



# BRIEFING

## ACCOUNTABILITY IS ESSENTIAL The Importance of Assessments in Florida Schools

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"In the past four years, Florida has ranked No. 11, No. 8, No. 5 and No. 11 among all 50 states in Education Week's annual Quality Counts report.<sup>1</sup> And contrary to some critics' claims, that's not just because of policies on paper that sound good; it's also because the state has moved the needle on student achievement, particularly for low-income kids. On the K-12 achievement portion of EdWeek's rating – which considers performance and progress on National Assessment of Educational Performance (NAEP), AP and graduation rates – Florida finished at No. 7, No. 7, No. 6 and No. 12 over the past four years. In 2011, it finished in the Top 10 in eight of nine progress categories. It finished in the Top 3 in six of them."<sup>2</sup>

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### Introduction

Florida, like many other states engaged in education accountability, has a history of being at the center of disputes with respect to its system of accountability, which is based on the use of statewide, standardized testing of students. While very few argue the merits of sound curriculum standards and student mastery of the standards content, once the discussion shifts from agreement of sound curriculum to the use of reliable metrics, much disagreement ensues.

The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability maintains its commitment to a strong system of education accountability that holds all of us, adults and students, to high expectations.

### Background on Accountability

Genuine accountability:

- uses effective, psychometrically-sound assessments to measure learning – for all students;
- includes the use of reliable assessments which serve as tools to improve student achievement and quality teaching strategies;
- acknowledges that not all instructional practices are equally effective and, more importantly, that using the results of sound assessments allows for the continuous improvement of teaching strategies, encouraging educators to adjust instruction based upon individual student performance;
- serves as a powerful tool that encourages teachers to push students who have mastered content on to more rigorous work and to free up additional teaching time, using alternate instructional strategies for those students who struggle.

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1 Quality Counts 2012, The Global Challenge, available at: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2012/01/12/index.html?intc=EW-QC12-LFTNAV> (Last visited July 13, 2012)

2 Did They Really Say That (About Education Reform in Florida)? - Ron Matus, redefinED, May 18, 2012, available at: <http://www.redefinedonline.org/2012/05/did-they-really-say-that-about-education-reform-in-florida/> (Last visited July 13, 2012)

## Benefits of Accountability

### Assurance of Quality Education

When valid assessments are used, they ensure:

- that our schools support student learning of relevant content based on state adopted standards—created by the state’s best teachers and administrators, and the business leaders who will hire our graduates in the near future;
- reliance on effective, standards-based measures to assess learning outcomes, so that we know, with a great degree of certainty, how our students are performing; and
- educational equity, irrespective of student demographics, ensuring that all students have access to a quality education and the ability to reach for the American dream.

### Guidance for Continuous Improvement of Instructional Practices

- Effective measurement encourages us to discontinue or change instructional practices that are ineffective, and to replicate and build upon successful ones.

### Return on Taxpayer Investment

- Taxpayers should be reasonably certain that public funds are being invested for the betterment of all Floridians, not simply being expended.
- The investments we make in education today will pay dividends in the very near future, and assessments along the way tell us how close we are to meeting the needs of the future workforce. Florida can position itself as a hub for a well-educated workforce.

## Florida’s History of Continuous Improvement

Florida’s decision to use valid assessments to measure student learning was deliberate; it has been well thought-out and continuously improved upon over time to ensure that our students are successful beyond the classroom. Florida embarked on genuine accountability for student learning in the early 1990’s in order to improve educational outcomes using legitimate assessment tools. Since that time, Florida has made great strides in improving student achievement based on a growing, science-knowledge about teaching and learning that can only be attained through the use of reliable assessments.

In order to monitor students’ understanding of subject area content and to make instructional adjustments to meet the needs of diverse learners, effective teaching practices have always included ongoing assessment of

“... Florida’s policy makers... have been more right than wrong in the past decade when it comes to standards and accountability and school choice. To deny there’s been progress is good for stoking fury and mobilizing troops. But it’s unfair to the teachers who made it happen. And it could undermine changes that really did make things better for kids.”<sup>72</sup>

Florida’s fourth and eighth grade students with disabilities were ranked first in the nation in combined math and reading gains, according to the Nation’s Report Card. Florida must never return to a time when it was acceptable to expect less of students with learning disabilities.

Florida earned the highest grade ever given by the 2011 National Council on Teacher Quality’s biennial report, State Teacher Policy Yearbook. The report named Florida a “best practice state” for: Teacher Prep Program Accountability, Pay Scales, Performance Pay and Reduction in Force. Florida must maintain its commitment to reward highly effective teaching, especially in low socio-economic areas.

According to the 2012 America's Promise report, Building a Grad Nation, Florida ranks third in the nation in producing additional high school graduates from 2002-2009. Florida must continue to support student success in attaining a high school diploma while assuring that the diploma translates to skills required at the postsecondary or workforce level.

Florida's low-income students ranked third in combined progress in fourth and eighth grade reading and math scores, according to the Nation's Report Card.

Florida's African-American students have closed the achievement gap with white students faster than the national average every year since 2003. Florida must never accept lower expectations for poor or minority students.

Florida's low-income fourth graders are ranked fourth in the nation when it comes to reading on grade level or higher, according to the Nation's Report Card. Florida must never return to an era of social promotion which sets in motion perpetual failure for students.

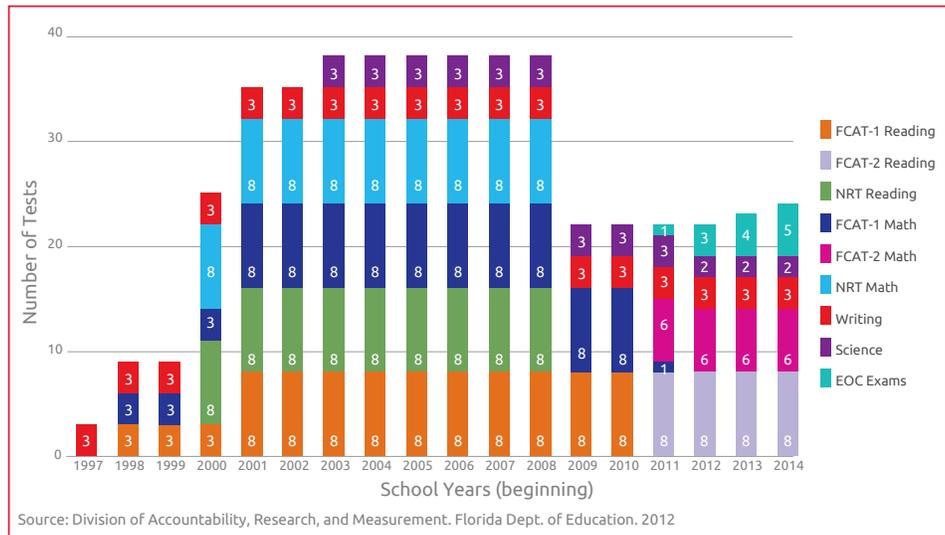
student understanding, often referred to as formative assessments.<sup>3</sup> These formative assessment practices were the precursor to the development of valid, standardized assessments used to measure student learning.

Until recently, comprehensive FCAT assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and writing were the primary assessment tools used to measure student achievement and learning gains. The FCAT tests were designed to accurately assess student mastery of Florida's adopted curriculum standards (Sunshine State Standards).

The Sunshine State Standards—based on a consensus of what students should know and be able to do—were developed by the state's most effective classroom teachers in their respective content areas, as well as content experts from state universities and community colleges, and business leaders—the end-users of our education system who ultimately employ our students.

Students are given multiple opportunities to take and pass the assessments required for promotion and graduation as well as opportunities to use different measures such as the ACT or SAT.<sup>4</sup> Notably, Florida has made minimal changes to its statewide assessments and has also decreased the number of required assessments over the past 15 years, contrary to popular belief, as shown below. (Appendix B provides an historical overview of assessments)

Florida's Testing Requirements Over Time (1997 - 2014)



<sup>3</sup> Good instruction involves, for example, probing questions and students' raising of hands, requiring students to apply what they've learned through the drawing of a bar chart, or participating in a group presentation and answering questions at its completion. Formative assessment, as such, has always been used as a teaching tool to continuously improve instruction.

<sup>4</sup> Florida has a long history of employing statewide assessments to both signal and measure expectations for student learning and achievement. When high stakes are attached for students, such as with Grade 3 FCAT Reading and with tests required for graduation, multiple measures are available to ensure validity of judgments.

## The Future of Accountability in Florida – Emergence of End-of-Course Assessments (EOC's) & Next Steps

As the result of a growing body of knowledge and support from local school districts, end-of-course assessments (EOC's) in Algebra, Geometry, Biology, and Social Sciences are gradually being implemented for Florida's secondary students and have replaced the mathematics and science FCAT tests. Similar to the FCAT, considerable student flexibility is provided for end-of-course assessments; students are permitted to take these assessments and earn course credit without having to complete or even take the course, provided the assessment results indicate content mastery. Again, because of the confidence of assessment validity, students will be much more likely to proceed academically at their own pace, freeing up valuable instructional time for struggling students and allowing advanced students to engage in more rigorous pursuits.

Florida is active in the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). PARCC is an alliance of 24 states working together to develop a common set of K-12 assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in language arts and mathematics, specific to student skills needed for college and workforce readiness.

The CCSS are informed by the highest, most effective models from states across the country and countries around the world, and provide teachers and parents with a common understanding of what students are expected to learn. Consistent standards will provide appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live. These standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs. The standards:

- Are aligned with college and work expectations;
- Are clear, understandable and consistent;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;
- Are informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society; and
- Are evidence-based.<sup>5</sup>

Florida is fifth in the nation on standards, assessments and accountability, according to the 2012 Education Week report, Quality Counts. Florida has been a consistent leader in setting high expectations for students, teachers and schools. Because standards, assessments, and accountability work together in tandem to improve education, they must be promoted as a single effort. Florida must not return to a time when instructional content was randomly delivered and not based on agreed-upon content standards.

Florida's Hispanic students have made great strides in closing the achievement gap in fourth grade reading and fourth and eighth grade math. As a combined average, Hispanic students have improved a grade level each year since 2003.

Florida's Hispanic students read as well or better than the average student in 21 states. Why would we stop there? Florida can be proud of its Hispanic heritage and we want our students to be better than the average student in all other states.

<sup>5</sup> Common Core State Standards initiative, available at: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards> (Last visited July 18, 2012)

It is anticipated that the assessment system by the PARCC states will include benefits not found in current assessment systems, providing additional information to:

- students, who will know if they are on track to graduate ready for college and careers;
- teachers, who will receive regular results to guide learning and instruction;
- parents, who will have clear and timely information about the progress of their children;
- states, who will have valid results that are comparable across the member states; and
- the nation, since the assessments are based on the college- and career-ready, internationally-benchmarked CCSS.<sup>6</sup>

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“When it comes to education progress, Florida is a star performer. Demography need not be destiny. Over the past decade, Florida has succeeded in improving student achievement despite its demographic profile. Florida has managed to realize such gains although the state’s per-student funding is below the national average.”<sup>7</sup>

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## Conclusion

As a result of state accountability, Florida has witnessed exemplary gains in student achievement over the past decade and Florida’s record of closing the achievement gaps for traditionally underrepresented groups of students is unequalled in other states.

Educational quality—measured by what people know—has powerful effects on individual earnings, on the distribution of income, and on economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the level of education required for a particular career path, literacy, mathematics, critical thinking, and collaboration skills will be essential for the

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<sup>6</sup> Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, About PARCC, available at: <http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCC-Overview-Dec2011.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> “Demography as Destiny?” Hispanic Student Success in Florida - Education Next, Matthew Ladner and Dan Lips, 2009, available at: [http://educationnext.org/files/ednext\\_20093\\_20.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20093_20.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The Role of Education Quality in Economic Growth, Hanushek and Woessmann, 2007, Social Science Research Network, available at: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=960379](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=960379) (Last visited July 13, 2012)

21st century workplace.<sup>9</sup>

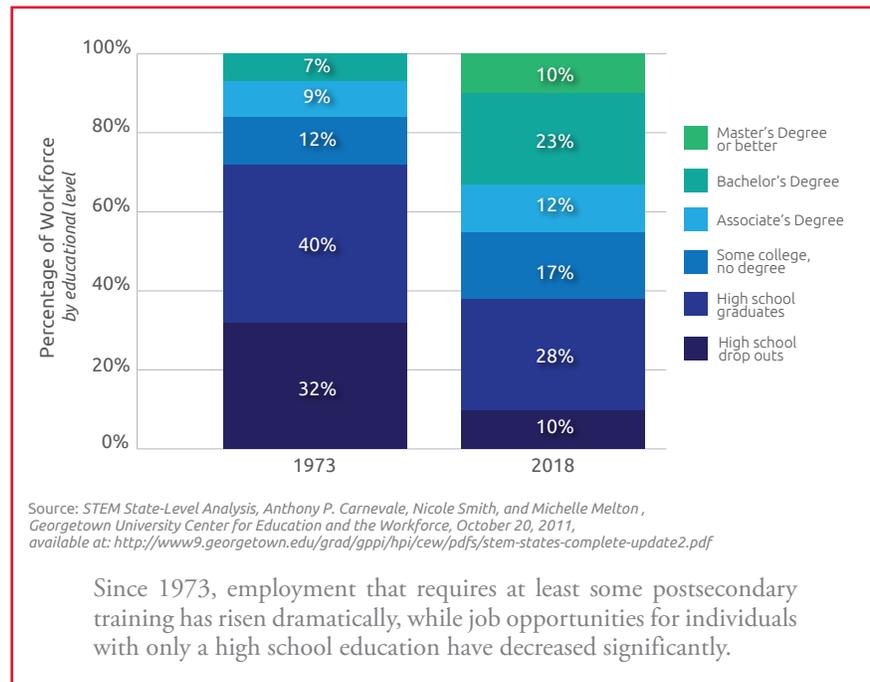
Florida cannot rest on its laurels. As a state, we must be vigilant in supporting a system of accountability that reflects emerging trends in student skills necessary for the 21st century economy.

According to the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, by 2018, Florida's Economy will demand a total of 385,000 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) jobs, up from 322,000 in 2008. Of these jobs, 58 percent will require a bachelor's degree or higher and a total of 89 percent will require some postsecondary education and training.<sup>10</sup>

Our students, if provided the necessary critical thinking, reading, mathematics, and technology skills, can effectively compete in the market place, earning competitive wages.

It is entirely logical—and wise—for Florida's taxpayers to be confident that funds to support education are invested intelligently, that students are challenged in their learning, and that public education is continuously improving. Florida TaxWatch urges Floridians to embrace and support genuine accountability for student achievement.

Percentage of Workforce by Educational Level  
(1973 v. 2018)



9 Unfortunately, a student must only read at a 10th grade level in order to be awarded a standard high school diploma in Florida. Although 10th grade reading skills may have been sufficient to gain meaningful employment 25 years ago, students with these skill levels will find it difficult, if not virtually impossible, to make a living wage in our competitive marketplace. A skilled-trade such as automotive technology or HVAC requires individuals in these fields to navigate technical manuals which are extremely demanding; most are written at a reading level commensurate with or higher than college-level texts. Without systematic accountability using scientifically sound assessments, we cannot be assured that our students have the actual skills they need; we are simply providing them with a counterfeit diploma, pretending to prepare them for a world that is rapidly changing and increasingly competitive.

10 *STEM State-Level Analysis*, Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Michelle Melton, Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, October 20, 2011, available at: <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/stem-states-complete-update2.pdf>

## Appendix A

### SY 2012-13 Testing of State Standards as Required Under Florida Statutes

Dates	Required/Optional	Assessment
October 8-19	Required only for students who have previously failed to pass and have not opted to use an alternative assessment (SAT/ACT)	Retakes FCAT Mathematics and Reading
December 4-5	Required for Grades 4, 8, 10	FCAT Writing (Field Test)
February 25-28	Required for Grades 4, 8, 10	FCAT Writing
April 15-26	Required for Grades 3-10	FCAT Reading
	Required for Grades 3-8	FCAT Mathematics
	Required for Grades 5 and 8	FCAT Science
July 23-August 10	EOC's are administered on multiple dates throughout the year to accommodate students who did not pass initially or for those who choose to earn credit without having completed the entire course.	Algebra I End of Course Assessment
November 28-December 19		Algebra I, Biology, and Geometry EOC
April 22-May 10		U.S. History
April 29-May 17		Algebra I, Biology, and Geometry EOC
April 29-June 7		Civics EOC Field Test

### Other Assessments

Dates	Required/Optional	Assessment
January 28-March 8	Selected Schools Only	National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading and Mathematics
August – May	Optional	Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR)
October	Optional - Parents may opt out	PSAT (Preliminary SAT)
March – April	Non-English speaking students	Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment
May	AP Students only. (These students do not take the EOC for the similar content course, e.g., Biology.)	AP Exams

## Appendix B

### Historical Changes in Statewide Assessments

#### FCAT Writing

*The essay portion of FCAT Writing remained the same for 17 years.*

	1993-2005	2006	2007-2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Essay	No changes	No changes	No changes	No changes	Moved to 1 scorer and no half-point scores; one mode/grade	No changes	Returned to 2 scorers; Increased emphasis on English conventions
Multiple Choice (Writing+)		MC items on editing & conventions	No changes	Dropped Writing+			

#### FCAT Reading

*FCAT Reading tests remained the same, with some grades added, for ten years.*

Grades	1998-2000	2001	2002-2007	2008	2009-2010	2011	2012	2013
4, 8, 10	No changes	No changes	No changes	Dropped performance tasks	No changes	FCAT 2.0 reported on old scale	FCAT 2.0 reported on new scale	No changes
3, 5, 6, 7, 9		Tests in additional grades	No changes	No changes	No changes	FCAT 2.0 reported on old scale	FCAT 2.0 reported on new scale	No changes

#### FCAT Mathematics

*FCAT Mathematics tests remained the same, with some grades added, for ten years.*

Grades	1998-2000	2001	2002-2007	2008	2009-2010	2011	2012	2013
5, 8, 10	No changes	No changes	No changes	Dropped performance tasks	No changes	FCAT 2.0 reported on old scale	FCAT 2.0 reported on new scale; dropped gd 10 test	No changes
3, 4, 6, 7, 9		Tests in additional grades	No changes	No changes	No changes	FCAT 2.0 re-reported on old scale; dropped grade 9 test	FCAT 2.0 reported on new scale	No changes

### ***FCAT Science***

*FCAT Science has undergone a number of changes since its inception.*

<b>Grades</b>	<b>2003-2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009-2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
5, 8, HS	No changes	High school test moved from grade 10 to grade 11	No changes	Dropped performance tasks	No changes	FCAT 2.0 reported on old scale; dropped high school test	FCAT 2.0 reported on new scale

### **End of Course Assessments**

*End-of-Course Assessments are gradually being implemented and have replaced high school mathematics and science tests.*

<b>Subject</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>
Algebra 1	New Test	Report achievement levels	No changes
Geometry		New Test	Report achievement levels
Biology		New Test	Report achievement levels
US History			New Test
Civics			<i>Begins in 2014</i>

Source for all: Division of Accountability, Research, and Measurement. Florida Dept. of Education. 2012

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THE FLORIDA TAXWATCH CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability (CEPA) was established to address the profound fiscal and economic impact that PreK-20 education has on Florida's competitiveness. CEPA works directly with Florida's business community and educational research organizations to advocate sound education policy to promote high academic achievement, develop and deploy reliable assessment tools, maximize the return on taxpayer investment, and help foster a more competitive Florida.

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The findings in this *Briefing* are based on the data and sources referenced. Florida TaxWatch research is conducted with every reasonable attempt to verify the accuracy and reliability of the data, and the calculations and assumptions made herein. Please feel free to contact us if you feel that this paper is factually inaccurate.

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## *About Florida TaxWatch*

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Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit, taxpayer research institute and government watchdog that over its 32-year history has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens' hard-earned tax dollars. Its mission is to provide the citizens of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and education on government revenues, expenditures, taxation, public policies, and programs, and to increase the productivity and accountability of Florida Government.

Florida TaxWatch's research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of economic and tax and spend policies and practices on citizens and businesses. Florida TaxWatch has worked diligently and effectively to help state government shape responsible fiscal and public policy that adds value and benefit to taxpayers.

This diligence has yielded impressive results: in its first two decades alone, policymakers and government employees implemented three-fourths of Florida TaxWatch's cost-saving recommendations, saving the taxpayers of Florida more than \$6.2 billion -- approximately \$1,067 in added value for every Florida family, according to an independent assessment by Florida State University.

Florida TaxWatch has a historical understanding of state government, public policy issues, and the battles fought in the past necessary to structure effective solutions for today and the future. It is the only statewide organization devoted entirely to Florida taxing and spending issues. Its research and recommendations are reported on regularly by the statewide news media.

Supported by voluntary, tax-deductible memberships and grants, Florida TaxWatch is open to any organization or individual interested in helping to make Florida competitive, healthy and economically prosperous by supporting a credible research effort that promotes constructive taxpayer improvements. Members, through their loyal support, help Florida TaxWatch bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by all types of taxpayers -- homeowners, small businesses, large corporations, philanthropic foundations, professionals, associations, labor organizations, retirees -- simply stated, the taxpayers of Florida. The officers, Board of Trustees and members of Florida TaxWatch are respected leaders and citizens from across Florida, committed to improving the health and prosperity of Florida.

With your help, Florida TaxWatch will continue its diligence to make certain your tax investments are fair and beneficial to you, the taxpaying customer, who supports Florida's government. Florida TaxWatch is ever present to ensure that taxes are equitable, not excessive, that their public benefits and costs are weighed, and government agencies are more responsive and productive in the use of your hard-earned tax dollars.

*The Florida TaxWatch Board of Trustees is responsible for the general direction and oversight of the research institute and safeguarding the independence of the organization's work. In his capacity as chief executive officer, the president is responsible for formulating and coordinating policies, projects, publications, and selecting professional staff. As an independent research institute and taxpayer watchdog, Florida TaxWatch does not accept money from Florida state and local governments. The research findings and recommendations of Florida TaxWatch do not necessarily reflect the view of its members, staff, distinguished Board of Trustees, or Executive Committee, and are not influenced by the positions of the individuals or organizations who directly or indirectly support the research.*

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