

THE POLITICS OF TESTING: THE FLORIDA EXPERIENCE

Speakers:	Hon. Jack D. Gordon, <i>The Florida Senate</i> Hon. Ralph D. Turlington, <i>Florida Commissioner of Education</i>
Moderators/ Recorders:	John Simmons, <i>The Florida State University</i> Sue Johnson, <i>The Florida State University</i>

Commissioner Turlington opened the session by describing the history of testing in Florida and the legislation that has created a dozen statewide tests over the past decade. He discussed the Basic Skills Assessment Program that assesses students' skills in the third, fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades, and the evolution of the 1979 Florida law mandating functional literacy as a requirement for high school graduation. He also discussed the recent court challenges to the state's functional literacy assessment programs.

According to Commissioner Turlington, the testing program implemented in Florida has been received positively by teachers. It has caused schools to be more serious about their mission by giving teachers something to "hold over" students so that better performance is achieved. The testing program in Florida has provided a strong incentive and been an excellent motivator for improvement in schools.

Senator Gordon addressed the issue of the context of testing in the opening of his speech. He referred to education and testing in terms of the industrial model: the state is responsible for the evaluation of a product, the student. The accountability for education rests in the hands of the students. School curricula are heavily weighted in a vocational direction, according to Gordon. Schools are in the business of training students for future jobs.

Senator Gordon believes that legislators and administrators should tell the public in simple, concise terms what is going on in the schools and they should be able to answer the question, "Are taxpayers getting their money's worth?" Testing accomplishes this goal. It is, according to Gordon, a "political necessity."

Gordon explained legislation that he introduced in the Florida Senate to increase support for teachers of English in the area of writing skills. The "Gordon Rule" provides for the reduction of class loads for secondary English teachers, provided these teachers agree to require one writing assignment per week. "Increased writing equals better writing" is the theoretical basis for this legislation.

In the question and answer session following the presentations, participants asked specific questions related to the testing of writing skills, particularly about the issue of increased funding from the legislature to implement such legislation as the "Gordon Rule." Senator Gordon recommended that teachers become involved in policy making in the school systems by attending budget sessions held by schools boards. In this way, teachers can have an impact on the types of testing done, and the types of support that are developed for the implementation of that testing.