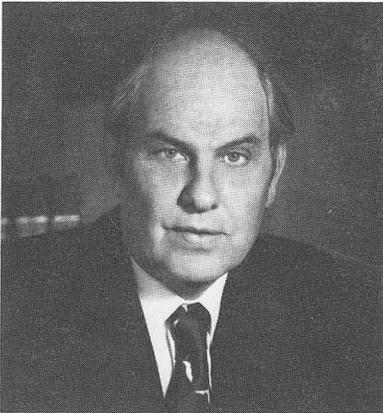


National Ranking for Florida's Schools

Ralph D. Turlington
Florida Commissioner of Education



Following a distinguished career in the Florida Legislature, Commissioner Turlington was chosen for the top position in Florida Education, a role which he has filled most ably for many years. Under the commissioner's leadership, Florida has made giant steps toward improvement in the quality of education at all levels.

Florida takes pride in the fact that at least seven years before *A Nation at Risk* jolted the American conscience in 1983 into attempts to address the issue of quality in our schools, the state had already begun sweeping enhancements. The continuum of change in Florida education had to encompass all the points because of the linkages — both obvious and subtle — between individual institutions, local educational systems and the myriad of community resources.

Beginning in 1976, more than 100 areas for improvement were identified and targeted as major goals. These goals are now used as benchmarks to note Florida's progress toward its ultimate objective of national excellence. Each year we must step back and assess how far we've come, identify problem areas and gather momentum to keep moving ahead.

Florida's activity in educational enhancement is rooted in our desire to achieve national ranking in the upper quartile of states. This is an ambitious goal not just because of the magnitude of issues which must be addressed, but also because of the efforts of other states to make similar improvements in their own standards. And all the time we must continue our quest for excellence in light of resistance to higher levels of government spending and urgent needs in other sectors.

Part of this commitment to excellence lies in our desire to overcome an image of mediocrity that some have tended to associate with Southern schools. Florida has achieved national recognition for its attractiveness to retirees, to vacationers, for its space program, for its burgeoning business and industry interests, and we are challenged by our potential for leadership in educational excellence as well.

We think we know what the ingredients necessary for quality education are — good teachers, good leadership at the school level, being willing to pay these people adequately for their services, and high performance standards for both students and teachers — and we must move rapidly. In 1981 the State Board of Education set as a target for Florida education to rank among the best programs in the nation. The mood of the nation has been focused on education as a top priority; we have the support and commitment of Florida citizens, the Legislature, business and industry, and we should not lose our momentum.

What is Excellence?

Education is a complex, dynamic, emotion-charged and essential institution. In the years that education has evolved from a rare commodity to a nearly universal experience in America, public expectation of the elements and outcomes of education has changed enormously. The elementary school — once the total educational experience for most Americans — has had to modify its curriculum to prepare students for secondary school, then later to pave the way for higher education. Merely summarizing those changes in one sentence can hardly express the dynamic nature of this evolution.

Our goal for improved access permitting virtually every American citizen to achieve levels of education never before available inevitably led to a broadening of the curriculum and decreasing emphasis on high performance expectations. Now the pendulum has moved in the other direction, and we are expecting much more from our students.

Few would disagree that excellence in education is a proper goal for any state. The question to be resolved is: At what price? Certainly not at the risk of closing doors of access opened after so much effort. Certainly not by imposing such strict standards of performance that spontaneity, innovation and creativity are stifled. Yet, public dollars can be stretched only so far, and we have been forced to set high but reasonably realistic goals to define a state of excellence and measure our achievement of it.

A major educational reform package was put into effect in Florida in 1983 which strengthened mathematics and science programs, required student minimum