ACCOUNTABILITY
POLICIES & EDUCATOR
WELLBEING

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Since the publication of A Nation At Risk in 1983[1], educators have lived with an increasingly comprehensive set of test-based accountability policies. Framing global competitiveness in student academic success as an increasingly important component of a broader economic and national security agenda , both federal and state departments of educationmoved to establish an 'accountability era' by mandating test-based educational accountability legislation including No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)[2], Race to the Top (RTTT), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)[3], as well as various state-level policy initiatives that evolved from including various district, school, and student accountability measures, and more recently; teacher evaluation systems (e.g., value-add measures). In their framing language, NCLB[4] and ESSA[5] were intended to increase federal oversight in holding schools accountable for academic progress of all students, improve equity and protections for America's disadvantaged and high-need students, increase transparency with annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress, and require high academic standards for all students.[6, 7] Ample research has shown high- stakes testing may be stressful for teachers[8, 9] — von der Embse and colleagues[10] reported nearly 30% of teachers experienced clinically significant anxiety specific to test-based accountability policies. Paired with the increased levels of anxiety[11] there has been a noted increased pressure to engage in counterproductive teaching practices due to the constant demand for improvement of student achievement (e.g., "teaching to the test").[12, 13] This will be outlined in more depth later in this policy brief.

In addition, the Obama administration introduced the Race to the Top (RTTT)[14] initiative in 2009 intended to provide funding to states and school districts willing to complete systemic reform around four identified areas: 1) development of rigorous standards and better assessments, 2) adoption of better data systems to provide schools, teachers, and parents with information about student progress, 3) support for teachers and school leaders to become more effective,

and 4) increased emphasis and resources for the rigorous interventions needed to turn around the lowest-performing schools.[14] All of these policy initiatives, as well as aligned support from foundations (such as the Gates foundation, amongst others) have led to the widespread adoption of teacher evaluation policies in a number of states-- including Florida.
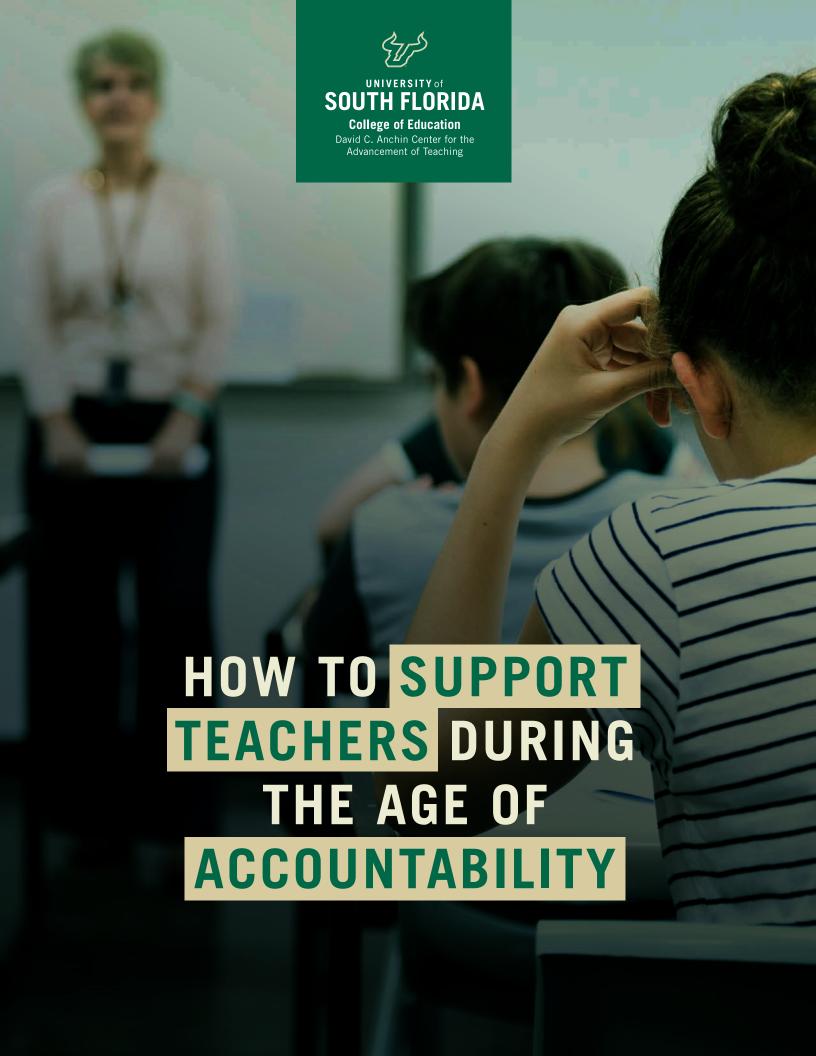
FLORIDA CONTEXT

The Florida Department of Education has employed value-added models (VAM) as a primary accountability measure for teacher evaluation. The use of the VAM stemmed from Florida's successful application for RTTT funds in 2009.[15] VAM is a simple measure of teacher effectiveness for teacher evaluation systems, in which teachers are provided with a numerical value to determine the "value" they add to or subtract from a school. Typical VAMs consider multiple factors such as the previous two prior years of achievement scores, number of students with disabilities status, English language learner status, class size, and homogeneity of entering test scores.[16] However, there are potential problems in using VAMs to accurately determine educator effectiveness. This includes achievement test design for the purpose of teacher evaluation, teacher and student mobility, organizational use of only one piece of information for making critical decisions, and the misuse of the data when displaying it to the public.[17]

A NATION AT RISK

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NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

RACE TO THE TOP

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS EFFECTS ON THE TEACHING PROFESSION

The teaching profession is highly stressful.[18] Teacher stress is a perceived threat or negative emotional that is specific to job-related functions and is influenced by available coping resources (e.g., administrative support, instructional resources).[19] Emotional exhaustion and stress interfere with teachers' perceived efficiency as well as efforts to implement effective instructional practices.[20] Approximately 20% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years; this is particularly problematic for those teaching in low-income and low-resourced school

HOW TO SUPPORT TEACHERS DURING THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

environments.[21] In cases where teachers do not leave the profession, their overall well-being that is affected by stress can lead to more negative effects for students[22, 23] such as limited capacity to provide academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support -to their students.[24] In addition, the indicated pressure to raise state standardized assessment scores leads teachers to spend class time focusing on exam skills and materials (e.g., how to bubble-in answers, how to weed out obviously wrong answers, becoming familiar with testing materials)[25], rather than on the curriculum. In addition, and ironically, counterproductive teaching practices may be most limiting for the poorest and highest minority population schools in order to increase statewide test scores and showcase "high quality" teaching.[26]

IMPLICATIONS MOVING FORWARD

The use of test-based accountability policies has led to a range of consequences, both positive and negative, for educators. Given the clear link with educator wellbeing, school leaders and policy makers need to consider how to support educators within a test-based accountability environment.

HOW TO SUPPORT TEACHERS DURING THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Consider Alternatives for Evaluating Teacher Effectiveness. Given the lack of statewide testing due to COVID-19, schools will need to identify other sources of data in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Schools can focus on collecting other sources of information such as student behavioral or social-emotional screening data, school climate data, or documented resource utilization by teachers. Developing multi-informational process around critical decisions for student success can provide administrators with a clearer picture to facilitate necessary change.

Support Teachers in Limiting Counterproductive Teaching Practices. During testing season, teachers may be more likely to engage in counterproductive teaching practices, which limits exposure to curriculum for students. To promote equitable instruction, administrators can emphasize the importance of teaching the full curriculum. Providing various supports (e.g., providing resources, hosting open forums for teachers, professional development, allocating support staff prior to testing season) can potentially support teachers in finding ways to avoid counterproductive teaching practices and increase curriculum exposure to all students.

Establish Teacher Wellbeing Programs. Teachers are continuously reporting high levels of stress and leaving the profession at alarming rates. Providing teacher wellbeing programs could potentially mitigate negative experiences of teachers and, in turn, potentially positively influence the overall student experience. Districts should go beyond typical and passive resources for teacher wellbeing (e.g., showcasing a meditation app) and move towards regular skill development sessions, mentoring or coaching, and consistent check-ins with teachers regarding their mental wellbeing.

Providing More Autonomy for Teachers. Considering the uncertainty of the upcoming school year due to the global pandemic, and even changes beyond the current year, policy makers need to consider giving teachers more control over decisions, particularly in lower performing schools. The disparities between economic groups that have become apparent with the transition to online instruction for K-12 schools have shed light on the need for different options and supports for students.

The variability across school districts and student populations, specifically in lower performing schools, warrant teachers' perspectives on the actions needed to mediate the barriers inherent in online instruction.

TEACHER SUPPORT

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ALTERNATIVES FOR EVALUATING

LIMITING COUNTERPRODUCTIVE PRACTICES

WELLBEING PROGRAMS

MORE AUTONOMY

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