in Florida, California, New Mexico and elsewhere have empowered students, parents, and community organizations to prepare more students to enter and succeed in higher education. Through a student conference dedicated to education policy, ENLACE Florida provided an opportunity for students to engage with their peers, administrators, policy makers, and legislators on issues that affect them directly. We wanted to bring students together and let them develop their own agenda for education reform, so ENLACE organized the conference and provided financial support to the students, but students developed their own analyses and policy recommendations. ENLACE simply provided the opportunity for university students to come together, debate the issues, and take their policy recommendations directly to Tallahassee. ENLACE Florida launched the student conference and ENLACE Florida days at the Capitol with three specific goals in mind:

- ☑ To create an education policy forum in which college students debated critical issues affecting education in the State of Florida;
- ☑ To empower students to participate in the policy making process; and
- ☑ To open channels of communication between state representatives, policy makers and the students they serve

In addition to the anticipated institutional benefits generated by empowering students, ENLACE also hoped to serve the students by giving them an opportunity to develop their:

- ☑ Critical thinking skills;
- ☑ Research skills;
- ☑ Knowledge of education issues;
- ☑ Oral and written communication skills; and,
- ☑ Consensus building skills.

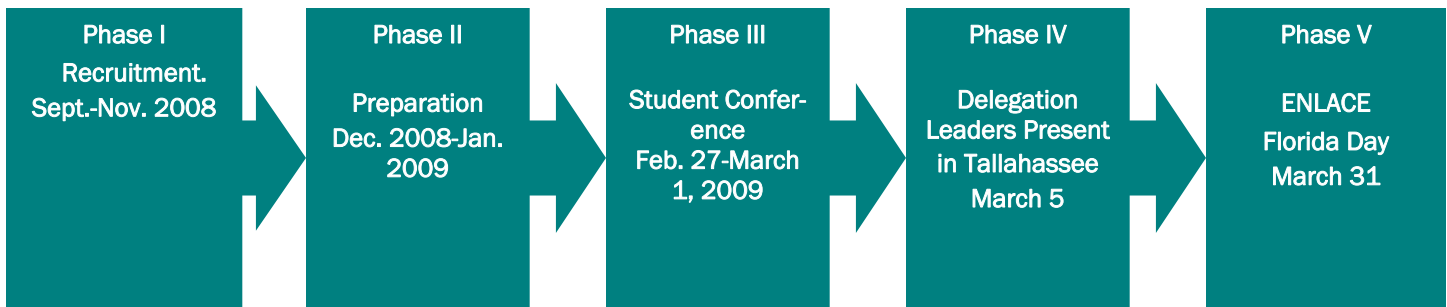
To accomplish these goals, ENLACE Florida designed a student leadership development and advocacy model built on five distinct phases:

- ☑ Phase I: Recruitment of students by Delegation Advisors at each university
- ☑ Phase II: Research, analysis, and discussion within each delegation, guided by delegation advisor and ENLACE Florida staff.
- ☑ Phase III Florida Student Education Policy Conference, February 27-March 1, 2009, culminating in the passage of policy recommendations on 4 topics
- ☑ Phase IV: Student delegation leaders present policy recommendations and discuss their interests and concerns with key education leaders in Tallahassee, March 5, 2009.
- ☑ Phase V: All 62 students travel to Tallahassee to raise public awareness about the need for education reform and meet with education policy-makers during ENLACE Florida Day, March 31, 2009

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<sup>2</sup> For the testimony of Vincent Evans go to: <http://enlacefl.usf.edu/enlace%20day/index.html>

The 5-phase model is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

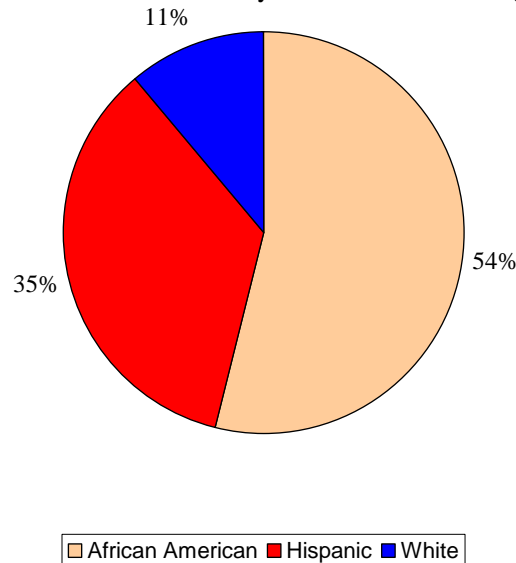


**Figure 1: Student Leadership Development and Advocacy**

### **The Florida Student Education Policy Conference**

Sixty-four college students were selected for the conference through a competitive application process by faculty leaders at Florida Agricultural & Mechanical (FAMU), Florida Atlantic (FAU), Florida International (FIU), Florida State (FSU), Central Florida (UCF), Florida (UF), North Florida (UNF), and South Florida (USF). Faculty and staff leaders at these institutions selected the students based on a flexible set of criteria. The guidelines did not include any preferences for race, ethnicity, or gender. As it turned out, 71% of the delegates were women, and 89% of the delegates were African American or Hispanic as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Race and Ethnicity of the FSEPC Delegates, 2009**



ENLACE Florida leaders selected the site, invited the guest speakers, and drafted the schedule for the conference. The team also selected four general topics for the students to research and debate:

1. Florida's high school curriculum
2. Florida's failing high schools
3. Florida's Financial Aid System, and
4. Capacity and quality of higher education

Soon after the delegations were in place, the ENLACE Florida staff assigned each delegation one of the four topics, giving them as much as 3 months to prepare their reports to the conference. Faculty leaders at each university and ENLACE Florida staff guided the students' preparations, utilizing web-based course management technology to post reports and analyses of each topic, communicate with students, and develop the PowerPoint presentations using a common template. Two delegations were assigned to each topic, so that two student delegations presented reports on each of the four subjects. Students made their presentations on Saturday morning. In the afternoon, the students broke into 4 subcommittees to debate each of the four topics and hammer out a resolution that reflected the majority view of both delegations. On Sunday morning, the students re-assembled for the final session, where they presented, debated, and voted on the policy recommendations that emerged from each of the 4 subcommittees.

During the course of the 2 ½ day conference, the students also heard presentations from and engaged in question and answer sessions with Frank Brogan, President of FAU and former Lieutenant Governor of Florida; Dr. John Pritchett, Provost, Florida Atlantic University; State Representative Anitere Flores (R-Miami), Chair, House PreK-12 Appropriations Committee, and former State University System Chancellor Dr. Mark Rosenberg, now President of FIU.

### **The Policy Recommendations**

On Sunday morning, the students engaged in a vigorous and challenging debate on the policy recommendations presented by the four subcommittees. The student delegations introduced the recommendations, defended them, and moved them to a vote before the 62 delegates in attendance. A simple majority vote (32) was required for passage of the resolution, and as the students discovered during the course of an occasionally raucous debate, a simple majority was not so easy to achieve.

Their recommendations do not reflect the policy positions of ENLACE Florida or the universities represented at the conference. The following recommendations, grouped in the 4 general topics in which the students considered them, represent carefully crafted positions adopted by a deliberative student body after months of research and analysis.

#### **I. The High School Curriculum**

##### **Recommendations:**

- ☒ Mandate a linear K-12 curriculum with fewer but more critical core concepts.

Citing the lack of rigorous college prep courses and the high number of students who require remediation at a university or community college, the students passed a resolution calling for a more challenging linear curriculum, such as the sequence of Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II. The motion passed 37 to 25.

- ☒ Revise the Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to more closely align it with curriculum standards.

The students recommended a comprehensive testing system that would evaluate their mastery of the subjects taught in the linear, or college prep curriculum. Concerned that too many teachers were "teaching to the test," the students advocated a system that would encourage instructional innovation and allow teachers to focus their efforts on teaching to the Sunshine State standards. The recommendation passed 41 to 21.

#### **II. Failing High Schools**

##### **Recommendations:**

- ☒ Increase funding to schools by raising taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and other "sin taxes."

Proponents of revenue enhancements argued that the state should discourage consumption of alcohol and tobacco anyway, so that a tax on these items would generate additional revenues for schools and ameliorate social problems. The motion passed by a narrow majority, 32 to 30.

- ☒ Offer a tax break to businesses that provide financial assistance to failing high schools.

The students advocated the development of financial incentives for the private sector to provide support directly to schools. The motion passed 46 to 16.

- ☒ Broaden the school accountability system.

Endorsing the reforms enacted last year that reduced the weight of FCAT scores in a school's grade, the students recommended a formula for grading schools to include, but not be limited to FCAT scores, advanced placement courses, dual enrollment courses, student-teacher ratios, and GPA's. The motion passed 52 to 10.

- ☒ Revise the current school incentive system to provide more money to failing high schools.

Students argued that failing high schools should receive a greater proportion of FCAT rewards funds so that they could use the money to improve the academic performance of their students. Passing schools should receive blue ribbons "schools of excellence" for their FCAT performance. The motion passed 40 to 22.

### III. Florida's Financial Aid System

#### Recommendations:

- ☒ Students advocated for the development of an aggressive marketing campaign designed to reach students and parents of K-12 schools.

The students felt that most students had little knowledge of the many different federal and state financial aid programs available to students in Florida. They recommended that the state use all available means, including the web, to raise public awareness about the financial aid programs accessible to students. The motion passed 52 to 10.

- ☒ Bright Futures Scholarship Program

The USF and UF delegations presented a proposal to raise the academic eligibility requirements for the Bright Futures Scholarship Program. Any savings derived from the higher eligibility requirements would be diverted to need-based financial aid programs. The proposal generated passionate debate, but it failed by a vote of 22 to 40. The USF team has since submitted a revised proposal to the student delegates via the social networking website Facebook, but the delegates as of April 21, 2009 have not yet voted on the amended proposal.

### IV. Capacity and Quality of Higher Education

#### Recommendations:

- ☒ Allow universities to increase tuition up to 15% until Florida's average tuition reaches the national average, provided that all universities allocate a minimum of 30% of the differential tuition for need-based aid

Citing enrollment growth, Florida's very low tuition, and the "brain drain," the alarming loss of high quality faculty to other institutions, the students supported recently introduced legislation that would allow universities to raise tuition. The motion passed 42 to 20.

### The Students Take their Case to Tallahassee

On March 5, 2009, the delegation chairs visited the State Capitol in Tallahassee. They presented and discussed the conference resolutions with Senator Evelyn Lynn (R-Daytona Beach), Representative Anitere Flores, the Council of Community College Presidents, and Commissioner of Education Eric Smith. In response to the students' recommendation to raise high school graduation requirements, at least one elected officials pointed out that Hispanic and African American students would suffer most from the higher standards. The students, most of them Hispanic or African American, argued that they could meet the new academic requirements.

On March 18, three students from UNF and one from FAMU testified before the House Council on Education and Economic Development. The students offered their personal testimonies in support of raising high school graduation requirements as provided in HB 1293. While courses like Algebra II and Chemistry would present tougher challenges to the students, Kevin Vu of UNF argued to the House Council that "adding rigor to Florida's curriculum is necessary for us to compete in the global economy."<sup>3</sup> Some school district representatives agreed on the need for more rigorous courses, but

<sup>3</sup> For the testimony of Kevin VU, go to: <http://enlacefl.usf.edu/enlace%20day/index.html>

they explained that they lacked the funding to hire or retrain teachers to teach the new courses. Some representatives on the committee echoed these concerns, arguing that the higher requirements represented an unfunded mandate, given that the legislature was poised to slash school budgets. Nevertheless, HB 1293 passed with bipartisan support, with many legislators citing the testimony of our students.

On March 31, 2009, the entire assembly of delegates participated in ENLACE Day at the Capitol. Accompanied by their advisors and armed with their policy resolutions, the students met with Representative William Proctor (R-St. Augustine) and Representative Flores. At a luncheon, the students received highest praise and commentary from Commissioner of Education Eric Smith; Senator Evelyn Lynn; Judith Bilsky, Executive Vice Chancellor, Division of Community Colleges; and Dan Cohen-Vogel, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Board of Governors. In the afternoon the students appeared at a meeting of the House Full Appropriations Council on Education and Economic Development and were publicly recognized by the Chair, Representative Proctor. Another group of students appeared at a meeting of the Senate PreK-12 Education Committee and were publicly recognized by Senator Larcenia Bullard (D-Miami).

### Policy Implications

By organizing college students, supporting their research, and facilitating their interaction with policy makers, we have opened a channel of communication between the students we serve and the people who draft the policies to educate them. The linkage stands to benefit the students, the policy makers, and the quality of our educational policies. In the first instance, we should all take particular note of the direct benefits realized by students, many of whom are first generation, limited income students who have rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to meet, let alone engage, policy makers.

The students took full advantage of this unique opportunity. They researched and analyzed the issues carefully and came prepared to debate. The faculty and staff who had the privilege of observing the conference were totally impressed by the students' high level of enthusiasm and the students' command of the issues. We went to Boca Raton expecting to find a few students not adequately prepared for the conference. We found, instead, that the students could have used at least another day to debate the issues more thoroughly and pass more resolutions. We learned, in effect, that our students rose above our levels of expectations.

If we empower students by giving them a voice in the policy-making process, we can fine tune our policies to reflect the particular needs and interests of our students. University professors routinely collect student evaluations at the end of each semester, and departments base their annual evaluations of professors partly on these assessments. Why do we not also allow students into the policy-making and evaluation process at the state level? This model of student leadership development and advocacy offers the potential for an institutionalized means of communication between policy makers and students, particularly if expanded to all universities and community colleges.

Our students want an opportunity to excel, a chance to realize their potential. Most of the students who participated in the conference and ENLACE Day were first generation, limited income, racial or ethnic minorities. They were highly motivated, high-achieving college students, selected for these very reasons. They were not necessarily a representative sample of students; the resolutions they passed were not based on any scientific polling methods. They probably represent the highest achieving students in these categories, so their perspectives on raising high school graduation requirements may well reflect the views of students who have met, and will continue to meet, higher academic standards.

Yet, as we pause to debate the wisdom of raising high school graduation requirements during a budget crisis, let us think about the wisdom of not teaching to the higher standards these students have set for themselves—and us. Is it more appropriate or productive to set standards based on the low-performing students? Our students have argued before committees in Tallahassee that our public education system is not preparing our students to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century global economy. Economists and educators have been telling us that for years. Now that students have challenged us to challenge them, how can we ignore their demands?

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## Highlights from Florida's first Student Education Policy Conference

February 27-March 1, 2009

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL



Student Delegate presents education policy recommendation (above)



Student Delegate presents during Florida Student Education Policy Conference (above)



Students vote on education policy (right)

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