

2007

# High stakes testing in Florida: Media portrayals and parental realities

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High-Stakes Testing in Florida: Media Portrayals and Parental Realities

by

Jennifer Gilroy Hunsecker

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Date of Approval:  
November 14, 2007

Keywords: accountability, parents, fcat, educational anthropology, media

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my parents, Gary and Jane Hunsecker. Thank you for instilling in me a love of learning and for encouraging me to follow my dreams. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my husband, Joel Holtry. Thank you for supporting me through thick and thin. I know it hasn't always been easy to live with a graduate student but you have adapted beautifully and made me feel like it's all been worth it.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Bird, for her guidance in formulating, developing, reformulating, and writing my thesis. I would like to thank the other members of my committee, Drs. Messing and Zarger, for always being willing to help me when I asked or to listen when I had a question. I would also like to thank the dynamic duo of Dr. Yelvington and Dr. Cruz for selflessly assisting me both with recruiting and methodological issues. It would be unfair not to mention the other members of the USF Anthropology Department. Thank you for offering suggestions, pointing me in the direction of potential interviewees, and for the willingness to listen and offer advice. A big thank you goes out to my yoga teacher, Angela, for helping me to relieve my stress through focusing on my breath, offering gentle guidance, and going out of her way to help me find research participants. I want to thank all of the parents who agreed to be interviewed. You took time out of your busy lives to talk to me, a complete stranger. I hope to someday be able to return your kind gestures. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for all of their support and encouragement throughout this process. While I may not always say it (or show it), your love and encouragement has helped me to make it this far. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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## High-Stakes Testing in Florida: Media Portrayals and Parental Realities

Jennifer Hunsecker

### ABSTRACT

In 1998, Florida implemented a system of standardized testing known as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). While initially designed as one among many tools to assess student and school progress, the FCAT has become a high-stakes test. Schools whose students fail to meet certain benchmarks are in danger of losing their students to “school choice plans” (which enable parents of children attending failing schools to choose another, more highly rated school) while parents must contend with ever broadening educational policies. The implications of this policy have been far reaching. Textbook makers now market individualized textbooks that teach FCAT content, schools hold FCAT pep rallies, and some schools hold celebrations at the end of FCAT testing. Both parents and children report feeling stress during FCAT testing time and numerous educators have left the field in protest of the emphasis placed on one measure of student achievement.

The impact that the FCAT and associated policies have had on Florida families is the subject of this thesis. Archival research was gathered from the St. Petersburg Times surrounding coverage of the FCAT and a content analysis was conducted. Interviews were carried out with parents of elementary school children surrounding the issues discovered to be most relevant in the content analysis. A comparison of the content

analysis and interview data showed that some of the issues covered most extensively in the media were not the most significant to parents. One of the most reported-on issues, the proposed changes (or lack thereof) to FCAT policy by Florida governor candidates in the 2006 election, was not the most important issue to parents, who were far more concerned with the amount and types of homework and associated stresses their children felt. Recommendations include giving parents a greater voice in the media by creating a guest columnist section and holding advisory meetings between high-ranking Florida officials and parents of current schoolchildren.

## Chapter One: Introduction

“The purpose of the FCAT is to make sure that the students are learning the basic skills they need to be successful in life.”

Florida Department Of Education, “About the FCAT”, 2004

"This [the FCAT] is about over-testing, over-testing to the point that we define school as preparation for a test."

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Rudy Crew, as quoted by Carl Hiaasen, 2007

As a child of the 1980s, I grew up taking standardized tests: the California Achievement Test (CAT), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Iowa), the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test (PSSA), the Stanford-Binet Intelligent Scale (IQ test), and the SAT. Only two of those tests had any bearing on my future: the IQ test and the SAT. The IQ test was used to group students into cohorts according to intelligence in my middle school. The SAT was used to determine the quality of college that I could gain acceptance into and to determine whether I was worthy of a scholarship. As a 10-year old, I did not understand the significance of the IQ test and took it lightly. As a high school student, I developed severe test anxiety and refused to prepare for the SAT. As a result, my scores were lower than my grade point average would have predicted and I became somewhat bitter about standardized tests. I felt that it was unfair to base my admission to college on my test scores from a high-stakes test when my grades were more reflective of my work ethic and intelligence.

Imagine my distress when I learned that children as young as eight are forced to take such high-stakes tests as a condition to pass the third grade. As an undergraduate in Chicago and then as a graduate student in Florida, I have witnessed many children and

parents whose lives revolve (in part) around high-stakes tests. There are books, commercials, remedial programs, and tutoring centers dedicated to assisting children in passing these tests. The discourse and rhetoric surrounding these tests, particularly in Florida, has become an insidious force in the lives of many. Anyone who is involved with elementary or secondary school in Florida feels the impact of high-stakes testing, whether it is a teacher who spends most of the year preparing children for the test, parents who coach their children to perform at their peak, businessmen and women who capitalize on new opportunities to make money, or support staff who can receive bonuses simply for working at a high performing school. Even those without children are not immune to its prevalence, since the news media so frequently report on stories related to education policy and its impacts.

### **Research Questions**

At the core of this research project was my belief that in the United States, governmental emphasis on standards, high-stakes testing, and accountability was getting out of hand. As I began to research the subject, I learned that I was not alone (Cuban 2004b; Goodman et al. 2004; Jones, Jones, and Hargrove 2003; McNeil 2000; Meier and Wood 2004; Sacks 1999). From books written on the historical failure of the business model to improve American education (Cuban 2004b; Jones, Jones, and Hargrove 2003; Sacks 1999) to those that chronicle state-level efforts to implement high-stakes testing (McNeil 2000, Sacks 1999) to those written by educators and journalists discussing the flaws with the federal high-stakes testing policy of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Goodman et al. 2004; Jones, Jones, and Hargrove 2003, Meier and Wood 2004; Sacks

1999), it is clear that many across the nation are dissatisfied with the impact of high-stakes testing.

Other media, especially print and television news, have focused on the change in education policy in the United States over the last 50 years. More often than not, these news stories focus on changes in educational policy at the school, district, state, and national level. While many of the stories include quotes from members of the public, rarely do the articles show the impact that educational policy has on families and children, as will be demonstrated in chapters 4 and 5.

However, anyone who talks to a parent or an educator knows that the impact of policies like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and NCLB has been perceived as wide and far-reaching, likely in ways that no one could have predicted. Children are increasingly feeling pressure and stress to perform well on tests at early ages, while parents feel pressure to ensure that their children are adequately prepared for testing. Businesses that promise to prepare children for taking high-stakes tests have sprung up while publishing and textbook companies vie for the rights to write the tests (and market preparation materials). Schools districts and administrators feel pressure to ensure that their school as a whole performs well on the tests (regardless of the many factors outside of their control) in order to avoid public shame or government takeover. Teachers feel pressure to keep their students scoring well in order to keep their jobs and earn bonus pay.

Educational anthropologists have documented these impacts through studies of state-level high-stakes testing policy across the nation, focusing on states like Texas, Massachusetts, and New York that have invested heavily in high-stakes testing prior to

the enactment of the NCLB Act (Fine et al. 2007; Johnson 2007; Lipman 2005, 2004, 2002; Salinas and Reidel 2007; Sloan 2007; Valli and Chambliss 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2007). The majority have suggested that such policies, though intended to improve curriculum and ensure that all children learn are, in reality, having the opposite effect (Fine et al. 2007; Johnson 2007; Lipman 2005, 2004, 2002; Salinas and Reidel 2007; Valli and Chambliss 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2007). Other researchers have suggested that these policies have aided teachers in improving their teaching practice (Sloan 2007). Are education policies that emphasize high-stakes testing along with standards and accountability accomplishing what their authors had hoped? Are fewer children being “left behind”? Of course I cannot answer these questions. To do so would require a study of a different nature: one with more time, researchers, and funding. Additionally, this is clearly an area of research that has taken hold within the educational anthropology community. An area that has been neglected (with the exception of Johnson 2007) in anthropological and educational studies of federal and state testing policies is the impact that such policies have on parents of school-aged children. As Salinas and Reidel (2007) indicate, it is important to understand who benefits and who loses under policies because public policy is designed to be responsive to the needs of communities. Following the call to consider the needs of the community, I chose to focus my study outside of the school context. The question that I hope to answer with this thesis is this: *what impact is high-stakes testing policy having on parents?* Specifically I will attempt to answer how the high-stakes education policies of one state, Florida, has impacted parents<sup>1</sup> in the

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<sup>1</sup> Although I intended to interview both male and female parents, I was largely unsuccessful in reaching male interviewees. This was largely due to the sampling methodology that I employed: because I utilized

Tampa Bay area. Using parents in the Tampa Bay area as a case study will illuminate the impact that high-stakes testing policies have on an under-studied, yet important group of stakeholders and will suggest further areas for research on the impact of policies like the NCLB Act.

I chose to focus on the Tampa Bay area (defined, for the purposes of this research, as Pasco, Hillsborough, and Pinellas counties) because it has been my home for several years and because I believe it is fairly representative of the rest of the state. Florida has seen a steady influx of new residents since the 1980s, though this rapid growth is slowing somewhat (Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research 2007). Like other parts of the state, the Tampa Bay area has seen a steady influx of new residents beginning in the 1990s and continuing today (Department of Strategic Planning and Technology 2006). The current populations of these three counties vary: Hillsborough County had roughly 1,157,738 people in 2006, Pinellas County had roughly 924,413, and Pasco County had approximately 450,171 people (US Census Bureau 2007). Pasco County covered the most land area (744.85 sq miles) and was the least dense (462.8 people per square mile). Hillsborough covered 1,050.91 square miles and was populated at 950.5 people per square mile. Pinellas covered 279.92 square miles and contains 3,291.0 people per square mile (US Census Bureau 2006). The majority of the new residents are migrants (as opposed to babies), either from other parts of the United States or from foreign countries (Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research 2007).

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snowball sampling, most of the participants tended to be similar. From the first woman that I interviewed, no other women were willing or able to refer me to a male interviewee. Thus, while I use the word parents, in reality this study is comprised of mostly mothers' perspectives (with one exception).

This creates a tremendous amount of diversity in Florida's school-aged population leading to unique challenges for policy-makers and educators alike.

Initially, I had hoped to study how high-stakes testing policies had changed teachers' lives both inside and outside of the classroom. While this has been documented extensively via surveys and interviews (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas 2000; Boyd et al. 2006, 2005; Cimbricz 2002; Hill 2007; Lomax et al. 1995; Smith 1991; The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality 2004), the anthropological and educational literature is not as robust with in-depth ethnographic studies (exceptions include Lipman 2004, Sloan 2007, and Valli and Chambliss 2007) . This project, for a variety of reasons, did not come to fruition. As an alternative, I chose to examine how the FCAT has impacted the lives of parents of elementary school children, a subject that has widely been ignored in scholarly literature. In the educational and anthropological literature, the focus of most research is either at the micro level: the impact on learning and curriculum, as well as how life inside of schools is changed by testing (Allington and McGill-Franzen 1992, Carnoy and Loeb 2002, Fine et al. 2007, Hill 2007, Mulvenon et al. 2005, Sloan 2007, Smith and Rottenberg 1991, Valli and Chambliss 2007) or at the macro level: discussion of the widespread social and economic impacts of high-stakes testing (Apple 2004; Fine et al. 2007; Lipman 2005, 2004, 2002; Salinas and Reidel 2007). This thesis is an attempt to shift the focus of analysis from the classroom and about the nation as a whole, to focusing on areas in between: homes, schools, and public spaces.

A component of this research project is to examine the role of the media in parental understanding of and opinion about the FCAT and high-stakes testing in Florida. I am particularly interested in determining the topics and frequency of discussion of the

FCAT in print media in the Tampa Bay region. How often do newspaper staff write about the FCAT? What topics are covered? Are members of the general public writing guest editorials or letters to the editor concerning their feelings on the FCAT? Are there topical areas concerning the FCAT that are not being reported on by the print media? By answering these questions, I hope to show that while the media are on target with their focus on topics of interest to parents, they do not provide enough information on the impact that testing has had on parents and their children.

To determine the answer to these questions I completed a content analysis<sup>2</sup> of the education reporting in the *St. Petersburg Times*. My content analysis produced four topical areas: the 2006 Florida governor's race, local school grades, teachers' feelings on the FCAT, and the general public's dissatisfaction with the FCAT. Using the broad topical areas, I created an interview guide designed to answer the following questions: How do parents understand the FCAT and policies surrounding it? How has it (or will it) impacted their child's education? Have they made changes in their lives in response to the FCAT and do they plan to make any changes in the future? Do they feel that they have a voice or a say in the testing policy, either at the school level or at the state/federal level? Has the FCAT impacted their level of political interest or their decisions about what politicians to support? And finally, do they feel that the FCAT is having the intended effect, that is, do they feel that it is improving the state of education in Florida? Answering these questions helped me to assemble a picture of how parents viewed the purpose of the FCAT, and how it was or was not having the desired effect in their lives,

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<sup>2</sup> By content analysis, I mean that I gathered data in the form of newspaper articles, read the articles, summarized the theme of the article with a word or phrase, and looked for larger patterns in my codes (Bernard 1994).

as well as to show the specific ways in which it impacted their lives. Armed with the interview guide, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-five parents and asked them to participate in a modified free-listing activity, designed as an “ice-breaker” as well as to elicit cultural domains related to the FCAT. To answer how the FCAT impacts parents, I utilized interview transcripts and a coding system to analyze a combination of interview and free-listing data which I compared with the findings of the content analysis.

As I shall detail in Chapter 4, I found that parents lacked intricate understanding of the policies surrounding the FCAT and that they largely felt powerless to combat the stressful situations in which it places their families. To combat these feelings, parents have begun to resist involvement with their children’s schools. If this trend continues, more wealthy parents may completely disengage from the public school system in Florida and will send their children to private schools where the FCAT is not an issue. To combat this issue, it is important to find ways to include parents’ voices in policy evaluation reports prepared by private firms or government offices (such as the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability or OPPAGA) to policy makers and for parents to organize to make their opinions heard at the state level.

### **History of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test**

According to a press release found on the Florida Department of Education’s website, the FCAT was developed because “a group of Florida teachers came together and created a set of academic standards for Florida’s public schools” (FDOE 2004:1). The standards were named the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) and were the basis upon which the FCAT was developed. However, the chain of events leading up to the

development of the FCAT and the surrounding high-stakes policy is a little more complex, involving more actors than just “a group of Florida teachers”.

According to the Florida Department of Education (FDOE 2007b), the movement toward “accountability<sup>3</sup>” in Florida public education began in the early 1970s (History of Statewide Assessment Program (HSAP) website) with the passage of the Educational Accountability Act (FSS 229.57). This act mandated evaluation of Florida’s education system, particularly to gather student achievement data for comparison purposes (HSAP 2007). The first state assessment test was conducted during the 1971-1972 school year and tested second and fourth grade students in reading (HSAP 2007). State assessment testing was expanded to other subject areas and grades for the next two school years. In 1974, the Educational Accountability Act was revised to specify the grades and subject matters to be tested and to require the schools to create an annual school report for parents (HSAP 2007). The next amendment to the Educational Accountability Act was added in 1976 and indicated that students must pass a basic literacy test in order to receive their high school diplomas (HSAP 2007). Students who did not pass the test were awarded a Certificate of Completion (HSAP 2007).

The 1979-1980 school year was the first in which Florida students with disabilities (taking the standard test) were given test accommodations including untimed tests, large print tests, and testing in small groups (HSAP 2007). The next testing development in Florida was the advent of a writing test, introduced in 1982 (HSAP

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<sup>3</sup> “Accountability” is a loaded term used by politicians (in Florida and elsewhere) seeking to reform a particular institution by applying business models to that institution. Components of “accountability” include some sort of performance review (in this case it is a test (the FCAT)), a overseer (or several in this case, including the state and the public), and pay-for-performance (teacher bonus plans and school recognition funds).

2007). Throughout the 1980s, the FDOE contracted with various entities (University of South Florida; Florida State University; Scholastic Testing Service; Dade County; and Instructional Design, Development, and Evaluation Associates) to create, modify, or assess tests (HSAP 2007).

The shift toward the current iteration of the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test began in the 1990s (HSAP 2007). Then-governor Lawton Chiles proposed Blueprint 2000, a measure designed to give more control over education to schools at the district level by allowing each district to make spending and curriculum decisions previously made at the state level (Kleindienst 1991, Nickens 1991). Individual schools were eligible to make decisions on how to meet Florida's education guidelines and were charged with creating School Advisory Councils to assist them in doing so (Kushner, Carey, Kromrey 1996). The School Improvement and Accountability Act (also known as Blueprint 2000) was passed in 1991 (Kleindienst 1991, Nickens 1991). According to early newspaper accounts of the law, the focus was on giving control back to the local level. 1992 was the first year that the Florida Writing Assessment Program was introduced (AABB 2007). This program tested fourth grade students on their writing ability and is the precursor to the Florida Writes component of the FCAT given today (AABB 2007).

In 1995, HSAP indicates that contracts were solicited to develop and administer a new state assessment test. CTB/McGraw-Hill won the contract and held it until 1999, at which point Harcourt Educational Measurement replaced them. During this year, the state also adopted the design for the FCAT, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Design (AABB 2007). The following year, 1996, the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) were

adopted, the FCAT was approved by the legislature, and preliminary testing of the FCAT was approved for the following year (AABB 2007, HSAP 2007). The full roll-out of the FCAT occurred in 1998, testing children in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 (AABB 2007). The data from those tests were used to develop grading guidelines of the FCAT (AABB 2007). Eventually, in the year 2000, students from grades 3 through 10 were required to take one or more forms of the FCAT (HSAP 2007).

Stakes, which were linked to student and teacher performance, began to be attached to testing with the election of Education Commissioner Frank Brogan in 1995 (Maxwell 1995). Brogan proposed many initiatives to privatize education, ranging from utilizing vouchers to merit pay for teachers (Maxwell 1995, AABB 2007). In 1997, Commissioner Brogan introduced the School Recognition Program, designed to reward schools that performed best on the FCAT with additional funds (AABB 2007). While the Florida Legislature passed this program, it remained unfunded until 1998, when Governor Bush lent it his support. In its current form, it provides \$100 dollars per student who attended the school full time in the previous year (FDOE 2007a). This money is available to schools who earn an A grade (discussed below) or “improve[e] at least one performance grade category from the previous year” (FDOE 2007a). In 1999, the Florida legislature adopted the A+ Plan for Education, a plan designed to grade schools based on student test scores and to implement a voucher system. It gave parents of children whose schools received failing grades for two consecutive years an option to attend another school of their choice (AABB 2007). The legislation also amended the original law authorizing the FCAT, by expanding the grades in which students were

required to take the FCAT, added a science test to the FCAT, and mandated passing the FCAT as a condition of graduating from a Florida high school (AABB 2007).

Since 1999, the legislature has created a minimum grade needed on the FCAT to graduate from high school, added a provision that third grade students must receive a grade higher than level 1 on their reading FCAT score in order to pass to the fourth grade, required teachers to create an improvement plan for middle school students who receive a grade lower than level 3 on their FCAT, and changed the writing portion of the FCAT to include multiple choice (AABB 2007).

So what, exactly, is the FCAT? According to the Florida DOE (2007:13)

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test® (FCAT) is part of Florida's overall plan to increase student achievement by implementing higher standards. The FCAT, an assessment test administered to students in grades 3 through 11, contains two basic components: criterion-referenced tests (CRT) measuring selected benchmarks from the Sunshine State Standards (SSS or Standards) in mathematics, reading, science, and writing and norm-referenced tests (NRT) in reading comprehension and mathematics problem solving measuring individual student performance against national norms.

It is worth mentioning that students who attend private schools or who are homeschooled are not required to take the FCAT. Critics of the test say that the FCAT encourages rote memorization, forces teachers to narrow their curriculums and pedagogical techniques, and is an effort to privatize education by taking failing schools out of the public domain and turning them over to private enterprise through charter schools and vouchers (see results chapter). They are also quick to point the finger at former Governor Jeb Bush, as both the idea's originator and its main backer. However, according to a 1996 *Tampa Tribune* article, Governor Chiles was in office when the FCAT was proposed, developed,

and implemented (Kleindienst 1996). Bush's influence on the test was to change it to a high-stakes test and is likely the reason that the test is strongly associated with Bush, rather than its true originator, Chiles (FCAT Scan 2007, Hiaasen 2007).

The A+ Plan for Education is what links the FCAT to the NCLB Act.

According to the federal Department of Education (US DOE 2007), NCLB was designed for four purposes: "accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research"(US DOE 2007). Similarly, the A+ Plan for Education gives parents a choice in the school their child attends and focuses on accountability (AABB 2007). Both policies focus on holding schools and teachers accountable for their students' scores on high-stakes tests, purportedly in order to improve the lives of children and their families. However, it seems that there are many ways in which local control of schools could be increased without implementing high-stakes tests, just as giving parents a choice about the school their child attends could also be possible without tests that are linked to children's retention, teacher bonus pay, or a school's financial resources.

### **Education in the Tampa Bay Area**

In Florida, school districts correspond with county boundaries making all residents of a particular county residents of that county's school district. Each of the schools receives a letter grade ranging from A to F. This is commonly referred to as a "school grade" (FDOE 2007a). These grades are based on points that schools earn by having their students achieve a score of level three or higher on the reading, mathematics, and writing sections of the FCAT, as well as points given for "learning gains" (AABB 2007:50) in reading and math. The final category for which schools earn points toward

their grade is in “reading learning gains of the lowest 25 percent of students” (AABB 2007:50). For every category, the school is able to earn up to 100 points. One point is given for every percentage point of the student body that is at or above the passing standard (the levels change yearly and by category). Therefore, if 100% of the students earn the passing mark or above, then the school is awarded 100 points in that category. Prior to the 2006-2007 school year, a school had to earn at least 410 points (out of 600, or a 69% score) to receive a grade of A. However, the guidelines have been revised (to incorporate a new science test). The new scores are calculated out of 800 possible points and a score of 525 points (or a 66%) or more will be necessary to earn an A rating. The table below lists the past and present scores that correspond to each school grade.

Table 1: Revised School Grading Scale

Grade	Score prior to 2006 (score out of 600 points)		Scores for 2006-2007 and beyond (out of 800 points)	
	A	410 +	69% +	525 +
B	380-409	63%-68%	495-524	63%-66%
C	320-379	53%-67%	435-494	55%-62%
D	280-319	47%-52%	395-434	49%-54%
F	<280	<47%	<395	<49%

Table taken from FDOE’s website, percentage columns added by this author.

Students in schools who receive the F designation for two consecutive years are eligible to attend another school of their choice under the Florida A+ Accountability plan (FDOE 2007a). School grades are publicized on the Internet, in newspapers, and via other forms of media. Critics of the A+ Accountability plan have pointed out that it is possible for schools to earn A grades but not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the NCLB act (Matus 2007b, Pinzur 2003). Under Florida’s policy, AYP is determined by the percentage of students score a three or higher on the FCAT (this is known as “proficiency”) (FDOE 2007c). In order for AYP to be met, this percentage

must increase by at least one percent every year, with the end goal that 100% of students will make AYP by the year 2013 (FDOE 2007c). The AYP standard differs from the school grades in that a school could feasibly receive enough points to receive an A grade, but still not have all of its students performing at the proficient level. This points to the mismatch between Florida's educational measures and those at the national level.

According to the Florida Department of Education, the FCAT is designed to measure the individual, while the NCLB is more concerned with groups of students (Pinzur 2003).

School failure is not the only way in which a student and his or her family is eligible to choose the school they attend. In the School District of Hillsborough County, a program called Hillsborough Choice Options allows parents to select and apply to up three schools in their attendance area (boundaries of which are drawn by the district level school board) (SDHC 2007). Other options allow parents to apply to magnet schools (special schools that offer specialized theme programs, often geared toward math or science curricula), to apply to attend charter schools, apply for McKay scholarships (scholarships that allow children with special needs to attend private schools), apply for the NCLB Choice program (this program allows parents of students in Title 1 schools to apply to attend a school that is making adequate yearly progress), or to home school their child (FDOE 2007a; SDHC 2007; DOE 2007).

In Pinellas County School District (PCS), schools were subject to a federally mandated busing program (which had been implemented to end segregation in schools) until 2003 (PCS 2007). Starting in 2003, a program called "controlled choice" (PCS 2007) allows parents of children about to enter kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade to apply to schools within their "attendance area" (a boundary drawn within the school

district). Parents are also able to apply for a change in schools during other years (this is voluntary, unlike in the previously mentioned years). Applicants are accepted based on “their attendance area residence, the capacity of schools, racial percentages and preferences” (PCS 2007). This process is currently undergoing yet another iteration as the district seeks to keep students in neighborhood schools, yet maintain desegregation (PCS 2007). Students are also able to attend magnet schools, charter schools, apply for McKay scholarships, be home schooled, or apply for the NCLB Choice program (PCS 2007).

The options are somewhat limited in Pasco County schools (PCSD 2007a). If families wish to send their children to a school that is not the closest school geographically, they must file an application for a change of school (PCSD 2007a). Applications for the following school year are accepted until March and are only accepted for schools that are not over capacity. Most schools have a limited number of openings for transfer students (PCSD 2007a). Other options, like magnet schools, charter schools, McKay scholarships, NCLB Choice, and home schooling are also available to parents in Pasco County (PCSD 2007a). On the whole, students in Pasco County schools are much less able to access schools non-neighborhood schools than is the case in both Pinellas and Hillsborough County schools.

Charter schools are a part of Florida’s solution to school failure on the FCAT. According to the Pasco County School District, charter schools “are independently governed, free-standing public schools that offer parents and students an alternative public education outside the traditional school district system” (PCSD 2007a). Interested parents, community members, and financial sponsors work together to create a charter for

the school, establish a location, and provide financial resources for the school. Students are recognized as attending a public school, their teachers must hold a valid Florida Educator’s Certificate, the school receives a grade, and the students take the FCAT (PCSD 2007a). The only difference is that charter school teachers are not employed by the school district, but by the individual school (PCSD 2007a).

Table 2: 2006 Data on Public Schools in Three Tampa Bay School Districts

	Student enrollment	Number of public schools	Number of charter schools	Number of instructional staff
Hillsborough	192,022	206	231	11,104
Pasco	63,849	72	4	4,570
Pinellas	112,127	167	6	6,776

Info in table taken from: FDOE website, SDHC website, PCSD website, and PCS website

As Table 2 shows, the School District of Hillsborough County (SDHC 2007) is the largest (enrollment-wise) school district in the Tampa Bay area. In fact, it is the eighth largest district in the country (SDHC 2007). While Pasco schools have the lowest population, they also have a high projected growth, of 15% (in Pasco County’s population) within the next five years (PCSD 2007b). In short, the population of the greater Tampa Bay area is large and is growing rapidly.

In Hillsborough County, there are currently no schools with the F designation, although there are sixteen schools with a grade of D (FDOE 2007c). Similarly, in Pasco County there are currently no schools with the F designation (FDOE 2007c). There were three schools with a D grade (FDOE 2007c). Just as in the case of Hillsborough and Pasco County schools, Pinellas County School District currently has no schools with the F designation (FDOE 2007c). There are six schools in Pinellas County (five high schools and one elementary school) with a grade of D (FDOE 2007c). Each district is assigned

an overall grade based on district-wide data. Beginning with the 2003-2004 school year, all three local districts have earned a grade of B (with one exception: Hillsborough earned an A for the 2005-2006 school year). Clearly the majority of Tampa area schools are doing something right in the eyes of the State of Florida.

Policy makers in Florida have clearly shifted from a focus on improving education by involving parents and teachers at the local level to statewide, public accountability with high-stakes testing. Through a set of policies (which I will henceforth refer to as the FCAT) designed to punish low performing schools and reward high performing ones, former Governor Bush and other lawmakers chose to focus their efforts on applying a business accountability model to the world of education. The following chapters will explore in greater detail what the literature says about accountability and educational achievement, how the FCAT has impacted parents of elementary school children, and will suggest ways these impacts can be addressed.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Anthropologists point to a holistic viewpoint as one of the hallmarks of the discipline. In that vein, I explore the issue of high-stakes testing in the literature from multiple perspectives. Specific areas I focus on include an exploration of the purpose of education, what anthropologists have theorized about education, a discussion of anthropological views of policy analysis, privatization movements, and how high-stakes testing has impacted teachers and parents. I finish with a discussion of the importance of studying the media as another site of socialization for youth as well as their parents. In doing so, I hope to show the ways in which ways high-stakes testing can impact education and address why parents may have concerns about it.

### **Purpose of Education**

One component of the debate surrounding NCLB and high-stakes testing relates directly to the purpose of education. Depending on one's theoretical persuasion, arguments can be made that the purpose of education in the United States is to create loyal and/or informed citizens, reproduce the existing social order, or produce skilled classes of workers to drive the country's economy.

One proposed purpose of education is to instill national values into the next generation of citizens (Hall 1999). National education systems serve as a network for dispersal of the government's desired values and cultural mores into (theoretically) receptive youth (Hall 1999). For a current example, one needs look no further than the debates over whether evolution should be taught in schools, which rose alongside the

increasing power of the Christian right in U.S. politics. The educational system is viewed as an effective medium for inculcating new generations with the values of previous generations.

Alternately, the educational system can be utilized to create a productive and loyal workforce to drive the economy. Hall (1999) suggests that as globalization increasingly becomes a force to be reckoned with, governments are turning to their educational systems to produce the sort of workers who will be both loyal and competitive on the worldwide scale. Such efforts to target the education system to produce workers can be viewed through the increased emphasis on science and mathematics education starting in the 1950s (Mintz 2004) and continuing through the present (Borman et al. 2005).

In a similar vein, other scholars view the education system as a site of social reproduction. According to Connell et al (1981), a capitalist nation begets stratification within its education system, just as it does within its economic structure: people will always be stratified based on the resources they have in life, whether this is in education received or social class ascribed to them. They point out that “where disillusioned liberals saw in the inequality statistics evidence that the education system was *failing*, theorists of another stamp saw it as *succeeding*---in carrying out its normal social function of reproducing capitalist class relations” (Connell et al 1981:297).

Willis (1977), author of *Learning to Labour*, discusses the “lads,” working class British youth who are used to illustrate the social reproduction inherent in a capitalist system. The lads are teenage boys from working class families who could utilize their education to raise their social class but ultimately are unable to do so because of the

conflicting messages they receive through interaction with one another about the desirability of social mobility. In essence, they are unable to gain social mobility through education, suggesting that social reproduction is an inherent and insidious force within education in capitalist countries. Hall (1999) points out that Bourdieu challenged the idea of schools as the site of social reproduction, suggesting instead that schools were sites of negotiation between capitalism and other forces in youths' lives.

Gonzalez (2004) suggests that the debate over the purpose of education is diametrically opposed between those who want to prepare children with tangible career skills versus those who want to train children in critical thinking skills. In other words, some believe that the purpose of education is to prepare tomorrow's citizens with job skills while others believe that the purpose should be to teach thinking and create an informed citizenry. High-stakes tests encourage teaching children tangible skills that are easily tested by multiple choice and short essay tests instead of critical thinking skills that do not directly provide students with a demonstrable skill, but in the long run benefit the child (Gonzalez 2004).

While social reproduction, worker skill training and citizenship building, and teaching critical thinking skills in schools are competing arguments<sup>4</sup>, it seems reductionist to select only one as the "correct" philosophy for the purpose of education or as what the government intends when it creates policy. Instead, the most likely purpose for education lies at the intersection of these theories: that it is to create better citizens, better workers, critical thinkers, and partially to reproduce the existing social order.

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<sup>4</sup> These three theories are not the only ideas that have been proposed to explain the purpose of schooling and education. However, they are the major theories that I was able to uncover in my literature review and thus will be the only three covered in this paper.

Variables change from location to location, making it difficult to say with certainty which purpose is the dominant factor that shapes education in the United States.

### **Anthropology and education**

High-stakes testing is a topic explored by researchers from many disciplines. What can an anthropologist contribute to the dialogue? According to Jacob and Jordan (1992:255) researchers from other disciplines place the responsibility of education in the hands of the individual or small groups while “anthropological perspectives widen the focus of attention...the classroom, the school, the institution of schooling, and the relationship of formal education to other social factors.” Gonzalez (2004:17) suggests that anthropologists have a unique understanding of “core issues that undergird teaching and learning, that is, the relationships among power, knowledge, and identity.” It is these three issues: power, knowledge, and identity that shape the experience that humans have with education, both formal and informal, as well as policy related to education. Hall (1999) writes that anthropology is particularly well suited to study these issues (power, knowledge, and identity) because the discipline itself has been examining its relationship to these issues, particularly power and knowledge, over the past few decades. The advantage is that the discipline has been working through concepts that other disciplines have yet to acknowledge.

Anthropological studies of high-stakes testing are relatively few in number; none have focused on the state of Florida. Those that I was able to find detailed the effects that testing has had on students of color (Fine et al. 2007; Salinas and Reidel 2007; Sloan 2007; Valli and Chambliss 2007) and were conflicting in their findings. Sloan (2007:25) discusses the impact that high-stakes testing has had on teachers “of minority youth”: it is

increased their stress and is driving them to quit the profession. He points out anthropologists' proclivity for critiquing policies that seek to standardize, noting that they need to take care in launching these attacks without ethnographic data to back up their claims (Sloan 2007). Salinas and Reidel (2007) analyze the high-stakes movement in Texas, where they find that minority groups have been successful in utilizing the court system to make their voice heard in state level education policy. They point to the need for further opportunities for public input into Texas's educational accountability plan and an increase in the diversity of assessments used to evaluate children (Salinas and Reidel 2007). Valli and Chambliss (2007) describe the impact that NCLB can have in the classroom by examining an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class. They found that the pressure of tests increased the amount of time the ESOL teacher spent reviewing test materials and strategies and decreased the time spent utilizing pedagogical techniques advocated by second language acquisition experts (Valli and Chambliss 2007). Finally, Fine et al. (2007) point to concurrent rise of high-stakes testing and Americans' concern over immigration and increasing diversity (particularly of language) in the United States. They find that while some members of the education community have resigned themselves to a future of testing and accountability, others have committed themselves to "resistance" (Fine et al. 2007:91). They find ways to reach out to immigrant youth and communities to incorporate these differences into their education. While each of these articles approaches the topic of high-stakes testing from a different angle, they all point to the need for further ethnographic study on the impact that policies like NCLB have on educational achievement, particularly for linguistic and ethnic minorities in the United States.

Fundamental to anthropologists' understanding of the impact that educational policy can have on the diverse populations that many schools encompass is the concept of culture. Anthropologists are well-known for this concept, one that has gone through multiple iterations over the last 100 years. Culture was initially defined as the "complex...whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquire by man as a member of society" by Tylor (1871/1958:1), a definition that eventually came to be viewed as too static and rigid for postmodernists because it suggested that culture was an unchanging characteristic of people. Currently the conception of culture is more flexible, taking into account that people have agency and can act on the behaviors and norms they were taught. Anthropologists interested in entering into the world of education research were early champions for the use of the culture concept in education because they believed it would aid integration and teacher understanding of students different from themselves (McDermott and Varenne 2006). Educational researchers and educators have latched onto this concept with increasing vigor. However, as anyone who reads educational anthropologists' work today knows, anthropologists are far from pleased about the current use of anthropology in education.

Gonzalez (2004) suggests that historically culture served as a stand-in for race, which makes its adoption in education troubling given that the culture concept has been used to justify the failure of minority children. Current authors such as Ruby Payne (and her predecessor Oscar Lewis) point to the idea of certain cultures as "deficient" in areas that other cultures are not (Gonzalez 2004). An example of the sort of argument used by deficiency theorists is the "culture of poverty" theory, which suggests that certain

cultures lack important components that allow other cultures to succeed in education and in life. Thus, the idea of culture has been used in place of the idea of race to explain why certain types of people are successful in educational achievement while others are not. Other authors, (such as Ogbu, Levinson, and Jacob and Jordan to name a few) many of them anthropologists, view the cause of the failure of minority children as related to difference theories, that is, that differences between children's cultures and that of the mainstream (what is taught in school) lead to the failure. These authors are often horrified when deficiency theorists explain that certain cultures are lacking essential elements necessary for success in modern America. McDermott and Vareene (2006) suggest that, simply put, those in education have gotten the idea of culture totally wrong. They write that instead of aiding educators in broadening their horizons, culture has made it possible for educators to reduce people even further to simple categories.

Additionally, educational anthropologists have contributed to the knowledge base on how schooling affects identity formation (Echeverria 2003; Fordham 1993; Gonzalez et al. 2005; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Levinson 2001, 1996) as well as broadening the field of educational research to processes taking place outside of the classroom (Basso 2000, Ginwright et. al 2005, Gonzalez et al. 2005, Nespor 2000).

While all of these contributions have been important, anthropology's legacy continues to be the concept of culture. As the discipline refines its ideas about the culture concept, other disciplines are not as quick to change their ideas, particularly if the old concept continues to work for them. If educational anthropologists wish to counter efforts at implementing cultural deficit thinking into policy, they must become more

effective at establishing interdisciplinary dialogue. One way to do so is to become a member of the policy making community.

### **Policy Analysis**

What is an anthropological examination of policy? How does an anthropologist's examination of policy differ from that of a political scientist? Part of the answer lies in the point of view taken by the policy analyst. Anthropologists tend to examine the intended as well as unintended effects of policy and include more stakeholder groups in their analysis. They do so in order to capture varying stakeholder perspectives and to understand the layers of impact that the policy has had (McNeil and Coppola 2006).

Another important component of anthropological policy studies is that it attempts to bring out not only the overt agenda of policy makers, but also hidden agenda(s) (McNeil and Coppola 2006). Doing so allows the researcher to understand whether the policy is having the effect intended by the policy maker (McNeil and Coppola 2006). McNeil and Coppola (2006) recommend asking questions such as "Who gains power under this policy and who loses it?" or "How do the recipients understand what it is supposed to be accomplished and how they are supposed to respond?" and "Where does this policy have impact?" (Goertz 2006:695). Such qualitative questions are necessary because they expose the (often) hidden reality that quantitative data cannot. Aggregated data in numerical form are usually what policymakers use to show reality and to determine how their policy is working (McNeil and Coppola 2006). By doing so, politicians often create and enact policy without awareness of the impacts that their decisions have or whether what they have created will really have the intended effect.

To sum up the difference between an anthropological analysis of public policy and that of a non-anthropologist, the answer comes down to intent of the final publication/research. McNeil and Coppola (2006) suggest that ultimately, many policy analysts and evaluators wish only to determine whether the policy is “working” according to the formal guidelines set forth by the policy, rather than answering questions about the unintended effects of the policy and its impact on broader communities. Anthropologists, particularly those who consider themselves applied anthropologists, seek to broaden the discussion of policy impacts and create dialogue with the impacted parties. Education, a contentious subject because of its high cost to taxpayers and its importance in shaping peoples’ lives, is governed by many policies of dubious intent. Increasingly social scientists have pointed to a movement to implement policies that take education out of the public sphere and make it a privatized good.

### **Privatization of Education**

One of the biggest debates in the United States concerns the push by government, at the federal and state levels, to privatize previously government provided services such as healthcare, welfare, the prison system, and education. Many researchers have described charter schools, voucher systems, and high-stakes testing as components of this push in the education sector (Bartlett et al 2002; Lipman 2002, 2004, 2005; Sirotnik 2004; Cuban 2004a). The beginnings of the modern privatization of education movement have been traced to the early 1970s (Mulvenon et al 2005, Cuban 2004a) with the increased emphasis on standards, accountability, and teacher effectiveness. Bartlett et al. suggest that this push was driven by the recession of the early 1980s and the public’s call for tax dollars to be spent more efficiently. They write that the government turned

toward private business models to streamline spending, specifically in education because it comprises a large portion of the national budget (Bartlett et al. 2002). Private business in capitalist societies is driven by the market and choice; by applying the idea that families were “customers” of educational services, the government attempted to replicate the sink-or-swim model of businesses<sup>5</sup> (Bartlett et al. 2002).

### **Accountability and Standards**

“At no time in the history of U.S. public schools have those responsible for schools been unaccountable.” (Cuban 2004a:19) Cuban makes this rather bold statement at the beginning of an article on the history of accountability in United States schools. While some educational historians may disagree with him, the evidence indicates that as long as there has been public education in the United States, the parties responsible for overseeing that education were held responsible by parents and the community at large (Johanningmeier 1985, Cuban 2004a). Understanding that historically, the public has been dissatisfied with the state of education in the United States, regardless of the presence or absence of accountability, removes power from policy makers who utilize discourses of accountability and standards. Policies such as the Florida A+ Plan and the NCLB rely on public acceptance of the idea that the cause of educational inequality is lack of accountability rather than structural and racial inequalities manifesting through education achievement.

During the 1950s, the United States federal government became involved in education legislation designed ultimately to produce more scientists in order to keep the

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<sup>5</sup> That is, if a business is effective and efficient, as well as provides what its customers want, it will be successful. If it does not streamline its services and delivery of these services, the customers will become dissatisfied and shop elsewhere, thus forcing schools to be effective to retain students (and tax dollars).

United States competitive with Russia (and other Communist nations). By producing more students who were competent in math and science, the federal government hoped to produce more scientists who would produce technology (such as weapons and spacecraft) that would place the United States in a position of power over their enemies (Cuban 2004a, Johanningmeier 1985). With the increased attention to educational achievement of America's students and the advent of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, it became clear that some students were not receiving the same quality of education as others, and that this could largely be predicted if given the child's race (Cuban 2004a, Johanningmeier 1985).

This knowledge became the springboard for a host of federal and state policies that attempted to solve the "achievement gap" in American education (Johanningmeier 1985). The most recent national iteration of accountability policy is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which was largely based on the Chicago Public Schools' policy of combining high-stakes testing with school takeovers, mandated standards, and teacher accountability (Lipman 2004). With the 2001 passing of President George W. Bush's NCLB, neoliberals successfully started a nationwide process to integrate private business models into public education. These models are implemented through state level monitoring implemented in the form of high-stakes tests. If resistance is attempted the United States federal government will intervene, either by withholding funding or by closing the school (US Department of Education 2007).

This heightened state of surveillance (Lipman 2005) and accountability creates a structure where teachers are forced to conform to certain practices because of increased likelihood of government interference or consequences if they do not. Hamann

(2003:441) writes that the standardization movement promotes the view that there is a “best practices” approach, one that “compels us to ask what knowledges are being silenced or subordinated in this quest for ‘educational science.’” Additionally, Hamann (2003:442) states that NCLB “dismisses teachers’ professional knowledge” by forcing them to comply with standards not of their choosing. Why is centralization of standards problematic? Rothstein (2005: 174) states that

Abandoning local control is dangerous because pedagogy is complex, with few final answers and a need for experimentation... Accountability rules have forced some schools to pay more attention to basic skills for disadvantaged students, but have also created incentives to narrow curricula so that little more than basic skills will be taught to many students.

A final concern, alluded to by Rothstein, is the standardization and nationalization of curriculum (or “federalization” as Rothstein calls it). McCarty (2005:xv) notes that the federal and state level government is increasingly involved in determining the look and feel of curriculum, with “policies mandating scripted, uniform, remedial reading programs for students identified as “at risk,” “limited English proficient,” and “deficient in reading skills.”” She suggests that such policies target ethnic minorities in the United States and do so because of the American fear of being outnumbered by “minorities” (2005).

Researchers (Anderson-Levitt 2003, Bartlett et al. 2002, Lipman 2005) fear that increased centralization of curriculum will have the deleterious effect of creating a homogenous national education system that works well for no one and sends the elites into private schools, where the faculty have more freedom to choose curriculum and pedagogical practices. The combination of these global level forces (privatization,

nationalization of education, and increased accountability) creates a structure in which teachers are treated less as professionals and more as incompetent workers, whose every move must be monitored and scripted in order to ensure that they do not fail (Lipman 2005). When teachers are deprived of their “professional knowledge” as their pedagogy becomes centered on teaching standards required by the state or federal government; the consequence of disobeying (in Florida) is potentially losing their yearly bonus or losing their job because their school is taken over by the school district or state (Whoriskey 2006). In this way, a global force (accountability and high-stakes testing) implements a structure of holding individual teachers accountable for situations that are partially beyond their control (poverty, history, ethnicity, school funding) while simultaneously taking away their decision-making power, thus exerting control over them.

### **Anthropological explanations of student “failure”<sup>6</sup>**

In part, the debate over high-stakes testing is one over the proper way to address student “failure”. There have been different explanations proposed for why some students excel in the American system of education while others do not.

One problem that critics of the NCLB Act (and the philosophy behind high-stakes testing) point to is that these policies fail to acknowledge that children’s socio-economic background can play an equally important role in their ability to learn as much as does the quality of their school. Schemo, a reporter for the New York Times, points this out in an article called “It Takes More Than Schools to Close the Achievement Gap” (August 9,

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<sup>6</sup> The word failure is enclosed in quotation marks because of the view of myself and others that students who do not achieve according to externally imposed standards are not necessarily failing to be educated, but only failing to be educated in the way that certain groups of people view as the “right” way to be educated.

2006). In this article, she cites research that shows children from wealthy families are privy to much more informal education outside of the classroom than their poor counterparts. Similarly, Muller (2004) writes that sociologists first began to suggest that socioeconomic factors influenced children's success in school in the mid-1960s, with the publication of James Coleman's "Equality of Educational Opportunity Study"<sup>7</sup> (Ravitch 1983). Many anthropologists have critiqued this sort of argument, one that puts the blame on student socio-economic background for placing the blame of school failure onto the students rather than on the structure of the school. These arguments suggest that if all students could become identical to white middle class children, then they would succeed in school. They fail to acknowledge that cultural differences are not deficits (Jacob and Jordan 1993, Levinson and Holland 1996).

Another attempt to explain the failure of certain groups in school was made by of John Ogbu (1992). He is famous for the voluntary/involuntary minority concept, which explained that the successes or failures of students were due to whether their ancestors had voluntarily immigrated to the United States or were brought by force (Gibson and Ogbu 1991, Ogbu 1992). People belonging to ethnic and cultural groups whose ancestors were brought by forcible means to the United States were less likely to succeed in school because they viewed school as a means to assimilate them into the dominant culture and wanted no part of it (Ogbu and Gibson 1991, Ogbu 1992). Thus their failure was not failure at all, but a type of resistance to a lifestyle that they had been forced into. This

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<sup>7</sup> Coleman's report was commissioned by the United States government to report on the state of education. His findings suggested that students' class and not their race were the most important factors in their educational achievement. This study was used to help end segregation (Ravitch 1983).

explanation for minority student failure has come under a substantial amount of criticism. Part of the objection to Ogbu's approach is the understanding that any sort of group (particularly a cultural group) is not homogenous. There are a range of ideas and values within groups as well as a range of expression of one's culture. There are also more components to an individual's identity than how "well" their ancestors assimilated into American culture: geographic location, class, ability level, gender, and family and community support are also important (Fine et al. 2007, Gibson 1997, Jacob and Jordan 1993, Levinson and Holland 1996). Second, researchers have found many examples of groups that do not fit into Ogbu's categories or who are exceptions. His dichotomous categories fail to incorporate several important groups of immigrants including: economic immigrants, refugees, guest workers, illegal workers, and immigrants from former colonies (Gibson 1997:432-436). The categories fail to explain the behavior of groups such as Hmong immigrants documented by Stacey Lee (2005). Among the students studied by Lee<sup>8</sup>, there was a range of student "success" within the school system (2005). Third, Ogbu's dichotomy "pits native-born minorities versus immigrant ones" (Lukose 2007:407).

Instead, many anthropologists today suggest that there is a mismatch between student knowledge and expertise and that valued by teachers and educational professionals (Gonzalez et al. 2005, Jacob and Jordan 1993, Lee 2005, Levinson and Holland 1996). Called the "cultural difference approach" (Jacob and Jordan 1993:8, Levinson and Holland 1996:7), this theoretical framework suggests that while schools

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<sup>8</sup> Lee's study population was comprised of both first and second-generation Hmong immigrants, who are refugees.

value a particular sort of knowledges and practices, their students' culture may value different sets of knowledges and abilities. This framework can be used to understand why some groups of students do poorly in schools: they have been prepared to be competent in areas that may differ drastically from what schools affirm (through grades and standardized tests) as the "correct" areas (Jacob and Jordan 1993, Levinson and Holland 1996).

Levinson and Holland (1996) caution that the cultural difference approach obscures the ways in which certain knowledges come to be viewed as highly desirable and point out the need of making such processes explicit in one's work. They suggest moving beyond both Ogbu's approach (termed "cultural discontinuity" (Jacob and Jordan 1993)) and the cultural difference approach to one that they label the "cultural production" approach (Levinson and Holland 1996:8). This approach recognizes that identity is "contingent and fluid" (1996:11), that culture is not static, and that both larger societal structures and individual agency play a part in the construction of a person's identity both within and outside of schools (Levinson and Holland 1996).

While the cultural production approach proposed by Levinson and Holland does not specifically provide an explanation for student "failure", it does expand on the idea of cultural difference to take into account structure and agency, as well as the fluidity of identity and culture. Understanding that anthropologists take a culturally relativistic approach to education is essential in understanding their critiques of high-stakes testing policies.

## **Purpose of Standardized Testing**

The introduction of standardized testing in public schools came into full swing with the growth of psychology and educational measurement tests, notably the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Gould 1996). The purpose of standardized testing is to provide both teachers and wider audiences with data on student achievement so that teachers can gear their teaching and content to their students and so the public can ensure that teachers are providing an adequate education (Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester 2005). However, those ideals are not always met: some teachers or districts do not have the time or resources to examine student achievement data and testing information can be used against teachers when scores may be influenced by many factors beyond the teacher's control (Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester 2005). Additionally, as Muller (2004) points out, while tests might show that there are gaps between groups of students, it does not actually mean that the students with lower scores are learning less than the students with higher scores and the opposite can often be true: students with lower scores may have made more gains in learning, but because they started behind, they end up behind.

In her book *High Stakes Education* (2004), Lipman clearly states her belief that high-stakes testing and the rhetoric that surrounds them are essentially used as “double-speak” a la 1984. While the discourse surrounding high-stakes testing centers on equality and giving every child an adequate education, the reverse is actually occurring: by placing such importance on one educational indicator, more children are being failed by the education system. While Lipman suggests that this is intentional, I am not so sure. Sirotnik (2004) suggests that the true problem with standardized testing is that it

measures a child's ability to take a test on a particular day of his/her life and does not provide an accurate portrait of the child's ability and capacity to learn, particularly for children who do not do well on standardized assessments, such as anxious children and children of color.

Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester (2005) write that there are four basic motivations for implementing high-stakes testing in an educational environment. They are: to exert control over the classroom level curriculum, to standardize curriculum on a large (geographically speaking) scale, to gather data about student learning, and to ensure that all students are learning certain fundamental skills and concepts (290-292). The implications for teachers in this scenario are particularly bleak if the motivation stems from the first two: control and monitoring of school and classroom level curriculum and content. Such tests take power away from teachers through a variety of means: publishing school "grades" and aggregated test scores, paying teachers whose students score well on the FCAT a bonus, making the names of those teachers public, and sanctioning schools who score poorly as well as rewarding schools who score well.

By making public the results of these tests, teachers are encouraged through a very public medium (newspapers and television) to "do well or else", with the "or else" being the shame of not earning extra money, not earning a teaching reward, or being forced to find a new job because their school was closed down, all because their students did not conform to standards that an unknown actor (or actors) set (Smith 1991). Teachers who attempt to exert their agency over the system risk losing bonuses and ultimately their career as a teacher. High-stakes tests push teachers to resort to new

methods to enable their students to perform at the expected level, regardless of what their professional training has taught them to do (Smith 1991).

### **High-Stakes Testing and Teachers**

In a survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA), 69% of its members (educators across the United States) “disapprove of NCLB” (NEA July 4, 2006). Only four percent of the NEA members surveyed indicated that the current iteration of the NCLB was acceptable (NEA July 4, 2006). According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, the FCAT has had a demoralizing effect on Tampa Bay area teachers, in part because “professional creativity has been replaced by what amounts to FCAT scripts” (Editorial 2006a).

One source of contention among teachers concerning the movement for high-stakes testing is that it essentially “de-skills” (Lipman 2004:44) them; that is, it forces them to follow externally imposed standards and curricula, neither of which they were able to give input into. In Chicago, one of the originators of high-stakes testing policy, Lipman (2004) observed that teachers feel that not only has their autonomy been taken away, but so has their voice to shape or influence policy. She writes that “it is not an exaggeration to say many Chicago teachers face an existential crisis as ... their actions in the classroom are in conflict with the very reasons they became teachers. There are no official channels to voice this crisis” (Lipman 2004:44). Why, then, would teachers comply with the standards’ mandate? One way that teachers are encouraged to go along with these undermining forces is performance pay, or teacher bonuses linked to student scores on the FCAT.

According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, such plans were first proposed in 2002, after the FCAT had been implemented for six years. Purportedly, teachers and teachers unions have aided in the design and implementation of programs that are so difficult that only a handful of people qualify for the bonus every year. These impossible standards were created by teachers who did not support the bonus plan to begin with and made it difficult in order to circumvent the legislation. Legislators, recognizing the teachers' actions, have attempted to revise the teacher bonus policy in order to better implement their original vision (Winchester and Matus 2006). According to one Pasco County district official, the problem with such plans is "We're not even three-quarters of the way through the school year and we're giving the FCAT...Who is responsible for the child's learning: the teacher they have this year or the teacher they had last year?" (Winchester and Matus 2006). Winchester and Matus's article points to a disconnect between government officials and classroom teachers. To illustrate this point, Winchester and Matus cite one Pinellas County teacher (who was given a teaching excellence award) who indicated that she felt teacher bonus programs were unfair, while a Department of Education representative indicated that " 'I don't know why they would feel that way...they are going to be recognized for what they are committed to do, which is increasing the learning gains of students'" (2006).

It is clear that the majority of teachers do not care for high-stakes testing and it is not difficult to see why. Smith (1991:9) points out that even well-performing schools attempt to raise their scores year after year as a "status symbol" of the value of that school. Smith indicates that teachers believe that administrators above them are directly affected by test scores of that school's pupils (1991).

Additionally, “many teachers reported feeling professionally unsatisfied ...preparing for tests — an activity they universally considered distinct from teaching itself.” (The Southeast Center for Teaching Quality 2004). This quote makes an important point, which is that an important reason teachers lack buy-in to testing is that they feel it is unrelated to teaching and learning. In order for them to value it, policy makers would have to determine what aspects of testing they do not value and see as unrelated to teaching and learning and what, if anything, can be done to change that. One reason teachers feel that such tests are not valid is that they measure the students’ performance at one point in time, rather than over a period of time (Smith 1991).

While one purpose of standardized testing is to force teachers to conform to a prescribed model of teaching, teachers do not always find this comforting. “Historically, when high-stakes test-oriented accountability measures have been emphasized in American schools, the use of methods focused on the teaching of complex reasoning and problem solving has tended to decrease” (Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester 2005). This is partially because standardized testing causes teachers to worry. Smith (1991) documented five categories of teacher reactions to standardized testing: negative emotions surrounding the release of test scores to the public, worry about the impact of the test on students, beliefs that the test results are an inaccurate reflection of student ability, the test(s) as a constraint on creative or innovative pedagogy, and the deprofessionalization of teaching. Similarly, Herman and Golan (1993) found that in practice, standardized testing causes teachers to gear their curriculum content toward the test content, believing that they were able to influence their students’ scores. In part, this is because teachers feel they must conform to an externally-mandated standard. This in

turn causes teachers to feel a loss of control over their classrooms, feeling that the more government has turned their attention to regulating and standardizing classroom practices, the less they are able to effectively do their job (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas 2000).

To create more balance in the present discussion, it is important to point out that teachers can gain from the push to implement high-stakes tests. The standards attached to these tests can guide teachers to ensure that they know what they must cover and can assist them in knowing what their students should know if they are to be on par with other students at the local, state, and national levels (Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester 2005). These tests can potentially be an important source of data on student knowledge and can be useful for improving instruction on the individual level, provided that the information is utilized by teachers.

### **High-Stakes Testing and Families**

It was difficult to find literature that discussed the impact high-stakes testing has had on parents. One article published in the Phi Delta Kappan specifically discussed reactions of parents to the A+ Accountability program in Florida (Goldhaber and Hannaway 2004). There is also a body of literature that discusses the importance of parent involvement on educational achievement. Beyond that, the existing research is largely tangential to my research question.

Goldhaber and Hannaway (2004) conducted focus groups with parents and teachers concerning the effect that the voucher system has had on education in Florida. They found that parents at both ends of the grading scale felt pressure to do well on the FCAT, a finding unexpected because the authors had expected only sanctioned schools to

have stressed parents. They also reported parents expressed concern over the amount of time focused on test preparation in their child's education (Goldhaber and Hannaway 2004).

Researchers have indicated that parental support is vital to a child's educational success and achievement level. Whether the support is shown as the parent volunteering in the classroom or assisting the child with homework at home, parents' support of and presence in their child's education is vital to their success (Watkins 1997, Zellman and Waterman 1998). However, there have been some researchers who have suggested that parents who are present in their child's school, through volunteering or to communicate with their child's teacher have children who perform at higher levels than parents whose involvement is limited to the home (Lee and Bowen 2006). Watkins (1997:9) suggests that there are multiple factors that impact a parent's involvement: "teacher communication, child achievement, the parent's level of education, and the parent's ethnicity." Whether these factors are negative or positive depends largely on the experience that parents, students, and teachers have with one another (Watkins 1997). Particularly important are the interactions that parents have with their children related to education. If such interactions are negative, children tend to disengage from school and their performance suffers (Zellman and Waterman 1998). It is clear that parents who are very involved in their children's educational lives can make the difference in whether they succeed or fail, particularly if their involvement is positive in nature.

Outside of school, parents often organize groups among peers to influence their children's education. Lipman (2004) mentions that there are several parent educational advocacy groups organized around fighting for quality education for their children. I was

largely unable to find such groups in the Tampa Bay area. One group that I did find, the Florida Coalition for Assessment Reform (FCAR), describes the FCAT as “a secret, high-stakes test that cannibalizes the curriculum, penalizes poor test-takers, diverts scarce resources, traumatizes children, shames and stigmatizes communities, usurps local control, and turns schools into giant test prep centers” (FCAR 2007). Other research that I found focused on specific issues, such as test anxiety, and utilized parents as one source of information among many (rather than focusing their studies on the impact that testing has on parents or the family unit), or was sponsored by a company with an ulterior motive (Mulvenon et al 2005, ASCD 2000).

There is an overwhelming amount of literature that is critical of high-stakes testing (and in the last five years, NCLB). Most of the criticisms emanate from scholars critiquing the policy themselves or via research projects with teachers who do the critiques for them. Mulvenon, Stegman, and Ritter (2005) point out that relatively few studies have been conducted that surveyed all of the stakeholders in a single study. Presumably this is due to time and budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, it points to an important gap in the literature: stakeholders other than teachers and school administrators have rarely been utilized as a source of information about the impact of high-stakes testing policy.

The only studies that directly concerned parents’ perceptions of high-stakes testing policy consisted of surveys that were conducted via telephone, internet, or with paper and pencil (Fuller 2006, Falbo et al 2003, ASCD 2000, Barber et al 1992). The findings varied, partially due to the scope of the survey, the time in which the survey was conducted, and the geographic area covered by the survey. The oldest study, conducted

by Barber et al (1992:18) consisted of a “42-item questionnaire . . . used to assess parental understanding of and satisfaction with MEAP [Michigan’s version of the FCAT]”. The researchers found that while parents had a general understanding of why their children were being tested, on the whole they did not understand the sort of test their children were taking or how to correctly interpret the results. Barber et al (1992) concluded that more information was necessary in order for parents to interpret and understand their child’s score.

The ASCD (2000) survey, conducted by Harris Interactive and sponsored by Sylvan Learning Center and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) was conducted via the Internet and resulted in 600 responses. The majority of the survey takers (seventy-two percent) were women with children enrolled in grades four through twelve (ASCD 2000). The most significant findings were that “half are unsure of or do not know what the state standardized tests measure” and that “a majority of parents . . . believe that mandated state testing is not a true and valid measurement of their children’s ability” (ASCD 2000:1).

Falbo et al’s (2003) study of parental satisfaction with Austin (TX) city schools was in part sponsored by the Austin Chamber of Commerce and focuses on parents as consumers of their children’s education. The participants consisted of a stratified (by race/ethnicity, income, and grade level) random sample of 1,176 parents, the majority (seventy-six percent) of whom were female. The finding of most significance was that low income parents were more likely to be satisfied with the children’s education than with higher income ones (Falbo et al 2003). The authors also indicated that Latino

parents were more likely to indicate satisfaction with their child's education than non-Latino parents.

Finally, Fuller's 2006 study of teacher and parent perceptions of the TAKS study was funded by the Association of Texas Professional Educators and consisted of a survey of 500 teachers and 500 parents. Much like Barber et al's study, Fuller (2006) found that the majority (65 percent) of parents felt that their children's test results were not easy to understand. According to Fuller, what was lacking from other studies is that parents (and teachers) feel that the high-stakes nature of the test is unfair. "Educators and parents want a system that is diagnostic and evaluative and that incorporates growth in student knowledge throughout a student's career." (Fuller 2006:6)

While all of these studies indicate parents' views on standardized testing and the various ways that high-stakes tests have impacted education for their children, all but one (Fuller 2006) rely on statistics derived from survey responses to determine parental opinion of high-stakes testing. While it is important to understand trends in the data, it is also important to understand how individual people view the test as well, both to test the survey data and to support or expand the view it provides: this is one of the aims of this study.

There has been some attention at the policy level to parents' confusion over education reforms. The National Education Goals Panel published a "how to" guide for states to publicize their high-stakes testing plans in a positive and easy-to-understand manner. The guide indicates that it was published to ease parental frustrations surrounding the testing policy. According to the forward written by Colorado governor Ray Romer, "Those frustrations were not due to the state's move to a standards based

system...I found that my audience was frustrated with the lack of information about what their child's test scores meant" (NEGP 1998:11). In other words, when Governor Romer heard opposition to the policy of high-stakes testing, it was actually frustration on the part of parents because of lack of understanding rather than actual opposition. Further in the document, the suggestion is made to "include graphics and pictures; use large print;... aim to an 8th-grade reading level" (NEGP 1998:15) so that parents are better able to understand the reasons behind the policy and their children's test scores. Essentially, if the message is explained clearly and in a simple manner, parents will support the policy (NEGP 1998). This suggests that governmental personnel view the public as incapable of understanding public policy and may suggest that they do not think them capable of making informed decisions unless the information is watered down.

### **Media and Education**

Why compare parental views of high-stakes testing to what the media has reported on the same topic? According to Hall (1999) in our rapidly globalizing world, many experiences are felt and lived through at least one form of media, creating a world where socialization does not necessarily occur face-to-face. Just as educational anthropologists assert that schools are sites of socialization (Levinson 1999), the argument can be made that the media can be experienced as a site of socialization as well (Bird 2003, Wehmeyer 2000, Page 1996). Finally, this is also not a method that is widely utilized among educational anthropologists; a review of the literature confirms that the preferred methods include interviews, Participatory Action Research (PAR), focus groups, and observations (Levinson 1999, Lipman 2004, Spindler and Hammond 2006).

Within the field of communication, studies of how the media impacts public thinking about issues have been called framing, agenda setting, and priming (Weaver 2007). Framing is defined as the way that the media represents particular topics, while agenda setting and priming studies look at the effects of the media frame (Weaver 2007). Here, I primarily discuss how the media frames the FCAT, because as Reese (2007:152) points out “news stories must select certain aspects of reality and emphasize them...it is precisely the way that certain attributes come to be associated with particular issues that should concern framing analysis.” Examining how the news media ties particular “attributes” to the FCAT will illuminate the issues that I anticipated would also be important to parents.

### **Conclusion**

Studying the impact of high-stakes testing policy on parents and their children from an anthropological perspective allows a holistic examination and interpretation of the ways that families experience the effects of high-stakes testing policy in Florida (Schensul 1985). Because anthropology pulls theory and methods from a multitude of disciplines and weaves these parts together to create a complex portrait, the resulting ethnography provides a textured and nuanced look at what life is like for families in an era of high-stakes testing (Schensul 1985). And as the literature shows, investment by parents is an important element in children’s educational success, thus suggesting that an exploration of parents’ attitudes to the high-stakes environment is long overdue. This chapter discussed important contributions that anthropologists have made to the study of educational achievement, as well as input from educational researchers.

In the following chapters, this information will be utilized to make sense of data gathered from parents about how high-stakes testing is changing the face of education.

### Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

Originally I did not intend to study the impact of the FCAT outside of the classroom. My first proposal suggested that I conduct participant observation in third and fourth grade classrooms in two different schools in a local school district. I would observe, over a period of months, how teaching practice changed as the FCAT loomed closer, arrived, and then ended. My hypothesis was that the amount of time focused on the FCAT would start off slowly, reach a peak and then drop off completely. I would also conduct interviews and focus groups with teachers in both schools concerning their feelings on how the FCAT has changed their teaching practice. However, I was ultimately unable to gain entry into local schools, due either to reluctance on the part of the school administrators or Florida laws regulating the administration of the FCAT.

After numerous consultations with my advisor, we agreed that doing a study of the opinions of local parents of elementary school children, and relating this to newspaper coverage of the FCAT could be equally illuminating (given the scarcity of research on parent opinion) and more within my reach during my relatively short internship semester. As a first step, I designed a flyer with tear-off flaps at the bottom indicating the topic of my study and the need for parents of elementary school aged children to contact me. My advisor sent an email to a university-wide listserv and I contacted several professors in my department with children to ask for assistance in gaining access to local parents. Ultimately the email and contact with a few colleagues and professors were the key to my reaching an acceptable sample size. The failure of the flyers was partially due to my own

reluctance to hang them, as well as formidable opposition from the local school districts to allow me to do any sort of parental solicitation on school grounds. This was regardless of my lack of involvement with children or school staff and in spite of the fact that the study had been IRB approved on two separate occasions.

## **The Methods**

The methods that I used included archival research of the *St. Petersburg Times*, a content analysis, a free-listing activity, and a semi-structured interview. The information gathered from the archival research was used to conduct a content analysis. I will discuss my reasons for selecting these methods and sources below.

### **Archival Research**

According to Rodriguez & Baber, archival data are “materials originally collected for bureaucratic or administrative purposes that are transformed into data for research purposes” (2002:64-5). This information, while not initially useful in its original form, can go a long way in illustrating one’s qualitative data, pointing out trends in data, or as a contextualizing body of work. Archival data are also useful because they provide historical information for triangulation or other purposes that may not be easily accessible to the researcher via other means (such as interviews). Rodriguez and Baber (2002) point out that while archival data have their advantages (including having an easily accessible set of data already collected), the drawbacks can be great too. Among those drawbacks include lack of control (or knowledge) over how the data were collected, difficulty verifying the accuracy of the data, and difficulty accessing the data/organizing it.

For the purposes of this thesis, I decided to limit my archival research to the archives of the *St. Petersburg Times*, the Florida Department of Education’s website, and

the three local school districts' web pages. Rodriguez and Baber (2002) suggest limiting the number of archival sources in order not to overwhelm yourself with too much information. They also suggest making a timeline of findings in order to orient the reader/recipient of the research findings to understand historical processes at play in the topic presented. I chose to focus on these three sources for several reasons. I chose the *St. Petersburg Times* because it is one of two significant Tampa Bay newspapers, and as one of the few remaining independently-owned newspapers in the country, it has a good level of credibility. It also has an easily accessible and searchable archive. The Florida Department of Education was the only source with information on the FCAT that is distributed to parents and the general public, as well as past test scores and other data about schools in the State of Florida. I was also unsure which branch of government would house historical information on policy and assumed that the DOE would be most likely to have a history of the FCAT.

I reviewed the contents of the *St. Petersburg Times* archives using their archive, which can be accessed at [www.tampabay.com](http://www.tampabay.com). I searched for the word FCAT appearing in the earliest online articles (January 1, 1987) until July 25, 2007. When this search returned very few hits in the years before 2000, I searched the archives again using the phrase "Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test". In both cases, very few articles (less than 100 from January 1, 1995-December 31, 1999) were written about the FCAT, which is an indicator of the growing public significance of the FCAT after 2000.

### **Content Analysis**

Once I gathered the archival data from the *St. Petersburg Times* website, I conducted a content analysis of the data in order to discover patterns or themes in the data

that I could utilize to shape my interview questions. Bernard (1994:339) writes that “content analysis is a catch-all term covering a variety of techniques for making inferences from “texts.” He cites several researchers who utilized magazines and comic books to answer questions about attitudes. The researchers coded the relevant text for emergent themes and discussed patterns that their codes revealed (Bernard 1994). There are other ways of conducting content analysis, but this description fairly closely depicts the process that I went through. I read all of the articles written by the *St. Petersburg Times*’ staff about the FCAT from July 25, 2006 to July 25, 2007 as well as a sample of randomly chosen articles from other years, particularly focusing on articles written prior to 2000. While I read, I jotted down words or phrases that I felt described the theme of each article. When I finished, I compiled the list into four basic categories<sup>9</sup> I used these categories as the basis for writing my interview questions and as a comparison tool to the interview data.

Because I do not know many parents and because of the dearth of literature on parental reactions to high-stakes testing, I needed a source to aid in formulating a hypothesis about issues of importance to families. Conducting a content analysis enabled me to postulate that the four categories I found were the issues of primary concern to families in the Tampa Bay area. Without the content analysis of how the media had framed the FCAT, I was unsure of the topical areas of interest to parents and at a loss as to what areas to cover in my interview. The archival research and content analysis provided me with a starting point to conduct free listing and interview data from parents.

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<sup>9</sup> These were: the 2006 Florida governor’s race, local school grades, teachers’ feelings on the FCAT, and the general public’s dissatisfaction with the FCAT.

### **Free Listing**

According to Borgatti (1999) and Jerome (2002), understanding a person's cultural domains is essential to understanding how they group and view objects, people, and events with which they interact. A cultural domain, or "mental group" (Borgatti 1999:115) makes explicit the ways in which people think about the world around them. Examination of variation in ways of categorizing or grouping objects, words, or feelings, related to the topic a researcher is interested in studying can reveal thoughts, opinions, or attitudes that even the informant is unaware of holding (Borgatti 1999). Examining groupings of objects, things, or people can also reveal how informants connect various seemingly unrelated events.

For the purposes of my study, I chose to use a "free listing" activity to elicit cultural domains related to the FCAT. It should be noted, however, that the free list activity was shortened greatly due to time constraints. Instead of asking the participants to list as many items related to the FCAT as possible, I asked for a list of five items. I also did not attempt to obtain exhaustive lists from more parents than the 25 that I interviewed. Since I did not plan to do any sort of statistical analysis or plotting of the data, I felt it was unnecessary and counterproductive to my larger goal, which was to conduct the interview. Borgatti (1999) also points out that the items listed by each informant and the patterns that they form can be of interest in and of themselves. Informants who list more items or list items with relative ease suggest a command of the particular domain that others who struggle or list relatively few items may not command with that domain (Borgatti 1999).

The free listing activity was conducted as the opening activity to the interviews. I handed the research participant a 3x5 index card, a pen, and said “List five words or phrases that you think of when you think of the FCAT.” There were varying degrees of difficulty with this endeavor. Some people stared at their card and repeatedly said that they did not understand what to do or could not think of words specifically pertaining to the FCAT. I eventually realized that my directions were unclear and expanded on my explanation to let them know that the phrases or words might also include something they associated with the FCAT or something that they experienced during FCAT time. Usually this aided interviewees sufficiently. For cases where the participant was completely stumped, I often allowed them to write just one or two words or to have a conversation with me about the FCAT and then urged them to write it down phrases they used during our conversation. As they handed the index cards back to me, most participants stated one of two things: either I would find out their true feelings of hatred for the FCAT upon looking at their card or that they had misunderstood what to do (even when they had not). Many others apologized for their lack of “appropriate” responses, despite my repeated assurances that regardless of what they wrote, I would find it useful.

If I decide to utilize this method in future research, I will do several things differently. I would not modify the task by shortening it or by giving research participants a specific number of items to write down. I am sure that many of the parents I worked with would have been capable of listing more words than five. The potential for discovering new domains would be greater as well. I would also pilot test the question before using it as a data collection tool. If I had done that prior to beginning my data collection, I believe that I would have encountered less confusion and potentially

gathered richer data. This method was useful because it helped shape my thinking about how parents viewed the FCAT, particularly when I realized that the majority listed several of the same words on their index card.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviewing uses a structured set of questions that are asked of all informants but is flexible in that it allows the researcher the latitude to change the direction of the interview if the researcher judges it to be necessary (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999). Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) indicate that semi-structured interviews are an appropriate way to explore cultural domains that the researcher is interested in as well as to discover new ones that informants may associate with a particular topic. They suggest grouping questions thematically, temporally, in order of least difficult to most, or by level of personal knowledge divulged (increasing as the interview progresses) (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999). Cresswell (1998) lists the steps of interviewing as picking a type of sampling, selecting a type of interview, obtaining proper recording equipment, developing interview questions, identifying a location/locations to conduct interviews, gaining informed consent from the interviewee, and attempting to follow the interview protocol as closely as possible. These steps are primarily the way in which I structured and conducted my own interviews.

Because I had difficulty obtaining access to informants via the school system or through other means, I was unable to utilize any random sampling. Snowball sampling became the default approach used. I decided that I would conduct a semi-structured in-person interview before I even devised my interview protocol. As an anthropologist, I prefer to conduct interviews in person, face-to-face with the informant so that I can

observe their body language and react to it as I conduct the interview. It also helps to know what is going on around the interviewee that could influence their answers, as well as their level of comfort in answering the questions.

I decided to conduct a semi-structured interview so that I would be sure to cover certain topics. For the first interview I conducted as part of this study, I attempted to conduct an open-ended exploratory interview, but found that the informant did not have much to say and I did not know how to prompt for further information without a “cheat sheet” in front of me. I also decided that for comparison purposes, it would be much more helpful to ask everyone the same question rather than trying to compare disparate topics, since my purpose was to determine what parents thought about the FCAT and how it affected them. Asking the same question but receiving different responses signaled to me that an informant had a different perspective than other interviewees. I grouped the questions thematically and developed four domains that I wanted to explore based on the preliminary information that I had gathered from the *St. Petersburg Times*

I recorded all of my interviews on a digital tape recorder and then transferred the files to my computer. I indexed (rather than transcribed) all of the interviews, writing down the times at which important conversations or topics occurred. The use of digital files facilitated this process since I could see the time on my computer, rather than trying to time it myself. During the informed consent process, I asked each interviewee if they were comfortable with being taped and whether they would allow me to do so. Some indicated that they did not usually like to be recorded, but when I assured them that only I would hear the interview, they all consented.

All interviews were conducted at a location that the interviewee indicated was most convenient. Many of the interviews were conducted in the interviewee's home, especially if they were close to the person who introduced me to them. Several of the interviews took place in coffee shops, one took place at McDonalds, and several took place in the interviewee's work place. I attempted to stick to the interview guide that I had written unless the informant was providing answers that were unclear or seemed as though they had a lot to say about the topic. The interviews ranged from 10 minutes to close to an hour in time. The length mainly depended on how much the interviewee had to say in response to each question and how willing they were to elaborate on their initial responses.

On the whole I was satisfied with the format of the interviews and my skill at conducting them. I am fairly comfortable in one-on-one situations and feel that I am skilled at asking for information in ways that do not make the interviewee uncomfortable. The times when informants expressed their nervousness, I assured them that there were no right or wrong answers and that the purpose of the interview was not to test their knowledge, but to learn more about how the FCAT impacted people. As with the free listing exercise, next time, I would pilot test the interview guide prior to starting the official interviews. As I learned which questions were poorly worded or did not address the issues I wished to address, I made slight changes to my guide. To make future research stronger, I now recognize the need to do this as early as possible and to do it before starting the official project.

## **Sampling**

Although I wanted to use a methodologically rigorous sort of sampling such as a random sample or a stratified sample, what ended up working for the purposes of this thesis was a snowball sample. Because I was limited in funds, my personal network, and in time, I eventually determined that the only way I would be able to find potential interviewees would be to ask the people that I did know in the area to connect me with people who fit the criteria for my study. There were several missteps along the way to gathering my sample population: I attempted to attend Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings at several area schools, only to have one principal contact the local district office, which in turn told me that I was not allowed to attend these meetings for purposes of recruiting parents without explicit permission from their office. As I had already completed this process one time for my first thesis topic, I was rather reluctant to do so a second time. Additionally, I felt that they were being slightly unreasonable to attempt to govern my research when it was taking place outside of school hours at a forum that parents were voluntarily attending. However, upon reflection, I can see that if their policy is to approve all research relating to any activity that takes place on the school grounds, they would think that they had the right to approve my attendance and recruitment at the PTA meetings (since they utilized school resources, school personnel, and advertised through the school system).

I contacted people that I knew through my time in the USF graduate program, mainly professors and other students. One professor was particularly helpful in referring me to several willing informants who in turn referred me to several more people. My advisor sent out an email to a USF listserv which garnered several more interviews.

When I had exhausted all of these contacts, I began to mention my project to people outside of the USF community, namely my physical therapist and my yoga instructor, who were also both great resources in helping me to locate additional informants. One concern I have is that because I relied so heavily on my own network to solicit interviews, it is entirely possible that a large portion of my interview population viewed the FCAT in a negative light because they were associated with higher education in some way. People associated with higher education are often accused of having a liberal bias; however I am not sure how much this factored into my interview pool as the two ardent supporters of the FCAT were university employees and several of the detractors were self-identified Republicans or indicated that they were conservative in other areas of their lives. Another source of concern is that all but one of the parents I interviewed were women. I believe that this was in part due to the sampling method I utilized: because I was first referred to a woman, when asked for a list of her friends with children in elementary school she gave me the names only of other women. Only one interviewee offered to connect me with a father that she knew. I assume that this is also due to the fact that many of the women I interviewed had more free time than their male partners (many of them did not have jobs outside of their home). This is also due to the fact that I did not think critically about my definition of “parent” enough to realize that men might have different and equally important opinions about the FCAT.

While my criteria was that the interviewee had to be a parent of a child currently in elementary school in Florida in the end I interviewed and utilized data from several informants whose children were no longer in elementary school. These data, while not useful in getting at the question of how much parents of elementary school children know

about the FCAT or how it impacts them, was useful in determining how the FCAT has changed over time.

In the future, it is clear to me that I need to begin to think seriously about my research design and data collection plans far in advance of when I start collecting data. I also need to make an effort to ensure that I have equal representation of both genders in my sample unless my project is explicitly designed to target men or women. One potential solution to my lack of informants would have been to tap into existing communities, such as church communities, community centers, daycare centers, after school programs, sites of youth activities (such as dance or karate studios). Making contacts at these locations would have given me access to a much larger and more diverse sample. Nevertheless, since my intent was to develop a rich, qualitative understanding of parents' experience, rather than a statistical study of larger trends, I believe the sampling did yield a significant body of data.

### **Methods of Analysis**

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) write that there are two ways to analyze data: deductively (beginning with a hypothesis and testing the data to check for fit) and inductively (beginning without a hypothesis and organizing the data as the researcher finds patterns). They caution that for ethnographers, it is difficult to claim either approach wholeheartedly because they tend to combine both approaches, looking for patterns, forming ideas, and then reforming them based on the available data (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). In the case of this research project, I conducted my data analysis of the archival data inductively, searching for patterns related to how the public views the FCAT. I used these patterns to create a hypothesis that parents of elementary school

children would be similarly affected by the FCAT and that their responses would fit into the same four categories. I used deductive methods to analyze the interview data.

I am undecided about the effectiveness of this approach. While the comparison between the two sources of data helped facilitate data analysis, I continue to wonder if there may have been a better way to design my research. Perhaps conducting exploratory focus group interviews with parents to determine the relevant domains would have been more appropriate. Alternately, I could have conducted the free listing task as the initial data gathering phase, analyzed the data, and then devised my interview guide from the relevant domains. Or, to completely break with the deductive method, I could have decided what topics I thought were relevant to parents and devised my questions *a priori*.

The work associated with my thesis is the first time that I have designed, implemented, and analyzed a research project of my own. Doing so has illustrated the difficulty that researchers have on many levels including: access to research sites, access to informants, issues with design (validity and reliability), self-doubt, and thinking of an improved plan after the research is well under way. This experience has taught me the importance of doing as much research, planning, and pilot testing prior to going into the field as possible. I have also learned the value of going about data collection as self-consciously as possible: taking time to reflect on my behavior during interviews, listening to recordings before I conduct others, and trying to implement necessary changes during the interview process, rather than learning what to do better next time.

## Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

This chapter will report on results of the media content analysis and of the free-listing and interviews conducted with parents. These results will illustrate the way that the FCAT has been framed for the public, relating this to the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences reported by parents.

### **Content Analysis**

A content analysis of stories in the *St. Petersburg Times* indicated that the most frequently covered topics (related to the FCAT) surrounded the 2006 Florida governor's race, local school grades, teachers' feelings on the FCAT, and the general public's dissatisfaction with the FCAT. Overall, the *Times* published articles containing the word "FCAT" 2,775 times, starting from January 1, 1996 and ending on July 25, 2007. Broken down by year, the number of times the FCAT is mentioned in the newspaper has gone up significantly from the late 1990s until today.

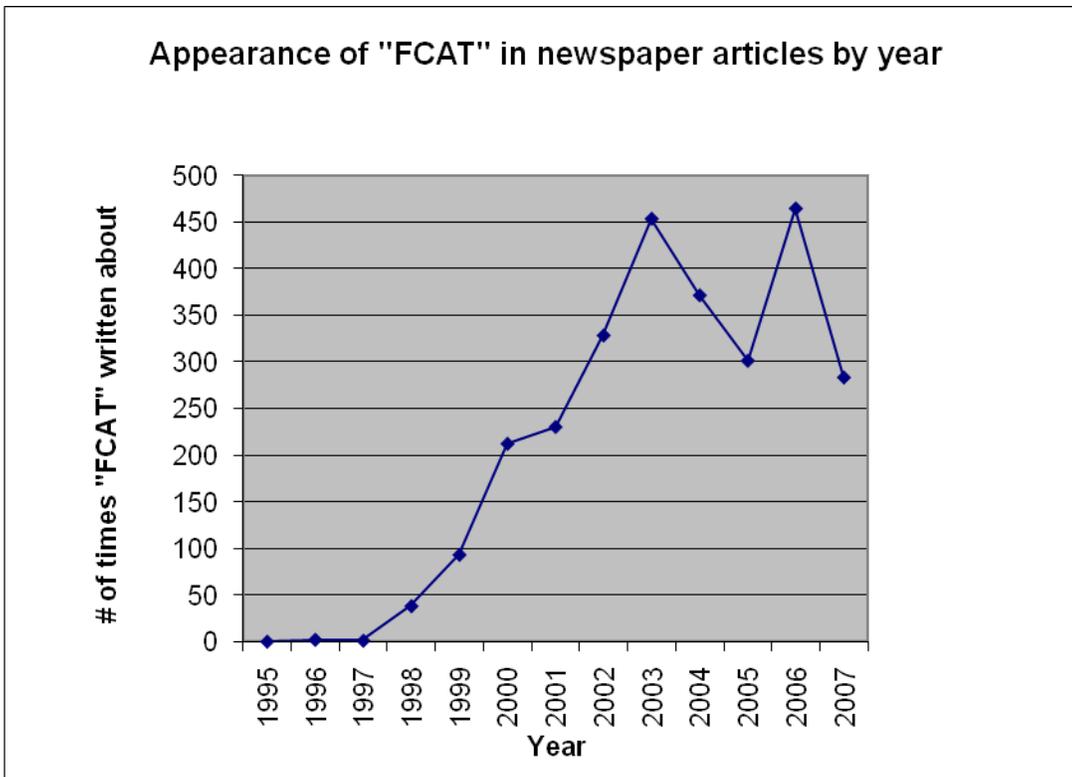


Figure 1: Appearance of FCAT in Newspaper Articles by Year

The frequency of mentions of FCAT is lower for 2007, but this is because only half of the year had elapsed at the time the analysis was conducted. In 1996, the FCAT was mentioned in a news article only once. Within three years, the number was 93, and the most recent full year recorded had an all time high of 464 mentions. The increasing number of articles mentioning the FCAT can be seen as a reflection of the importance that newspaper staff believes it has in their readership’s lives. It should be noted that not all of the hits for “FCAT” were articles written by newspaper staff, but included letters to the editor, editorials, and community events related to the FCAT.

The topics that they chose to cover are also telling. As previously mentioned, there were four general topic areas covered repeatedly by the *Times* within the last year:

the 2006 Florida governor's race, local school grades, teachers' feelings on the FCAT, and the general public's dissatisfaction with the FCAT.

Perhaps the topic that has received the most coverage over the last 10 years is the public<sup>10</sup>'s dissatisfaction with the FCAT (Andryusky 2007, Bianca 2006, Colavecchio-Van Sickler 2007b, Editorial 2007a, Leary 2006, Marshall 2007, Matus 2006a, Moorhead 2007, Miller 2006, Rock 2006, Staff 2006, Tobin 2006, Van Hoult 2006). Not only are articles, special series, and editorials written on this subject, but frequently newspaper readers will write Letters to the Editor discussing their disagreement and disgust with the way the FCAT is written, administered, graded, and used to reward or punish individuals and schools (McNary 2006, Morris 2007, Otteni 2007, Zell 2007).

Articles have focused on subtopics such as the unfairness of the FCAT, ideas like "if it isn't tested, it isn't taught," and the idea that the FCAT is a "four letter word" (Bousquet 2007, Lane 2006, Marshall 2007, Moorhead 2007). For example, Tobin (2006) quotes David Hammons, a Democrat "who calls the FCAT time-consuming and 'stupid.' 'It seems the teachers are only teaching what they need to pass the test, and not teaching what they should be," he said, voicing a common FCAT complaint.'" Similarly, an article on the upcoming science FCAT test suggested that until the test was developed, science instruction had taken a back seat to math and reading: "Many Florida teachers say science has been de-emphasized in recent years, as schools respond to state pressure to raise math and reading scores... the science FCAT could help shift that balance" (Marshall 2007). Several articles (Editorial 2007, Stein and Tobin 2007) have pointed

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<sup>10</sup> I define the "public" resident of the State of Florida over the age of eighteen.

out potential problems with the test construction and grading of the FCAT, including one (Editorial 2007b) that states

Teachers and schools are now being judged on how much their students learn each year, yet the reading scale distorts the picture at high school. That's one reason elementary and middle schools are awarded A's at nearly four times the rate of high schools, why high schools last year received only \$23-million of the \$151-million in school bonus awards.

These articles and Letters to the Editor portray the FCAT as a policy in which the general public have little influence (Adams 2006, Colavecchio-Van Sickler 2007a, Miller 2006, Rock 2006). According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, “eight years later [than the implementation of the FCAT], polls show a majority of Floridians oppose Bush's decision to make the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test the centerpiece of a strict accountability system” (Stein 2006). The articles also suggest that public education is increasingly heading in a direction other than that which the public wants, becoming more narrow in focus, and is such a bad experience for some people that the mention of its name causes harm (Stein 2006).

Another subtext of these discussions is that the FCAT is a political tool. Democrats are quoted as discussing the flaws with the FCAT and are depicted as the FCAT's detractors (Matus 2006a). An example of the depiction of Democrats is illustrated by this quote from Matus (2007c) “For years, state Sen. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami, has been a leading critic of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, better known as the FCAT. But in a legislative committee meeting last month, she took FCAT blasting to new oratorical heights.” Newspaper articles have linked the FCAT with movements by Republicans to privatize various industries in Florida, with education cited as the most recent target (Editorial 2007a, Editorial 2007b, Matus 2007a, Matus 2007c,

Solochek 2007a, Solochek 2007d). Several articles have suggested that it is not actually education that FCAT policy makers are interested in, but testing with the ultimate goal of running schools like businesses (Biance 2006, Dyckman 2001). There have been a minority of articles that suggest the opposite: that it will be good for schools to compete with one another in much the same way that businesses do or that the FCAT is working. An example of such work is the 3 paragraph piece entitled “Think tank says test-based promotion is working” (2006), an article that briefly discusses the results of an FCAT study conducted by the conservative Manhattan Institute.

The 2006 Florida governor’s race was a topic written about often, both by newspaper staff, in editorials, and in Letters to the Editor. These articles were mainly written during the primary period and prior to the 2006 governor election. The majority of these pieces focused on what the two major candidates proposed to do (or not do) to the FCAT if they were elected (Bousquet 2006a, Editorial 2006b, Editorial 2006c, Editorial 2006d, Tobin 2006). Some of the time, these discussions were part of a larger article or series of articles that focused on the candidates and their platforms, as well as on voters (Crist, Davis, Gallagher and Smith 2006; Elia 2006; Fiorentino 2006; Himmel 2006; Leary 2006; Solochek 2007a; Verhulst 2006). For example, an article on the leadership style of Jim Davis, the Democratic candidate for Florida governor began its piece with an illustration of that style relating to the FCAT. According to Leary (2006), “from the back of a small bookstore in Tampa, Jim Davis quietly launched a war against the FCAT.” This article aligned Davis with FCAT detractors and showed that his leadership style is thoughtful and unexpected. Other times these articles focused on attributing the FCAT to the (then) present governor, Jeb Bush and suggesting that

because it was his masterpiece, it would not be changeable until a new governor was elected (Bousquet 2006b, Solochek 2006a). As Nickens (2006) wrote as part of an article discussing issues facing the 2006 Florida legislature, “Bush's elaborate student-testing and school-grading systems touch more families directly than anything else he has done. FCAT has become a household word and the focus of public education.” He continues on to discuss the difficulties the legislature will have in making changes to the FCAT while Bush remains in office (Nickens 2006). Many of these articles suggested that Governor Bush was unwilling to listen to popular opinion about this particular policy because it was close to his heart (Nickens 2006). In the same vein, they suggested that a different governor would be able to look at the FCAT in an objective light and see that it needed to be changed.

Another frequently covered topic was teachers' reactions to the FCAT. This reaction was largely negative, as any regular reader of the newspaper knows (Farlow 2006, Hooper 2006, Tobin 2007, Yacht 2006). Proposals over the last 10 years to link teacher pay to students' FCAT scores have been largely met with resistance from teachers' unions and individual teachers alike (Colavecchio-Van Sickler 2007a, Editorial 2007a, Editorial 2006e, Solochek 2007d, Tobin 2007, Troxler 2007, Winchester 2007a, Winchester 2007b). For example, in a 2007 article about one proposed teacher bonus plan (the STAR plan), the executive director of the Pinellas County teacher's union is quoted as saying "There's no pattern to it [teacher voting], except the pattern that no one likes it," (Tobin 2007). Recently, a proposed change to the teacher bonus plan was met with cautious optimism by local teacher groups, with one union member stating, “It opens the door, but I'm not sure it opens it wide enough” (Colavecchio-Van Sickler

2007a). Other articles have focused on the ways in which teachers have had to change their pedagogy and curriculum to focus on a narrow set of goals in order to get their students ready for the FCAT. Field trips are put on hold during testing time (Miller 2006), some subjects receive more focus than others (Dyckman 2001, Raman 2006) and subjects which are not on the FCAT are not taught (Farlow 2006). Dyckman (2001) points out these problems with changing curricula in the following quote

Richard A. Pettigrew, a former House speaker who now chairs the board of Audubon of Florida, tells of approaching a South Florida school system with an offer to take its children to the brand-new nature center at Corkscrew Swamp. They would learn elementary biology and other sciences in the context of an outdoor experience "which kids find more relevant than trying to learn in a classroom," Pettigrew said. They turned him down. "They said, 'Look, we don't offer anything in elementary school in science at this time because it's not tested for,' " he said. "They did say that in 2003 they are scheduled to start teaching some kind of science - but until then, they're concentrating on reading, writing and arithmetic, which just shows you how skewed this kind of testing gets you, how far it gets you away from a holistic approach to education."

This change in curriculum has caused some teachers to leave the profession (Winchester 2006). Jean McNary, in a letter to the editor, stated that "quality teachers ... [are] leaving the profession because of the simplistic solutions politicians like the Bush brothers have forced upon education" (2006), a concern shared by other letter writers and illustrated in newspaper articles (Andryusky 2007, Van Hoult 2006).

A subset of these articles focuses on the FCAT's impact on students (Editorial 2007b, Matus 2006b, Matus 2006c, Staff 2006, Solochek 2006b). Some articles suggest that more advanced students are not being intellectually stimulated because teachers are spending so much time to bring the lower performing students to passing level on the FCAT (Binder 2007, Skerritt 2007, Solochek 2007a). Other pieces have suggested that

the FCAT has stifled the creativity of teachers and students (Bradley 2007, Editorial 2006e, Solocheck 2007c, Solocheck 2007e). Others talk about the stress of not passing the FCAT, such as the article by Solocheck (2006), “Stress of FCAT can zap students' zeal to learn,” which describes the FCAT as “fodder for this year's race for governor... reality for the students. An anxiety-inducing, seemingly arbitrary reality.” In summary, the articles lead to the conclusion that the FCAT is the main priority of schools and the education system, at least in the Tampa Bay area.

Local school grades make up a substantial portion of the articles at the end of the school year, largely in April, May, and June. These articles tend to discuss general trends in grades as well as point out major changes, particularly if a school receives a poor grade (Ave 2003, Dyer 2006, Editorial 2007b, Marshall 2006, Matus 2006c, Solocheck 2007, Stein 2007a, Stein 2007b, Stein 2007c, Winchester 2007c). This year in particular, a minor scandal was created when the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that the reading scores for the 2006-2007 school year were lower than in past years and then retracted the statement a few days later. The article, written by Letitia Stein on May 3, 2007 stated that

Hillsborough's third-grade reading scores dropped precipitously this year, mirroring a troubling state trend in FCAT results released Wednesday. This year, 67 percent of Hillsborough third-graders are reading at grade level, a drop of 6 percentage points. That's the greatest annual decline since third-graders began taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in 2001.

Within the next day, a retraction had been printed, stating that not all elementary schools in Hillsborough county recorded lower scores (Clarifications 2007). The public's

response to these types of articles usually leads to Letters to the Editor which suggest possible reasons for the grades (Chapman 2006, Long 2007, Perry 2007, Vincent 2007).

The topical areas that the *Times* has chosen to focus on suggest what the public in Tampa Bay might be thinking of concerning the FCAT. However, there are certainly other topics that concern citizens of the Tampa Bay area and these will be addressed below.

### **Free Listing Activity**

Borgatti (1999) suggests conducting a free listing activity with no fewer than 30 participants. Because I had far fewer participants (22 of the 25 interviewees), the validity of this activity is certainly called into question. However, I feel that there is some value in presenting the data I gathered, in that they offer some illumination of what these parents think of the FCAT and associate with it. Additionally, the fact that recurring themes are present in the data suggests that there is a measure of validity in this set. The modified free listing task indicated that parents were overwhelmingly negative about the FCAT. I devised five categories that I felt the words fit into: negative feelings, stress, politics, education, and test prep. Stress was the most common word listed, written 14 times (61% of parents participating in free-listing activity listed it). The next most commonly written words were: anxious (4), test (4), and nervous (3). The following words appeared at least two times: political, Florida, prep, Jeb, stupid, and money. The results of the free listing activity are below in Table 3. Table 4 details the ten most commonly listed words and the frequency of each word.

Table 3: Results of Free Listing Activity

Respondent	Free List Results				
1	Stress	important	silly	uneven	political
2	favorite time of year	no homework	home prep	follow up	support
3	Test	primary	skills	Florida	
4	Stress	political	waste	sad	accountability
5	Testing	time consuming	math	reading	writing
6	Stupid	non-realistic	too focused	unhelpful	overwhelming
7	Teacher	mandate	children	school	education
8	big mistake	impedes education	stupid	misused	waste of time
9	assessment	evaluation	state funding	childhood stress	realistic vs. unrealistic expectations
10	Test	stress	teaching for test	teachers salary	school grade
11	Mandatory	stress for teachers	disruption	long days	doesn't count for grade
12	Anxiety	stress	nervous	sleepless	uptight
13	anticipation	nervous	long testing time	preparation	anxious
14	Stressful	long	Florida only	study hard	deadlines
15	Hell	Stress	anxiety	pressure	ability
16	Stressful	ridiculous	nonsense	I hate it	inaccurate
17	Stress	unreal	too much	why?	money
18	wasted time	stress on children	teacher stress	too much school focus on test	money
19	standardized test	state	jeb bush		
20	Stress	teaching to the test	school scores	compensation	Jeb
21	grade of school	stressful for kids	compulsory	stressful for faculty	allow a child to advance to next grade
22	anxiousness	nervousness	tedious	good night's sleep	eat good breakfast
23	money for schools	teacher benefits	teaching the test	not much use for kids	don't need it

Table 4: 10 Most Commonly Listed Words

Top 10 words from free-listing activity		
	word	# of times listed
1	stress	14
2	anxious	4
3	test	4
4	nervous	3
5	political	2
6	Florida	2
7	prep	2
8	Jeb	2
9	stupid	2
10	money	2

The lists provide a foreshadowing of the topics that parents discuss most in the interviews, particularly the stress and political associations with the FCAT. Although Borgatti (1999) suggests that this activity can uncover relationships that the participants are unaware of, I did not find this to be the case. Parents who wrote lists that were overwhelmingly negative tended to be the same people who expressed their disapproval of the FCAT during the interview, while those who were neutral or supported high-stakes testing wrote neutral or positive words. The only commonality was that most parents associated the test with stress, either for themselves or for their children, as Table 4 demonstrates.

### **Discussion of Interviews**

The majority of the interviews were conducted with parents who had at least one child in elementary school. Some of the parents had children in middle or high school as well, and a few parents had children that were no longer in elementary school, but were still anxious to talk about their feelings on the FCAT. The majority of the interviewees were women (one out of the 25 interviewees was a man). The interview consisted of 14 open ended and structured questions. Parents were free to talk as much or as little as they

felt comfortable. Below is a table of the interviewees. The names used in it and throughout the paper are pseudonyms.

Table 5: Interviewees, Their Children, and School Grades

Name (pseudonyms)	Children	School grade	Performance on FCAT
Lisa	3 children, 2 in elementary school	A	passed
Kimberly	1 in elementary school	A	passed
Michelle	1 in elementary, 1 in middle school	A	1 failed in 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade, 1 passed
Tracy	3 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Sandra	2 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Donna	1 in elementary school	A	n/a
Mark	1 in elementary school	Didn't know (A)	n/a
Kathleen	3 children, 1 in elementary school	C	n/a
Nancy	3 children, none in elementary school	A	passed
Melissa	1 in elementary school	No grade (new school)	n/a
Karen	3 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Patricia	2 children, 1 in elementary school	B	passed
Carol	2 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Judith	1 child in elementary school	A or B	passed
Amy	3 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Angela	1 in elementary school	A	passed
Helen	2 children in elementary school	A	passed
Alice	1 child in elementary school	Didn't know (A)	passed
Susan	1 child in elementary school	B	passed
Virginia	1 child in elementary school	B	passed
Anna	2 children in elementary school	A	1 pass, 1 failed
Ruth	2 children, 1 in elementary school	A	passed
Joan	None in school	A and B	passed
Rose	3 children, two in elementary school	A	passed
Samantha	1 in elementary	Didn't know (A)	passed

Most of the parents interviewed knew their child's school's grade. For this study, 20 out of 25 interviewees had children who were currently attending or who had attended an A school. One parent indicated that her child's school was too new to have a school grade. No questions were asked about the participant's socioeconomic status or racial/ethnic identity. However, many parents indicated that they lived in an affluent area. While some interviewees voiced an opinion that the children attending 'A' schools and their parents would have no qualms with the FCAT (because they would be well prepared), parents of children at A schools indicated that this was not the case. I was unable to determine any connection between a parent's feelings about the FCAT and the school grade. Parents at C schools indicated that they were satisfied with the FCAT, while many parents at A schools indicated that they were unhappy with it. There were an equal number of parents at A and B schools who indicated that they were undecided about whether they supported the FCAT.

One of the interview questions asked how the interviewee's child or children performed on the FCAT. I had hypothesized that parents whose children performed well on the FCAT would support the policy to a greater extent and would feel less of an impact of the policy than those whose children did poorly or failed the test. The majority of the parents I spoke with (19 out of 25) indicated that their child performed at least adequately on the test and that they were satisfied with their student's performance. There did not seem to be a direct link between children's performance on the FCAT and the view of their parents about FCAT policy. While, as expected, parents of children who did not do well on the FCAT did not care for it, there were also many parents of high achieving students who disliked the FCAT with equal intensity. There was no one factor

that I could determine that would predict whether a parent would support the FCAT. As I will discuss later in this chapter, political affiliation did not impact opinion, nor did school grades or a child's performance. What seemed to influence opinion most was the impact that the FCAT had on children's learning experiences while in school and their stress levels outside of school.

### **Parental Understanding of FCAT Policy**

I chose to address the question of how well parents understood the reasons why the FCAT was developed and implemented by asking questions about what they believed to be the government's goals for education, why the FCAT was implemented, what types of people supported (and didn't) the FCAT, as well as a question about policy fidelity (in other words, is the policy doing what policymaker intended?). The majority felt that the FCAT was developed by politicians with purposes other than improving education in mind.

#### **Government Goals for Education**

Parents differed on what they believed the government's goals for education are. They were split between whether the government cared about education and children or viewed the education system as an undesirable expense. Regardless of what they thought the government's goal was, everyone wanted the government to support public education. As Donna so eloquently told me, "I don't mind paying taxes if it's going to something useful. Like roads that don't have dips in them and children who aren't dips."

Patricia pointed to what she believed to be the deceptive practice of the State of Florida relying on the lottery system to provide funds for education.

They also don't want to pay the money they need to make the school something outstanding. It would take a lot of money. And they just don't want to pay

it...The lottery, which says so much money goes to education, but with all this money coming in from the lottery for education, the state has lowered the amount it contributes for education.

In a similar vein, Angela suggested the government's priorities were to "weed out" people, rather than helping them.

Karen suggested that the government was only willing to focus on education inasmuch as it would provide job security for politicians: "I think the government's only priority is to keep the voters happy enough to keep them in office." Tracy furthered that thought by stating that the government feels pressure from different interest groups who may argue that schools are not being run efficiently and could be streamlined to save taxpayers money. Susan stated that she believed the government wanted to educate people, but that, "they want fast results with the least amount of effort coming from the least amount of people."

Many parents also voiced concern over the low pay and fairly low status of teachers. Helen told me that in her native country, "a doctor, a teacher, and a lawyer are pretty much equal" and that, "I wish our teachers would get paid more."

Parents also pointed to issues of privatization of education, albeit with mixed feelings. While Carol stated that school choice and accountability measures reassured her that the government truly cared about having an education citizenry, Amy had this to say

I think they wouldn't mind seeing it privatized. In Florida, you see the ranking of schools rather than providing more support for those that need it, they're giving less support, almost like they're trying to get rid of them. Just like any business, a lot of really looking at students as statistics and numbers and test scores as true indicators of what they can do which is not necessarily true.

Regardless of why they believed the focus was there, many parents agreed that money was a large issue in education, whether it was in the form of poorly funded schools or investing in children now so that the country's economy would continue to have a supply of educated workers. Suggestions that the government was trying to save time, money, and resources or to divert those things (such as jails) were made by the vast majority of my informants.

### **Purpose of the FCAT**

Somewhere along the lines, someone decided there had to be accountability and this is what they came up with to do it, I think it was developed by bureaucrats and politicians who weren't even familiar with education. They just had to prove that they were being accountable...Education was starting to go downhill in the United States and there were many reasons for that, I just think that was the wrong way to try to correct it. ---Nancy

In order to gauge understanding of the FCAT policy, I asked participants why they thought the FCAT was developed in Florida. Answers ranged from suggesting it was a way to control state spending to suggesting it was done to help students achieve, to stating that it was a tool designed to benefit politicians. There was one parent who admitted that she did not understand why it had been created.

Some parents believed the purpose of the FCAT was to assist students in learning. Kathleen told me that, "My understanding of it was to give them a high goal to try to reach and to require the kids to bring up their reading, bring up their math, bring up their scores period." The idea that Florida's students were lacking in basic skills was suggested by Mark who stated that, "kids were graduating that didn't know how many states we had or who was president and some have even gone to college, that couldn't tell you who the vice president was."

Others suggested that the test is a mixture of politics and a focus on raising student achievement levels. Parents seemed to believe that without a standardized achievement test, schools would be unable to prove that their students were learning. Kathleen said, “You’ve gotta have a test. If it’s not FCAT, it’s gotta be something.” The FCAT was cited as a tool used to promote standards, ensure that students were learning at a minimum level, show student progress, and to compare schools to one another.

Other parents viewed the FCAT as a political tool. “It’s money again...the schools get more money the higher their grades are...I don’t think it goes to helping the kids who need the help, at least, from my experience,” was Angela’s opinion. Donna concurred, stating that, “I think it’s political...it looks good to say that you’re promoting education. And it only looks good if you have numbers to show for it. It’s a way of getting numbers. It’s ultimately less than helpful [for the students], so I don’t think it’s of any use. I think it’s just political.” Michelle stated that the FCAT was, “a way to punish schools with difficult students.” Most of the parents would probably disagree with this statement. Not all parents felt that it was only a tool for political gain, but also to ensure that all children were learning and that all teachers were doing their jobs.

Melissa, who was unsure of why the FCAT was developed, had moved to Florida within the last few years from a northern state. She explained that her state had also had a standardized test, but that it lacked the high-stakes component of the FCAT. The fact that the FCAT was used as a method of rewarding or punishing students and schools was one that was foreign to her and an explanation eluded her.

### **Who supports the FCAT, or Not?**

Most parents had very distinct views about who supports high-stakes testing in Florida and who does not, even though these ideas varied widely from person to person. There was only one interviewee who stated that she was unable to categorize the types of people who would like it or dislike it. The most common pattern was for people that disliked the FCAT to suggest that only politicians supported it because it made them look good by suggesting that they cared about education, which many of these parents believed that they did not. The people who were undecided about the FCAT, had mixed feelings about it, or supported it also named politicians as supporters of it, but had no other distinct pattern concerning who they felt supported it versus who did not.

The most vocal critics of the FCAT were also most disparaging of supporters of the FCAT. They often suggested that supporters liked the FCAT because they did not like to think or were not educated enough to understand the flaws of the policy. People who liked the FCAT were characterized as people who, “want to be blindly led and do what you’re told to do, then you’re going to like it...someone who doesn’t care about the true learning process is going to like it.” Another parent characterized FCAT supporters as, “People who don’t know any better. People who don’t have children or who have grown children and think ‘well gee if my children had had this test, maybe they would’ve done better in this or that.’ I think it’s just ignorance.” Other suggestions of people who would dislike the FCAT included all parents and students, educators, parents of students who failed, and educated people.

Parents were mixed about who would like the FCAT. Many suggested that politicians would like the FCAT because they passed the legislation to make it what it is

today. Others suggested that parents who wanted accountability would support the FCAT because it ensured that their children would learn. Mark suggested that teachers probably dislike the FCAT because, “Personally in my work, I wouldn’t really like somebody grading myself and how well I worked or how well I do my job, especially if you have to do it every year...I probably wouldn’t like that.”

### **Is the FCAT An Effective Policy?**

To determine whether parents felt that the FCAT was an effective policy, I asked them two different questions: what factors contribute to school grades? and how effective is the FCAT? By getting at the factors that contributed to school grades, I hoped to determine how well parents understood the school grading criteria as well as why they believed that student bodies scored well on standardized achievement tests. Most answers address only one of those two issues. As for the effectiveness of the FCAT, I was interested in whether parents thought the FCAT was doing what it was supposed to do (which they answered in a previous question). On the whole, parents seemed to think that “teaching to the test” was what guaranteed good school grades, but poor school grades were factors that were beyond the control of the school. The majority of parents believed that the FCAT was not useful for improving education in its current high-stakes format.

Only four people addressed the criteria for grading schools. Nancy stated that A schools, “met all the specifications on the FCAT for doing well...The way they decide what grade a school’s going to get is not just the FCAT. There are other things that factor in, like attendance...I think you can easily skew the grade a school gets.” Patricia elaborated on this, stating, “I think most schools get bad grades because their students

don't show improvement." Susan indicated that, "from what I understand they are given a grade by the percent of students who achieve a particular score." Judith echoed all the statements made by Nancy, Patricia, and Susan.

Parents differed on what they thought contributed to a successful school under Florida's accountability and school grades system. The most common answer was that students did well on the FCAT because of teaching to the test. Michelle said about her son's school that, "They're an A school...because the teachers teach FCAT." Tracy said that her children's school did well on the FCAT because, "they're a good school, they know how to play the game and prepare." However, it was not teaching to the FCAT alone that earned an A. Parents also pointed out that students from a particular sort of background scored much better than other students. Patricia told me that her son's school earned a B because, "They have a lot of low income students that come from the neighborhood ...the teachers all work very hard with [them]." She later explained that by neighborhood children, she meant African-American children, whose parents were likely low-income.

Some parents indicated that the community surrounding a school was an important component of school success. Parents from more affluent areas felt that because they had a large parent volunteer base as well as deep pockets, their school was successful. Mark told me that his son's school, "did fairly well compared to other schools...the only thing I can think of is because it's in my neighborhood and I live in a pretty nice neighborhood. Probably good kids that go there." Mark lives in an affluent suburb of Tampa, one that many would agree is costly, low in crime, has a largely white population, and has only A schools. Kathleen, whose daughter attends a C school stated

that, "...[the school leadership] are working together [with parents] to get what the kids need to bring the grades up and parent awareness. Everything now, especially through the PTA is 'check their homework, check their book bags, sit down with them, read with them'." Donna stated that, "I think they get that grade [A], not because of the FCAT in particular but because the teachers for the school really seem to care. I've been to schools where they don't, as a child. So I recognize the difference."

The converse of these answers were given for reasons why schools did not do well: schools that lacked resources, poor teachers, students from low socio-economic status, and uninvolved parents were all listed as reasons that my interviewees gave for why schools as a whole do not score well on FCAT. Donna summed it up by saying, "A bad combination of apathy and lack of funding, poor management. The factors are huge. It also depends on what level of income the children are coming from because if you afford to help the school, the schools don't make enough money to really do all the things they need to do."

The biggest complaint was the lack of parental involvement in their children's education. Melissa told me, "A lot of it, I was complaining to my husband yesterday about the teachers and he said, 'but honey, a lot of it is the parents.' It seems like nowadays there are so many parents who are like 'I don't care, I don't have time, I don't want to be involved' and just expect the schools to do everything. So I think a lot of it is a failure on the parents' part of it." Karen more squarely placed the blame on parents who did not proactively educate their children beginning at birth

I think the main reason is what homes the kids come from....I don't think it's fair to take the results from one year's test...and blame the school that that child's in at that time. I think that if kids don't have good foundations from the time they're

babies on up that they might not do well on the test. And it's not the current teacher's fault and it's not the current school's fault. I think that some kids either lack the proper foundation for school and that's why they don't perform well... I think there are a number of reasons... I think if the kids don't have support at home when they bring homework home or if they don't have books around or if they don't have parents who are literate they're going to produce kids who aren't literate. I don't think you can blame the school for that...they can't be held fully responsible for where they're at.

Regardless of whether parents understood the grading process or agreed on reasons why some schools earned better grades than others, almost all of them agreed with Tracy who said that, "I don't think that it's [the FCAT] a true measure of student academic performance, so that's why I'm not saying that the students aren't learning what they should learn."

Parents were mixed about the usefulness of the FCAT in ending the achievement gap. Kathleen stated that, "I think it has its pros and its cons. I think it's useful to determine where a child is in their education but to hold it against them or the school because of a certain level they were supposed to achieve, that I don't think is right." Kathleen emphasized the importance of holding children accountable: "I think the expectations in FCAT is good. You don't want to not give them a high enough expectation. Then they're just scoring under anyway." Most parents (with a few exceptions) pointed out that the FCAT did not tell them anything new about their student. Donna said, "Tim needs to work on writing. But we knew that. We've known that for several years now. So I don't really need the FCAT for that." There was one parent whose son's learning disability was not caught until he failed the FCAT. While it appeared that she appreciated learning of it, she still felt that the test was not an effective tool in improving education. Carol was the one exception, stating, "I think it's been very

effective because when I see that it consumes my school...[I know that] they know they have to do well on it.”

Most parents were not opposed to the FCAT in itself. The high-stakes aspect of the FCAT is what the majority of them objected to, particularly because schools receive funding tied to the FCAT scores.

### **Link between No Child Left Behind and FCAT**

While I did not ask any questions about federal high-stakes testing policy, many parents brought up the NCLB and its relationship to the FCAT. Frequently, it was in reference to the fact that they felt that it was a misnomer and that children were being “left behind” by the educational system in Florida. This discourse more accurately targeted parents’ feelings about the effectiveness of the FCAT. Parents indicated that many children are still being failed by the school system, that funding is being cut to those schools who need it most, and that they worry that American children are still behind other nations in terms of achievement. As Kimberly said, “I know that there are so many kids being left behind and it says that there’s no left behind kids, but that’s the biggest crock ever because we’re cutting all our money for kids that have been left behind...”

### **FCAT Materials and Who Pays For Them**

Another issue which I did not directly ask about (because I had not been aware of it) was the FCAT materials that parents received or were exposed to from their child’s school, or through telephones, internet, and in the mail. Several parents were vocal in their disapproval of this type of information campaign. The main focus of my

informants' attention were the phone calls, a DVD, and newsletters sent home from school.

Parents indicated that communication from schools about the FCAT often came in the form of newsletters with instructions on how to prepare children for testing. Some mothers felt that these letters questioned their parenting ability. Tracy told me that, "We get letters: 'make sure you give your kid breakfast this morning' and 'make sure that they are well rested'. A list of 10 things to do before the FCAT. It's insulting!" Prerecorded phone calls from the school district are also something that parents of school-aged children can expect during the FCAT testing time. Similarly to the newsletters, the prerecorded calls from district officials explained the proper way to feed and rest children so that they perform optimally on the FCAT.

Finally, there was the DVD. Parents in Hillsborough and Pasco counties received a DVD entitled "Your Child, Your Schools". This DVD presents facts about Florida student achievement, provides testimonials from parents in support of the FCAT and the school choice program, informs parents about the structure and purpose of the FCAT and suggests that the FCAT is responsible beginning to close the achievement gap in Florida (FDOE 2006). For several parents, the DVD was the final insult from the schools and the state. Kimberly stated that, "The DVD was it, the DVD was...when that came home on Friday, with a big packet of information, I just, I just said 'That's it. Somewhere along the lines, someone's lost their head.'" Tracy linked the DVD to the governor's race, saying, "We got one in the mail right before the voting for governor, we got one hailing Jeb Bush and all about FCAT which I never watched because I wanted to puke. The

second one we just got the high school students brought home, all about FCAT. So it's a lot of money." Another mother, Donna, found the DVD informative:

This is going to sound bad because I actually came a little early this morning so I could watch that DVD that they sent home, cause I haven't had a chance yet. Actually it changed the way I thought of the FCAT. I think maybe I was a little uninformed or else the school system has done a good job persuading me their way. I always thought that they kind of taught for the test...Now this DVD has explained to me that it's not just teaching to the test, it's teaching Florida standards. I haven't had time to look at the Florida standards, but they've kinda convinced me that that's what they're doing.

The same parents who disliked the DVD and other materials questioned who was paying for them. Some parents expressed concern about who was funding the DVDs and workbooks that their children were bringing home. A few parents indicated that they thought politicians were making deals to benefit from the policies that they had created. Tracy told me that, "I think it's a little bit of a money-making machine too. I mean, our text books are now FCAT textbooks. I mean, who's making money off of that?... it's turning into an industry almost and that's a lot of money, every textbook someone's making that much money off of. Those things aren't cheap." Ruth corroborated this sentiment, stating, "I think it's a huge moneymaker for somebody. And I would love for that to be exposed in the media... wouldn't that be interesting to see who Jeb's old buddy in Texas is, who's probably printing these things out."

### **Will The Test Change?**

As many of the participants in this research project have pointed out, the FCAT and surrounding policy largely took shape during Jeb Bush's time as governor of Florida. Since a new governor has been elected (Charlie Crist, a Republican), I wondered what parents believed would happen with the FCAT. Would Crist change it? Would he remove it? Or would he leave it as it currently is, since he is also Republican, as was his

predecessor? Some parents believed that he would make changes because they believed him to be more moderate than Bush. Others indicated that as long as the FCAT made Crist look good, they did not believe he would have any incentive to change it.

Some parents suggested that Crist would follow party lines and stick with the FCAT. Melissa told me, “No, I don’t think he’s going to change anything about a lot of things, I hate to say. I kind of get that, he’s from the previous administration so he’s going to kind of status quo and follow along.” Similarly, Patricia stated that, “Because he’s another Republican...I think it’s the Republican Party who’s really big on FCAT.” Anna had the opposite view, stating that, “he’s [Crist] trying to distance himself from Bush,” but still believed he would not change the FCAT. Samantha told me that she read in the newspaper that Crist said he will not change the FCAT. Even though many of the parents did not believe that Crist would change the FCAT, many indicated that they wished he would.

There were parents who hoped that Crist would make changes to the FCAT. Both Michelle and Tracy said that they have heard Crist plans to make changes, but both remained pessimistic that the changes would not be drastic enough to make the test more acceptable to them. Tracy even stated, “I think it’s too much of a political win...why would they want to mess it up?” Nancy, Karen, Kathleen, and Sandra all suggested that because Crist was a new governor, he was more likely to be open-minded about changing policies made by the previous administration. Sandra, however, was not sure that this was necessary. “I haven’t heard any harm that it’s done. It seems to be working. I think. According to their [presented on the DVD] numbers it is. I just don’t see where it’s hurt, to be honest.”

## **Lived Reality of the FCAT**

In addition to inquiring about parents' knowledge about the FCAT, I also wanted to find out how the FCAT has changed parents' lives. Specifically, I wanted to know how it has impacted their children's education, whether it was an influence in the political candidates they supported, and whether they felt that they had a voice in influencing education policy. Every parent indicated that the FCAT impacted them, but diverged on the amount that it shaped their lives. Some parents were violently opposed to it and opted to show that in a variety of ways, such as disengaging with their child's school, refusing to talk about testing at home, or offering to send their children to private schools (where they would not be required to take the test). Other parents wished that changes in their student's school structure during FCAT time would become permanent, such as no homework, treats for students, and extended recess time. Universally, parents felt that their children's curriculum had changed due to the FCAT.

### **Impact on Children's Education**

No parents who had experienced Florida's education system prior to FCAT felt that it had remained unchanged. Teachers, the curriculum and methods of delivery, and students were all different, either from parents' own experiences in elementary school, or from the way that elementary education was previously delivered in Florida.

#### *Teachers*

The impact that a child's teacher can have on them is enormous. As Kimberly told me, "When the teachers are stressed then the kids are stressed." All parents who speculated on their children's teacher's feelings about the FCAT indicated that it had

changed their teaching practice, some more drastically than others. Judith stated that her son's teachers get frustrated with the test because, "they feel like it gets in the way of learning." Amy concurred, telling me that she didn't know any teachers who liked the FCAT or how it impacted them. Both Tracy and Donna indicated that their child's teacher was unable to teach in ways she wanted, but rather felt forced to change her teaching to focus on the content she knew would appear on the FCAT. Karen attributed this change to the experience level of the teacher. About her daughter's teacher, she said

She has a teacher that's older and more experienced. She teaches less to the FCAT. In fourth grade, I think it was particularly bad because she had a young teacher who's been trained in this current environment and that's all she knows. So that was her emphasis. That's what I really feel is a sad state of affairs is that the younger teachers coming in, that's what they're trained in. So we're producing teachers that all they do is follow a set curriculum. They don't ever go beyond it.

Not everyone I interviewed expressed an opinion on how teachers viewed the FCAT.

Some parents, such as Alice and Helen, indicated that they had not had conversations with their child's teachers about the FCAT.

Two other parents hinted that the FCAT could be used to punish disliked teachers.

Michelle said

Honestly, the teachers don't have any say over the students that they get in their classroom and if a principal didn't like a teacher, they could just dump them with all the crappy kids that they know aren't going to perform well. They have no say whatsoever over it and ... I don't think they have enough power to make that huge of a difference...I don't think that they should be personally responsible for their performance in that way.

Anna echoed this statement

There's subtle kinds of discrimination. If the classes are too big in Hillsborough County, the policy is to hire a new teacher, so they usually pick the troublemakers and the hard-to-teach kids and so they throw in a couple of blond kids to make it look right. This happened to my son in first grade and I didn't figure it out for several months.

Unlike other parents, Michelle and Anna touched on issues of ethnicity and social class, as well as student ability level in schools and classrooms. It is likely that their children experienced different treatment at least in part because they had children who were labeled by the test as deviant from the norm.

While the majority of the parents I spoke with disliked the FCAT and supported teachers who voiced similar opinions, Carol and Mark both suggested that the reason why teachers complained about the FCAT was because they disliked public oversight of their teaching. Specifically, Carol said

My opinion would be, I think most teachers don't like it...I think they don't like it because it holds them accountable. That's my assessment, that it's a bona fide tool that's being implemented across the state and you as a teacher now have a way to be exposed if you have a class across the board that's not doing well compared to your peers...I think that's a frightening thing for many teachers...I've seen that with young teachers, they have a hard time fitting into that curriculum and usually those are the ones you hear that [are] anti-FCAT, because they don't want to fit into the mold...I like knowing that if I get a bad teacher that I have something that they damn well have to shoot toward.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

Many parents felt that the FCAT was pervasive in influencing their children's instruction. Even before children enter third grade, they have begun to prepare for taking standardized tests by practicing skills such as bubbling as part of their class work and homework. Once children reach third grade, most parents have observed that the curriculum centers around FCAT practice. Tracy summed it up well when she stated, "they're being taught FCAT, that's basically all they do." Kimberly, as well as other parents, told me that the period just prior to the FCAT was the worst in terms of focus on

the FCAT. "Since coming back from spring break, all regular instruction has stopped and it's been FCAT prep, with lots of homework." Once the FCAT period is over,

The rest of the year [after FCAT time] is non-productive...they do some things academic of course, it's not like a big party all the time. It's just a lot more fun. A lot more outside time, finally, a lot more fun things that the teacher wants to do with the child...I think they do whatever the teacher wants them to do finally. --- Tracy

Patricia had a similar observation, linking the emphasis put on the test to her child's apathy in the final quarter of school

They teach so that the students will do well on the test. And they don't necessarily teach life skills or things that they can find an interest in...they teach for the test...so once they get past the test, they can relax because the test is over, right? I get that impression from my 9 year old sometimes. 'Oh the FCATs are over, so...I mean, you've got another whole semester in school. So he feels like he has to work less hard because the testing is over...I find he puts less effort into putting things done when he realizes the testing is over.

Angela discussed a conversation that she had with her son about the FCAT. "He said 'Mom, we have to pass FCAT to pass third grade, right?...Well, why do I have to make good grades all the rest of the time?' What are you supposed to say?". On the whole, parents indicated that teachers who teach to the FCAT are imparting the lesson that students are only responsible for learning until the FCAT is taken.

Some parents specifically discussed the emphasis on reading in third grade and writing in fourth grade. Judith noted

Last year the emphasis was on writing and a lot of the math was not [there]...there were things that they needed to be working on and they weren't being worked on because last year in fourth grade they had to test writing, that was the big thing, to work on writing...the other subjects aren't always as important because they don't have to pass those. So there's an emphasis that they put on it because the school wants the grade because the school wants the funding.

Michelle concurred and indicated that by the time her children reached fifth grade, they were unprepared in areas other than reading and writing. Karen stated that, “In her fourth grade year, it was incredible how much time they spent practicing how to pass an assessment test, which is a huge problem, I think, of wasted time...” Amy, one of the parents whose children are spread widely in age told me that, “My oldest son did not have the FCAT when he was younger and I’ve seen the transition from no FCAT to FCAT...I think it’s pretty much stifled some of the more creative ways teachers present the information.”

Tests that shaped an entire year’s curriculum were not the only concerns that parents had. Karen said that her daughter was going to start taking standardized tests in “specials” (art, music, PE) because, “I read in the paper that the elective teachers, well they’ve been cut out of the picture of getting bonuses, so in order to allow them to compete for money too, they are now starting to test in those areas.”

Parents also expressed concern that not only were their children focusing in on one skill or subject area at the expense of others, but also that the way they were being taught was sub-par. Anna said, “This is ultimately a very stupid kind of assignment. He [her son] learned to write, but in a very stereotypical way. There’s this artificial time thing...” Ultimately, I believe that parents’ concerns come down to the fear that the FCAT was making school an unpleasant place to learn. Judith summed up the concerns of many parents when she said, “I think the danger is that they’re losing the love of learning.” Parents pointed out that after the FCAT testing period ended, their children did many more fun things: went on field trips, engaged in experiential learning on a

regular basis, disposed of FCAT workbooks, the pace of homework slows, and students are allowed to have more time spent in recess.

### *Stress*

The topic that concerned parents more than any other was the stress that high-stakes testing has placed on their children. This stress manifested in a variety of ways. Some parents indicated that anxiety over the FCAT caused their children to have physical symptoms such as stomach aches, crying, or losing sleep. Other parents reported that their children were anticipating and “worrying” about the FCAT far in advance of the test. Parents of children who did not worry about the FCAT still reported child stress as a component of FCAT testing. Patricia said, “He doesn’t seem to have a problem with it. I know other students that have stress about it. I’m a [volunteer] in his class and I was working with three or four other students that weren’t as strong in their writing and I could tell they were really not looking forward to it.”

Tracy’s narrative about the stress that the FCAT created for her son is telling of the experience that other parents have had

He loves FCAT week because there’s no homework, but he doesn’t like the FCAT. He’s a really good student, he always performs well on FCAT or any other test, he’s a high level for his age and he gets so stressed out that he can’t sleep and he’ll cry himself to sleep at night because the teachers put that much pressure on the kids because they’re getting that much pressure from their administration . . .stuff that’s high pressure, he doesn’t show any signs of not being able to handle stress in other situations. . .He’s afraid he’s not going to pass fourth grade, or whichever grade which is ridiculous because he’s a really strong student, he has no reason to worry, so then we have to coach him through that, you know, let him know that he’s not at risk of not doing well, he’s not at all a child that this test is going to catch and say ‘Wait a minute, what’s going on here?’ That there are some students that that might happen to but he’s not one of them.

She suggested that the teachers talking about the test and prepping for the test is what leads to the children's anxiety. "They talk about it a lot and emphasize it a lot, so the kids know that it's a big deal and they know that they cannot pass a grade...I don't know specifically if I've ever heard what a teacher says, but they definitely emphasize it quite a deal."

Melissa also reported that her son suffered from an immense amount of FCAT-related stress

There's a lot of emphasis on the FCAT...John was in second grade last year and he was already worried about the FCAT, I mean even the little kids hear about the FCAT, so a year ago, he was 'Oh, what if I fail and what if this and what if that' and 'I'm not going to be smart enough to pass it' and I was like 'Gosh don't worry about it. We'll deal with that when the time comes, if it comes.' But there is so much anxiety even at such a young age and then they just finished the FCAT last week...He was [worried] but then, it was so funny, I think because we worked on it so much, we'd go to the library on the weekends so he could sign into the Internet and practice this FCAT Explorer, so I think he was as well prepared as he could be and I talked to him about it last week and I said 'How do you feel about it' and he said 'Oh it was so easy Mom, it was just like practice.' Which was wonderful, but I was like 'Oh my god, we've been worrying about this for a year now...see honey, all that was for nothing.

Even Sandra, whose son is in kindergarten, found herself dealing with an upset child because of the FCAT.

He became upset and anxious, I could tell he was anxious talking about this test and I thought, 'my word, are they giving it in kindergarten now?' I started asking around and no, no they weren't. I started telling him, it's just a test, don't worry about it. But he was actually upset...he was very upset thinking this was something horrible that if he didn't do good, it was bad...he got it from school cause we didn't talk about it at home.

Finally, Judith talked about the difficulty of having a sick child during the FCAT time.

While normally staying home sick is not a big deal, during FCAT testing it can be an enormous problem.

It can be frustrating, I mean your son's home sick with the stomach flu and you have this sense of urgency that you have to get better now, you're missing the test. That's crazy. If someone's home sick, they should be allowed to be sick ... There shouldn't be so much high pressure so that the kids, the parents, and everyone else feels a sense of urgency about it.

Angela points out that much of this anxiety is for no reason. "Other than that [third grade], the scores that the kids get on the assessment doesn't affect them one iota education wise. But because the school is graded based on improvement and numbers, they are pressured to the point where they're having anxiety attacks." Part of this pressure includes watching students earn trophies for perfect scores, listening to teachers stress the importance of the test, and observing that the school essentially closes down during the testing period.

At the same time that some children were anxious over the FCAT, parents reported that there were some positive things associated with the FCAT testing time. Many parents pointed out that they were thrilled with the lack of homework during testing time. Carol said that even though her son disliked the test, "he loves the FCAT period because you take a test and then you relax the rest of the day, you play, you have special snacks...you have a two-week period where you have a life. And it's divine." Other parents reported that their children were given goodie bags with treats in them, extra recess, sweets from their teachers, rallies before the FCAT, and celebrations when it ended.

### *Children Who Fail*

While the FCAT has the potential to create stress for any child and their parents, it is particularly stressful for children who failed the test. Two of the parents, Michelle and Anna, had children who failed the FCAT reading portion in third grade. Michelle

indicated that until her son failed the FCAT, no one was aware that he was not at grade level in his reading comprehension because he was always able to read and passed the school-level benchmark tests. She was upset because until her son failed the FCAT, his son's teacher said that he was "on level".

Now for someone like him, his problem is comprehension. He can read, so he was overlooked. He could read, if you put something in front of him, he could read it to you with 99% fluency. But if you ask him to understand what he just read and he couldn't. And the FCAT is basically a comprehension test, so leading up to that, he was always on level for reading...so no one informs you until you go through something like that and you dive deeper to find out why. So when they did the portfolio, it became apparent that sure, he had 99% fluency but he had a 35% comprehension rate....She [his teacher] might have been aware of it [his low fluency level]. In fact, she told me that he would do fine and that he was on level. All of his report cards say 'on level, on level, on level' until he failed the FCAT and then it says 'below level'. So, I'm a little bitter."

Anna's experience was slightly different. She told me that her son's problem is not reading, but rather taking tests.

He has always had trouble with reading but he reads definitely at third grade level and he's been doing very well at math and he got a one on both parts of the FCAT because he doesn't do standardized tests. So now I have to send him to summer school in reading from 8 o'clock to 12:30...How I'm supposed to go to work is not at all clear to me. I already have thousands of dollars down in summer camps...they can't tell me if he's going to be promoted or not because he has to take another standardized test and they won't get the results for that for another three weeks and school ends in two weeks...he doesn't know yet. We haven't decided what's going to happen to him so we're not going to tell him yet.

### **Impact of FCAT on Parents**

Some parents felt that the FCAT was affecting them more directly than other parents. Whether it was an anxious child, homework beyond the skill level of the child, or their child being held back in school because of the test, those parents who felt its impact were quite vocal in their displeasure.

## **Impact on Parental Involvement**

Parental assistance with homework was one of the ways in parents directly felt the impact of the FCAT. Some parents reported that their children were bringing home increasing amounts of homework as FCAT time approached, while others were frustrated that their children had not been taught the skills to complete their homework themselves.

Kimberly stated that

He's gone and done what he could do [in his FCAT math workbook] and then I would have to go back and check everything, so it's like hours for the last two weeks... I had to go in, there was stuff that he absolutely couldn't do. It was a grid diagram and in the grid diagram was a locker room and a school room and a cafeteria room and you had to find the whole area of all three, combine them, in this big grid, get the total square feet...for a fifth grader. My son came home to me and told me because of course I had to help him do it and I tried to explain to him how to do it, but the teacher was writing on the paper, 'Good work Dad, Good work Mom'. So, we're doing the work for these kids because they can't...they're having to get through these booklets and the stuff that's being covered in these booklets is at such a quick pace that she's [the teacher] not truly explaining it.

She also explained

In that one book you'll see algebra and I was like 'Have you even looked at this Sam, have you even started to learn this?' He's like 'No'. Then I'm having to teach him how to put the letters on the right the numbers on the left and...I had to go in and show him how to put the letters and to divide by the two and it's just... When I got done, I say, 'So Sam, you understand what I'm telling you?' and he goes 'No'. I go 'Alright, alright, let's do this again.' By the time I got done with that one question and that whole book was homework...60 questions for homework. It's no wonder my kid's stressed out."

It's also no wonder that parents like Kimberly feel stressed out by the test. She concluded her discussion of homework and the FCAT by saying, "If I've got stressed out kids, I can only imagine how kids who don't go home to a parent, who don't get help on

these books...these 60 questions [of math homework]...how fair is that to a child who doesn't have somebody at home to help him?"

The FCAT also changed parents' feelings about their involvement in their child's school. Several parents mentioned that they volunteered at their child's school, usually directly in their child's class. Tracy mentioned that she used to tutor children who were falling behind until she was asked to assist with FCAT tutoring. She stated that

I've been asked to tutor kids for these FCAT prep things. Let's say it's fifth grade reading level and the child that I'm tutoring is on second grade reading level and they still want me to go through this thing with them. To me it's a waste of my time and a waste of the child's time because they need to be learning at the appropriate level. You know what I mean, you can't jump from second grade to fifth grade. So I stopped tutoring at the school because I don't want to prep people for FCAT. If I'm going to spend my time, I want to help them where they are and do what they need, because otherwise it's wasting my time, it's wasting the kid's time.

Another mother, Karen, told me a about a similar scenario

In fact, for years I volunteered to be a tutor...and last year I quit. I was working with fourth grade kids and the only thing from the beginning of the year on, the only thing teachers requested I do with them was practice the FCAT with them. I had kids beg me 'Please don't make me do another one of these. Please don't make me do this. I don't want to do it.' Because they did so much of it. Honestly it broke my heart. I couldn't do it. I said, I just can't come back to this, I can't be a part of adding more stress to those poor kids.

Nancy, who no longer had children in elementary school, related the tale of how she decided to disengage with the school system because of a frustrating experienced related to the FCAT.

The school system blows you off, they don't really care what parents think anymore as long as they show up to help at the schools, that's parental involvement now, you show up and help at the schools. But if you want to look at your student's test, oh you can't see the questions because we have to keep those quiet so that people don't know what those questions are going to be, and they might get passed around and students could cheat...I got her grade, she hadn't done very well in science, which is my field, I've even taught it. Um, and I wanted to see the test questions with her answers because all I had were her

answers on the page. I knew I could help her with it, I just needed to see what she did wrong. 'Oh no, you can't see those, we can't let those questions come home.' Because something about it was like a general program used over Florida and if I saw the questions, I might pass them on to other parents who might let their kids cheat. I had to go down to the school to see the questions and I had to try to just group what it was she seemed to not understand so I could try to help her with that, I couldn't help her with individual questions. Well to me, they just took away my parental involvement, so don't ask me to help out at the school.

Nancy concluded the interview by telling me that her disengagement was largely because she was not allowed to help her daughter with the areas she needed help on.

A lot of it had to do with being told that I couldn't see the test questions and I couldn't help my daughter with a subject that I knew very well. That's my parental involvement...I just backed out. So I don't have anything to do with the school anymore unless I have to, that really sums it up right there. And I, at one point in time, was on the school advisory board and in Virginia, I was secretary of the PTSA, and in Germany, I was on the school advisory board or school advisory committee. In Florida I tried to be involved and it just tapered finally, after that test thing, I was done.

These parents all agreed that when the school no longer appeared to value their contributions, they felt it was best to refrain from assisting them. Tracy explained that the process of preparing for the FCAT

It makes elementary school less appealing to thinking parents. You start to want to just keep your distance because you can't buy into the process that they're doing. It's easier just to keep your distance than it is to try to pretend you're supportive of what's going on. I think it creates a little bit us and them between the students and their school and parents and the school. Because it's not a unifier. It's a mandated down thing that sucks the fun out of the whole thing

Parents also reported that they were unwelcome at the school during the actual test.

Sandra, whose kindergarten son was afraid of the FCAT indicated his school prohibited visitors.

Parents aren't allowed to come to school for a visit for anything or to volunteer. It's called "quiet campus". Now it didn't really affect me because I'm here at work, but it's unsettling to know that you're not allowed to go and have lunch or

anything. I can live with it though. I guess they know what they're doing...they don't want any parent, any visitor, they don't want you to come...

Parents found the schools that their children were attending to be different from their own schools and unwelcoming. Unsure of how to deal with these changes, many physically or emotionally disengaged themselves from their children's schools.

### **Parents and Stress**

Donna found that the test stressed her out more than it did her son, "It's not a difficult test for him. It is stressful to his mother more because I know that it's a permanent record of how he did and in reality it's just a snapshot of just a few days instead of the usual testing over time where you can average everything..." Alice's son has learning disabilities, so she finds the testing stressful as well: "I was stressed making sure he got ready for it...it affects everybody, the whole family." Helen explained that the extra materials coming home from school actually made her anxious. To deal with this anxiety, she focuses on feeding her children nutritious food, enforcing strict bedtimes, and skipping sporting practices that run too late into the night. Rose seconded the anxious feelings, saying that she gets more "anxious and nervous" than her children about the test.

In a similar vein, Michelle worried that failing the FCAT caused her child to be considered a less-than-ideal student. She said, "I just really think when it comes to which teacher is going to get the lower level kids, it's not something they all jump for because they know they can get bonuses if their class does well, but if they don't..."

Part of the parental stress stemmed from worry about whether their child would score well on the FCAT, while some of it related to worries over the stress level of their children. Overall, parents wanted their children not to fail the FCAT because of the

shame and stigma it would incur on their children as well as on them as parents. Parents indicated that they were not open about their stress with their children.

### **Impact on Voting**

Parents were mixed about whether the FCAT was an issue that would impact who they voted for in the governor's race. Several parents indicated that they were not able to vote. Those parents were asked to consider the question if they were able to vote.

Eleven of the twenty-five interviewees indicated that the FCAT was an important issue in who they would (or did) vote for. One person was undecided, and 12 people said it had no impact on who they voted for (or would vote for, if eligible). One interviewee did not answer the question. Of the people who felt that this was an important issue, Nancy, Samantha, and Susan named the FCAT as the most important issue or one of the most important issues they considered when choosing a candidate. To some parents, the issue was important enough to make them vote across party affiliation lines. Tracy told me, "I mean, I vote pretty much Republican and I even voted against Republicans because I felt like I couldn't in good conscience support [the FCAT], not that the Democrats would come in and make major changes..." Anna said, "I've never voted for a Republican, but god forbid a Democrat was supporting it, I'd probably find someone else to vote for."

What was striking was that even parents who were vocal in their disapproval of the FCAT, such as Melissa, Michelle, and Amy indicated that the FCAT was not an issue they considered when voting. Michelle suggested that politicians were never faithful to their election platform, so she did not believe her vote would make a difference.

Alternately, Alice told me that she believed most politicians would keep the policy, so voting would not be a way to impact FCAT policy.

### **Perceived Lack of Power to Influence Policy**

Across the board parents felt a lack of power to influence FCAT policy. Whether this was because they felt that their vote would not change anything, that their child's school did not listen to their opinion, or that they were unable to shield their child from the stress of high-stakes testing, every person I talked to seemed to feel that they had little to no influence over the policy, leading to political apathy. While they were unable to change the written policy or the ways in which the school carried it out, they did develop their own ways to deal with its effects within their family and their home.

One way in which parents dealt with this power issue was to subvert it by refusing to talk about the test at home. Tracy indicated that they did not talk about the test except to tell their children that if they did poorly on it, they were willing to send them to private school. "I try not to mention a word when they come home...I tried not to, cause he's getting enough of it at school...The only thing we even talk about FCAT is 'don't worry', try to de-stress them because they're all stressed out...then secondly, celebrate because there's no homework that week." Parents also offered to send their children to private schools if they did not do well on the FCAT. Kimberly said, "I've always said to Michael, 'Michael, if you don't pass the FCAT I'll send you to private school...I couldn't care less. Stupid test.'"

Another way in which they dealt with this was to end their volunteer relationship with their child's school (as was previously mentioned). Some parents suggested that they voted against politicians who were in favor of the FCAT, while other parents, such as Tracy, indicated that voting had relatively little impact

I feel like all three of my kids have been thrown under the bus for it in Florida schools. I'm sure the same thing happens in other states, but I think it's been the biggest disservice to our kids, absolutely and I wish people would vote it out, would make more of a stink about it...In a way, it's our own passive fault for putting up with it...But a little bit shame on all of us...I'm just complaining to you, I'm complaining to my neighbors but I'm not doing anything active to make a difference other than a single vote which will never do it.

Other parents wished that schools themselves would rebel. Karen suggested

I wish there'd be a principal or teachers that would just say 'okay, here's what we're supposed to do, so I handed it out, I did my job'... ..just let it go. Do it, take the test, don't prep for the test, don't stress about the test. Just pass it out, have the kids do it, and that's the emphasis of it. And whatever score you get, you get. And if your school gets a bad rating, it gets a bad rating. And if you don't get your bonus, you don't get your bonus...don't create this whole drama about the whole thing...but they have careers...they can't really do that. They've gotta play the game...it's not a real career builder.

Parents had a variety of ways of dealing with the influence that the FCAT has over their lives, most of which involve resistance through ignoring the test, offering to remove their children from situations where they would have to take the test, and withdrawing volunteer support for the schools. One way of dealing with FCAT that they do not turn to is voting at the state and local level, since many feel that their vote will not be enough to end the FCAT. I suspect, based on comments from some of the interviewees, that this policy applies to their voting in federal elections. However, I did not ask directly about the influence of education policy on national level voting choices.

### **Suggestions for “Fixing” the FCAT**

Only two parents were unable to discuss changes they would make to the FCAT. Both Mark and Carol expressed concern that they did not know enough about the intricacies of the FCAT to suggest any changes to it. Mark did say that he believes tying teacher compensation to the test is an important aspect of the FCAT. The other parents that I interviewed were filled with suggestions for ways to tweak the FCAT to make the

policy stronger or more accurate in producing data for teachers and schools to use to improve student learning.

Regardless of how their child performed on the FCAT, most parents indicated that they felt their children (and children in general) should be assessed via a standardized test to ensure that they are learning what they need to learn. However, across the board, parents disapproved of the way in which the FCAT is used to assess students. Many parents offered suggestions such as downgrading the emphasis on the FCAT or creating a portfolio of assessment tools including report card grades, and other test scores in addition to the child's FCAT scores. Some parents bluntly stated that they felt that teachers were capable enough to know when to retain children and when to pass them without the aid of the FCAT.

Parents emphasized that it was important to keep testing in place. Mark said

I say it's a good idea, without even looking at it, without investigating it more, it's a good idea to test children along the way in their education to see how far along and how well they've been educated. I remember I went to school in Florida and they didn't have any FCAT when I was going to school and basically there were kids graduating that weren't very bright and didn't learn that much.

One of the most often suggested changes to the FCAT was to replace it with another standardized test, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the California Achievement Test. Parents clearly dislike the high-stakes aspect of the FCAT, but do not recognize that it would be possible to have children take this particular standardized test without attaching stakes to it. Discussing other standardized achievement tests, often taken by parents when they were children was a way that interviewees offered an alternative to the current high-stakes environment of the FCAT. Tracy told me that while she disliked the FCAT, the accountability aspect of FCAT policy appeals to her

The accountability part of it attracts you, it attracts me to it because you have to have some way to measure, you know, the education and have some level of accountability, but I think this is just way off the deep end in the wrong direction and it's turned into a monster. I mean, there might be a portion of it that could work, it could be one tool among many...it's just turned into the only thing that counts...it's too much. It's not that good to make it such a big deal.

Another criticism was that the FCAT is not actually doing what is purported to do. Michelle told me, "You're teaching this to them and then giving it to them. It's not really an achievement test, it's really, what have we taught you to take this test? Have we taught you the right way?" Nancy suggested that the FCAT would work better as

an evaluative tool. I don't think it's a bad thing...I don't think it's bad for it to travel with them, as long as it's used properly and teachers can use it to day, okay this group of student might be lacking in this area, maybe I need to work on it this year or this student has problems in this area or these areas, so I need to maybe pay special attention to this student...then I think it's a useful tool. The way it's used now, pffff.

Similarly, Judith suggested, "it would be useful if they used it as an assessment tool.

That I have absolutely no problem it. It is not useful as a change in curriculum, it is not useful to stress the school out, I don't think they should tie that much money [to it]. I think they should use it as an assessment and nothing more." Kimberly suggested a slightly different test might be more appropriate

Every student should be tested, like the IQ test to see where they're at and what kind of learner they are and get the information about the students by the time they're in second grade, have all of them tested. And then have an accurate profile of the student and use that information to help improve their education, versus the FCAT.

Rose suggested that giving children a test that was untimed might make it a more accurate measure of a child's ability, while Alice and Helen suggested breaking up the test into smaller tests given throughout the year.

Another suggestion was to discuss the policy with educators, parents, and students. Tracy said, “The teacher’s the one on the front line...if I were going to be governor, I would ask the teachers, ‘You tell me what you need.’ Trust them. They’re the ones in there with the kids.” Donna seconded this opinion to trust in teachers.

I would ask teachers what they think would work better and I would try to implement [that] because I think hobbling how a teacher teaches is one of the worst things you can do, politically...I think that’s crazy. If you have to restrain what you can do for the kids, in particular the kids who really need help, then it’s interfering, it’s keeping you from your assigned task which is to teach the children the best way you know how...I would ask teachers what they would prefer in place of FCAT or to make FCAT more effective.

Tracy suggested that because students had no input, the process was less meaningful to them.

I think it throws the students under the bus and the students have absolutely no input in this process that they’re supposed to buy in, which I think is absolutely ridiculous. If you’re going to have something that’s meaningful, I think there should be some way that the students should participate in the process and parents too because we have absolutely no say other than voting which isn’t a lot of power because it’s one vote.

Susan suggested creating a committee that included parents, teachers and students to determine appropriate ways to assess student learning, as well as lessening the importance of the FCAT.

A shift in emphasis from high-stakes to focusing on educational achievement, without concerns of funding was suggested by Michelle. “Maybe the emphasis should be changed to be put on the schools that don’t achieve the A level and why and what can they do to raise their levels. There shouldn’t be that big of a difference in levels if we’re all being taught the same thing.” Joan stated that “I don’t think schools need grades, I think that certain schools are disadvantaged and having a grade doesn’t help.” Similarly, Nancy suggested that

I can't say that I don't think there's some need for a little bit of standardization in terms of what is expected for students to learn, but I think it needs to be reasonable and I think teachers flexibility in how they would teach it...there may be more than one way that works...school grading would go. There's too many other factors that they don't factor into school grading that affects school grades. The poverty level of the students in the school and the background they come from is probably a bigger factor than the rest of it. Not that you might not be able to find ways that the school can deal with that, but I don't think FCAT testing is going to do it...I'd pay teachers more money...I'd take a lot of that money that's going to the FCAT now and I'd put it into teachers.

Tracy also suggested, "tak[ing] the stress of the student...these kids are too young."

Michelle said, "I mean, if I went by my other son [who passed the FCAT], I'd probably have a whole different opinion of FCAT because it's easy for him...I mean, your whole life revolves around a test. But what about everything else you've done all year?" This idea, that too much weight is put on the FCAT is one that was echoed by other parents. Many of the parents interviewed expressed that there was too much weight put on one measure of a child's performance. One parent said, "You know, you can't base everything on that one test, if you don't pass that.... I think you've gotta look through a bit at how the kid has been doing the rest of the year."

A few parents suggested that high-stakes testing was not the solution to solving educational inequality. Patricia said, "I don't really think they're [schools] broken. I think we need better pay for the teachers, smaller class sizes, better schools..." Amy suggested that teachers should be given more support, particularly since they often spend more time with children than their own parents. Anna expanded on her problem with the FCAT

It's the business model of education and I don't think that business has anything to do with education. You're supposed to train teachers well...and give them decent curriculum materials...and pay them decent salaries and...what do we mean by holding schools accountable? Do you mean that we're hiring stupid teachers? Do we hold businesses accountable? I don't understand this thing about

holding schools accountable. I think there's something wrong in the system and people think we're going to fix it by putting more pressure on the schools and the teachers and the kids. I don't think it's working and therefore I don't think their analysis of what's broken is correct.

## **Conclusion**

Parents largely feel that the FCAT has been a pervasive influence in their lives, even though they may not understand the intricacies of the policy surrounding it. It has created stress both in their lives and in the lives of their children, while having an impact on education that is not clearly positive. Both the interviews and the free listing activity reflected this tension, while the content analysis predicted these answers. The following chapter will discuss the implications of these findings and make suggestions to improve the lives of parents dealing with the FCAT.

## Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The content analysis of the FCAT coverage in the *St. Petersburg Times* indicated that there were four key issues<sup>11</sup> that newspaper editors and writers focused on. This study was designed to determine how the FCAT impacted parents of elementary school children. Looking at the information gathered from the content analysis compared with the interview data is one way to shed light on this information. I will demonstrate that while parents largely agreed that those topics were important, there were other topics that they found to be of equal or greater importance.

An interesting finding was that, while the *St. Petersburg Times* reported heavily on the FCAT in relation to the governor's race of 2006, not all parents associated the test with voting choices. While some parents felt that the test was unfair or unnecessary in its current format, they were also unwilling to show that feeling through their vote. Several of the parents were in unique situations because they were not U.S. citizens. In spite of this, I still questioned whether they would consider this an important issue when it came to voting. One woman told me that, while she was unable to vote, she encouraged her husband to vote for the person who did not support the FCAT. More than half of the respondents indicated that the FCAT had no impact on who they voted for. Reasons discussed included the feeling that their vote would not impact policy and doubting that politicians would enact any changes they promised to make while campaigning. For

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<sup>11</sup> They were: the 2006 Florida governor's race, local school grades, teachers' feelings on the FCAT, and the general public's dissatisfaction with the FCAT.

parents who did consider the FCAT in their voting choice, this decision sometimes caused parents to vote for members of a party that they normally would not. One mother indicated that normally she voted along Republican party lines, but because of the FCAT, she would not vote for anyone who supported it. Another mother indicated that she would not vote for any candidate who supported the FCAT, regardless of party. In the few cases in which parents mentioned political party or affiliation, it was usually in keeping with the newspaper representation of the FCAT as a Republican party idea.

Another topic that the newspaper focused on was school grades. Parents largely seemed to find these grades inconsequential except to express concern over why the system of ranking schools was put into place. Several of the parents with whom I spoke were unable to tell me definitively what their child's school grade was for the proceeding year. Parents whose children were no longer in elementary school were even more unlikely to remember what their children's grade was, often just giving me a range of where they thought the grade fell (A/B or B/C school). Many times after I left an interview, I returned home to look up the grade a child's school received on the FCAT (I asked this as a follow up question if parents were unable to tell me what grade their child's school had).

Part of the reason they were unable to tell me was likely because the overwhelming majority of my research participants had children who attended schools in their wealthy neighborhoods. Families who have higher incomes, particularly those in which one parent does not work, likely have more time to research schools. These parents are more likely to have attended a successful school or have received education that taught them what a successful school looked like, making choosing a quality school

for their child easier than relying on the grade assigned by the State of Florida. The few parents whose children were not attending 'A' schools indicated that their child was attending or had attended a magnet or a charter school. In order for parents to send their children to such schools, a considerable amount of research on the parents' part must be completed, in order to select an appropriate school to meet the parents' and child's needs. I suspect that such attention to the quality of their child's school is not the norm. Had I interviewed a more diverse group in terms of socioeconomic status, the findings are likely to have been very different.

Another reason why parents were likely unable to tell me the school grade was because this aspect of the policy is unclear to them. While the newspaper reported on school grades, they did not discuss the criteria that a school had to meet to earn that grade. In fact, it was difficult for me to find the criteria that the Department of Education uses to calculate school grades. Part of the reason is that the FDOE's website is badly in need of updating. There were several times during the course of my research that I clicked on a link, only to find that it was broken. There was often no other way to find the appropriate material from within the website (I resorted to searching Google and using the cache function to look at the outdated web pages). Also, the design of the website is cluttered and not intuitive. Often I used the search function to locate items I was looking for because none of the categories appeared to contain the information I needed. From what I was able to find, it appeared that the school grading formula has changed several times over the last nine years. It is no wonder then, when the information on how grades are calculated is difficult for a determined person to find, that

the average parent is unaware of how the grades are calculated and what their significance is.

Teachers were another subject of newspaper coverage. Articles focused on the ways in which the FCAT and associated policies have changed the job of teaching in Florida's schools. Most often this coverage was negative, focusing on teachers who are dissatisfied with the changes in education over the last ten years. One of the major issues that teachers have protested is the proposal to link student scores to teacher bonus pay. Various guises of this program have been proposed over the last 10 years. Parents' reactions to this topic were varied. Some parents were teachers, married to teachers, or close friends with teachers. These people were more likely to decry pay for performance plans as unfair to teachers. There were two parents, Carol and Mark, who indicated that they supported such programs and felt that they were working to ensure that teachers did their job. Both also admitted that they only had a superficial knowledge of these programs.

Parents often expressed concern that teachers are not allowed to use their judgment in picking curriculum, deciding whether to promote a student, and teaching material that will not be covered on the FCAT. It seemed that most parents believed that teachers mainly "drill and kill" or focus on memorization and basic facts, rather than expanding students' knowledge beyond the state standards and emphasizing critical thinking skills. These opinions matched what has been covered in the *St. Petersburg Times*, although much of their coverage relies on teachers, not parents, as sources. In fact, some parents attribute the "back-to-basics" approach to their child's teachers' inability to go above and beyond the material that will be tested on the FCAT,

particularly if they are young and recently graduated from college. Teachers, on the other hand, attribute the change in their teaching to top-down, mandated changes that the state government requires. Partially this difference in opinion over the cause of the back-to-basics approach is that teachers want to present a united front and that by explaining the intricacies of how the FCAT and state level standards affect people differently would weaken their arguments against it. Partially the difference is due to stylistic variability in teaching, which parents would encounter regardless of the FCAT. Another factor is the parent's knowledge of the teacher's in class behavior, which varied widely from parents who volunteered in the classroom to parents who met teachers once or twice a year in conferences. Parents who spent little time interacting with the teacher were more likely to be critical of the teacher and her teaching style.

The newspaper was not as likely to discuss the uneven power dynamic that the FCAT creates or implies, while parents often brought it up. Implementing a system of standardization, as previously mentioned, deprofessionalizes teachers. That is, it takes away their power and ability to use their knowledge and judgments in their classroom. In its place is a standard, essentially scripted format for teachers to follow to ensure that they are doing their job appropriately according to the guidelines set forth by lawmakers. Many parents expressed concern over this issue, pointing out that they felt that teachers were capable of assessing students without an externally written and graded assessment. One mother pointed out that teachers had been determining whether to pass or fail students for years without the aid of the FCAT.

Another issue that parents pointed out was that the FCAT is only tied to passing in the third grade (for elementary school students), but the same amount of emphasis is

placed on the importance of doing well every year even though there is no benefit to students for doing well. The benefit applies to the child's teacher and the child's school, through the receipt of bonus funds through the School Recognition Program. Most parents discussed their understanding that schools received funding that is tied to student performance on the FCAT. The parents who mentioned funding were the same ones whose children attend A schools in wealthy suburbs of Tampa. They often indicated that it was unfair for their school to continue to earn bonuses from their high scores when they were already blessed with much more than schools which received lower scores. Other parents were either unaware of this practice or did not feel it was important, because the majority did not mention it.

One thing that the newspaper focused on extensively that parents did not was teacher job satisfaction. The newspaper has frequently reported on teachers who leave the education field because of reasons related to the FCAT. The public has also contributed to this discussion in the form of letters to the editor describing the plight of teachers who leave and the reasons why they leave, which are usually related to teachers not wishing to deal with the stress and importance placed on the FCAT. A related subset of the teacher dissatisfaction pieces are the articles and letters to the editor concerning teachers who are reprimanded or fired because of missteps during the FCAT. Teachers are not allowed to look at the FCAT booklet or assist students when proctoring the FCAT, except for the few instances when students receive accommodations to complete the test. Only one of the parents that I spoke with mentioned their belief that the FCAT

was such a detrimental force to teachers that they were leaving their jobs because of it<sup>12</sup>. The discussions tended to consist of the parent stating that their child's teacher did not like the FCAT or that she was stressed during testing time.

The area with the most overlap was on the subject of the general public's dissatisfaction with the FCAT. These articles tended to discuss the unfairness of the FCAT as a measure of student learning and teacher effectiveness, as well as discuss flaws in test design. They generally point out the flaws with that State of Florida's high-stakes testing policy and attempt to show that in spite of such legislation, there remains unequal achievement in education. The parents that I spoke with largely felt that these critiques were valid and voiced them in our interview session. As Anna pointed out, "I don't think their analysis of what's broken is correct." Parents, as well as the newspaper, suggested reasons for the continuing failure of certain schools. They felt that schools who lacked resources, such as money, parents who could be involved in their child's education, and a supportive community, were at a disadvantage regardless of whether the FCAT was in place or not. Testing to point out these differences only served to reinforces parents' (and the public's) opinion that the public education system is still in need of repair and that current measures are not the appropriate ones to fix the problems. Strangely enough, when parents were asked why schools performed well on the FCAT, they suggested that the success was dependent on individuals (like teachers or administrators) while when

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<sup>12</sup> While the point can be made that many parents are unaware of schools' retention rates and the reasons why teachers leave their teaching assignments, I believe that this sample is different from most parents. Many of the mothers that I spoke to had multiple children attend the same school, were familiar with the school staff, and volunteered in their child's school. I suspect that if a teacher left, these mothers would likely hear an explanation, either because she asked or through gossip.

they were asked why schools failed, they put the blame on structural issues such as poverty and lack of resources.

On the whole, parents agreed that the FCAT is an unfair measure of ability. Pointing out that it was only a few days of testing and that children were often aware of the intense pressure placed on them by a host of sources, many parents showed that they agreed with the way that the *St. Petersburg Times* has portrayed public perception of the FCAT. Suggesting that the test should be made only one tool among others, parents pointedly stated that they are dissatisfied with the impact that the FCAT has had on their schools, their educators, and their children. Parents were also quite concerned with the impact that the stress of taking a high-stakes test was having on their child. Several of the parents pointed out that their child became anxious as a direct result of this test, which in turn concerned them that there was too much pressure placed on children at a young age.

Largely, newspaper coverage touched on issues of concern to parents but failed to explore the issues in ways that connected with my sample's concerns. This discord points to the need for increased interaction between members of the media and the public. In the recommendations section, I will suggest ways that parents and the media could engage in dialogue to address this mismatch in assigning importance to issues.

### **Other Issues: Power and Politics**

There were other issues that were not covered in the *St. Petersburg Times* but that parents felt were of grave importance. These included conspiracy theories surrounding the FCAT and former Governor Bush, stress on parents, lack of perceived power, and lack of understanding of the intricacies of policies surrounding the FCAT.

A few parents suggested conspiracy theory explanations of why the FCAT was implemented, who benefited financially from the material surrounding the test, and why DVDs were distributed to parents. While there was some discussion in the *Times* of Neil Bush (Governor Bush's younger brother) and his educational software company peddling software to Florida school districts, there was little other mention of personal ties between former Governor Bush and companies hired to write, administer, and market FCAT materials. However, several parents felt that one of the reasons the FCAT was developed was so that Mr. Bush would financially profit through deals he had made with test makers. I did not find any evidence to support this claim. The initial legislation was implemented under former Governor Chiles, a Democrat, and a person whom no one linked to former Governor Bush.

Similarly, parents wondered about the many FCAT branded materials that their children brought home, including a DVD that explains why the State of Florida implemented the FCAT and how it benefits their children's education. Parents felt that the process of awarding the contracts to publishing companies to produce these materials was surreptitious and suspect. I was unable to find any discussion of how such contracts were awarded in the *St. Petersburg Times*. However, I did discover that the Florida PTA helped to produce the DVD in conjunction with the Florida Department of Education, which makes it seem unlikely that it was financially benefiting one particular politician. What these suggestions do point to is that parents have concerns about the level of transparency of governmental decision making.

Additionally, parents do not seem to understand policies that implemented the FCAT and that made it a high-stakes test. Adhering strictly to what the policy states, the

FCAT is designed to test whether teachers have educated students according to the Sunshine State Standards, which were created by a coalition of teachers and politicians. None of the parents I spoke with mentioned the Sunshine State Standards, nor addressed whether the FCAT was actually testing student attainment of those standards. Instead they explained in broad terms why they believed the FCAT was implemented (as a political tool, as a money saver, or because Florida's education system had a bad reputation nationally). This suggests that they are unaware of the official discourse surrounding this set of policies.

The distrust of the FCAT, the Department of Education, and former Governor Bush was evident in the decisions that parents made concerning their level of buy-in to the FCAT, surrounding policies, and measures implemented to carry them out. Parents spoke of ways in which they attempted to resist the policy by exerting their power. One of the ways in which they did this was to refuse to talk about the FCAT within their homes or to their children. Another way was to refuse to assist schools that were giving too much value or power to the test. Parents also warned their children against assigning too much power to the FCAT. Several parents told their children that the FCAT was only a test and not a matter that they needed to concern themselves over. Finally, some parents told their children that if they failed the test, they would circumvent the system by sending the children to private school. All of these measures were tools of resistance<sup>13</sup> that parents used when they felt powerless to influence the policy. The one tool that not

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<sup>13</sup> Educational anthropologists have dealt extensively with the topic of resistance in education. Among these authors are Alpert 1991, Bjork 2002, Cammarota 2004, El-Or 2004, Faiman-Silva 2002, Fine et al. 2007, Fordham 1993, Goto 1997, Lipman 2005, Mitrón and Lauria 1998, Moll 2004, Olmedo 2003, and Woods 1994.

all parents used was their voting power<sup>14</sup>. These parents also seemed to believe that there was little one person could do to change the FCAT, unless that person was a high ranking government official.

The issues related to the FCAT that the *Times* did not cover were just as important in parents' minds as the issues that were covered. While getting at those ideas often took some work, parents were often more willing to expand on their opinions on subjects that they felt had been neglected in popular media than on ones that they felt had been covered extensively. My hope is that participation in this project gave the participants a sense of power and voice, even though it will not reach as wide an audience as talking to a member of the media would grant them.

### **Connections Between the Literature and Findings**

These findings relate to the anthropological and educational literature on high-stakes testing in a number of ways. First, the privatization of public education is a topic that was salient in both the anthropological and education literature and in my data. Parents clearly recognize what the literature on teacher's reactions to high-stakes testing policies refers to as the deprofessionalization of teaching (Darling-Hammond and Rustique-Forrester 2005, Sloan 2007). This is evident in their statements that express confidence in teachers' ability to judge children's educational achievement without external oversight. They also commented, at times disparagingly, on pay-for-performance plans designed to improve test scores.

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<sup>14</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, 12 of the 23 parents stated that the FCAT was not a significant factor in making their voting decisions even though the vast majority of the parents indicated their disapproval of this policy.

Second, many parents, though critical of the philosophy behind the FCAT and other high-stakes tests, espoused views of educational failure that anthropologists have rejected (Jacob and Jordan 1993, Levinson and Holland 1996). Often, parents pointed to race and class of students as reasons for educational failure rather than suggesting, as anthropologists do, that these students were likely very knowledgeable in other areas than those tested on the FCAT and other high-stakes tests (Jacob and Jordan 1993, Levinson and Holland 1996). Although many felt that linking the FCAT to school grades was unfair, this was because they felt that students in poorly performing schools were at a greater disadvantage (and thus deserved funding) than their peers at A and B schools.

Third, while many of the parents in this study would be considered “privileged”, they voiced the feelings of powerlessness to influence public policy that anthropologists have documented in their research on the impacts of high-stakes testing on minorities in other states (Fine et al. 2007, Johnson 2007, Salinas and Reidel 2007). Similarly to the actors in the work of Fine et al. and Salinas and Reidel (both 2007), parents found ways to express their agency through resistance (though the forms are somewhat different since the previous two studies did not focus on parents, but on other stakeholders).

Finally, parents both discussed and illustrated their lack of understanding of FCAT policies much in the way that the literature from The National Education Goals Panel (1998), Fuller (2006), and the 2000 ASCD survey suggested that they might. However, unlike the NEGP paper suggests, it is unlikely that simplified explanations of FCAT policies will increase parents’ buy-in. As the majority of parents indicated, their problem is with the stress that the FCAT creates in their lives and the lives of their

children as well as the influence it has over their child's curriculum. These are problems that explaining the rationale behind such policies in more simple terms will not address.

### **Recommendations**

Given that the parents who participated in this study were largely unsupportive of the FCAT, what can be done to improve the current state of affairs? I will outline seven suggestions that are crucial to improving public participation in and influence over current and future public education policies.

First, to address the issue of disconnect between public concerns and newspaper coverage, newspaper reporters should conduct surveys of public opinion related to topics that they cover heavily. Telephoning or conducting internet surveys on these topics will allow them to get some sense of public concerns which in turn will lead to more honed reporting and potentially a wider range of topics covered. Another solution is to contact writers of Letters to the Editor and ask them to write a guest column on their views of education policy in Florida. While this will only expand the viewpoint to a minor degree, it will help readers to see that they have the potential to be heard and to read diverse opinions. Providing this service may convince more people that they can get their message into public spaces and inspire others to try their hand at it. Admittedly, the *St. Petersburg Times* has already in part anticipated the desire for a public forum in which to comment on news stories, as they have added a comment section to many of their news stories and they have presented guest columnists, such as former teacher of the year, Greg Bianche (2006). However, not all news consumers have access to the online version of the newspaper or have the knowledge of how to comment on news stories. Additionally, there is still a need to include a wider audience in the guest columnist arena.

Second, the government needs to do a better job of disseminating information about the FCAT in a clear and reachable way. I am aware that the government produces informational materials targeted at the public and that these materials are distributed through multiple mediums, but it is evident from my interviews that even well-educated upper-class parents are unclear about many of the finer points of the education policies that affect them most. Forming partnerships between government spokespersons and newspapers around the state could potentially be quite beneficial to policy makers and the public. It would allow policy makers to get their message out into a widely read forum and would also provide the public with accessible, easy to understand, and condensed explanations of policy. Implicit in this partnership is that jargon and doublespeak would be eliminated. The policy education piece would need to be written as a typical newspaper article is: succinct, using an 8<sup>th</sup> grade vocabulary, and addressed to a diverse audience. Certainly this movement could expand beyond the newspaper into other media such as television news.

Third, the government needs to conduct a formative evaluation of the FCAT that includes qualitative data from various stakeholder groups. There was no evidence on the Florida Department of Education's website that an evaluation had ever taken place or that it was mandated to occur (although it is according to the legislation). I did find one evaluation conducted by the Miami-Dade school district, and evaluation reports from the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, which is housed in the Florida State Legislature. The goal of this office is to "deliver program evaluation, policy analysis, and justification reviews of state programs to assist the Legislature in overseeing government operations, developing policy choices, and making Florida

government better, faster, and cheaper” (OPPAGA 2007). There is no link between the two pages, making it difficult for interested parties to find the evaluation reports.

Additionally, it is clear from reading the reports that members of the public were not consulted to answer the evaluation questions; these questions were answered through analysis of state collected quantitative data.

Fourth, “the public” needs to be given a voice in this policy. Several ways to do this have already been discussed, but this should be a priority of policy makers and elected officials. The evidence continues to mount that parents, teachers, school districts, students, and other stakeholders are largely unhappy with the current set of policies that surround the FCAT. Involving these groups in discussions of whether these policies are having the intended effect as well as exploring the effects that are occurring (whether intended or not) can have a huge impact on gaining public support, as well as improving the policy. Other potential ways for the public to voice their thoughts and opinions include holding town hall meetings, asking school boards to solicit public opinion on the FCAT policies during their meetings, and inviting guest speakers to discuss the topic with policy makers, either formally or informally (this could also be done by asking stakeholders to write papers on the topic).

Fifth, separate from state level activities to increase public input, schools should create groups of parents and students to discuss how to deal with FCAT. As several parents suggested during our interview, the schools are not involving parents in decision making about the FCAT. While all schools are supposed to have School Advisory Councils (or SACs), the members of those groups are not focused specifically on high-stakes testing, but rather on making decisions on school policy. Creating a group of

school level stakeholders that changes every few months could potentially involve a large number of people and help to shape policy at the school level. This would help to allay feelings of powerlessness that parents expressed during the interviews. It would give parents a sense of power at the local level and would hopefully allow them to either understand why schools make choices that they do (in terms of asking volunteers to tutor children for the FCAT) or enable them to create positive changes in how their child's school is run. Additionally, parents could provide feedback on school policies that are creating more stress, such as sending home newsletters and making phone calls related to FCAT test preparation.

Sixth, both at the state and school district level, policy makers need to determine valid reasons why students should put forth the time, energy, and worry that they currently experience. The only time the test has a significant impact on students is in third grade and in high school. Every other year that students are required to test, there is no long term incentive for students to attempt to do their best other than fear of failure. The current method of scaring students into doing well by emphasizing that the scores stay on a student's transcript does not work in every case and has the potential to be exposed as a fraudulent reason for students to try hard on the test. I suggest that no one, other than the school district, is looking at student's transcripts and judging them by their FCAT scores. The real people who benefit from student scores are the school staff, who benefit in the form of bonus funds given under the School Recognition Program. While this money could be used to benefit students (through purchase of equipment), it is ultimately adults (both the SAC and the school's faculty) who make this decision.

Finally, the government of Florida should consider making the FCAT a low stakes test by removing the link between the FCAT and school funding. This suggestion is the least likely to be implemented, but is also the one most often voiced by my participants. Many of the adults felt that all of the strings attached to the FCAT were only serving to lessen the value of their student's education, not strengthen it. The most frequent suggestion that parents had for changing the FCAT was to make it one among many assessment tools that teachers and schools used to ensure that students were learning. Taking away the teacher bonuses, school grading and the associated school choice plan, and the tie between FCAT scores and retention would silence many of the critics of the policy and likely not do much damage to the education system. My interviewees largely agree that the system that is currently in place is not working and needs drastic change in order to improve education in the way that these policies suggest.

### **Conclusion**

I set out to determine what impact that the FCAT has had on the lives of parents of elementary school children. I attempted to do so through a content analysis, free listing activity, and interviews with parents. What I learned is that parents feel at least as much stress as their children over the test. The set of policies that surround the FCAT are confusing to parents and the source of a great deal of animosity which is usually directed at the former governor. The FCAT also lead to the disengagement of a group of parents who are traditionally expected to be more involved in schools and their child's education than parents with less free time or income. Additionally, many parents' concerns were not reflected back to them in at least one widely read local newspaper or through prominent policymakers.

While I cannot say that this study captured wide-spread public opinion on the FCAT or that I had a representative sample, I believe this study taps into the large and growing discontent that parents, both in Florida and across the country, have with this set of policies. This illustrates the value of the qualitative, anthropological approach, which is that it uncovers issues and populations that have previously been ignored or obscured in the literature or in other forums (such as the popular media, in the case of this study). Just as other anthropologists have pointed out (Fine et al. 2007, Johnson 2007, Salinas and Reidel 2007, Sloan 2007, Valli and Chambliss 2007), the effects of high-stakes testing policies are widely variable and the most important issues vary depending on a multitude of factors. The best way to expose those issues is through ethnographic work that highlights issues of importance to people on the ground (Fine et al. 2007, Johnson 2007, Salinas and Reidel 2007, Sloan 2007, Valli and Chambliss 2007). Whether other parents either in Florida or across the nation express their dissatisfaction with these types of educational policies in the same ways that parents in this study did is questionable. However, what this study has done has been to emphasize the need for more attention to the reaction of parents to high-stakes testing policy and for more interaction between various stakeholder groups and policy-makers at the local, state, and national level. My hope is that this happens sometime soon so that parents and children can return to their focus on education for the sake of learning and not because “it’s going to be on the test.”

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. I'd like to do a small activity. I'm going to hand you this paper and pen and ask you to make a list of the first five words that come into your mind when I say the following word: "FCAT"
2. What school does your child/children attend? What grade is/are he/she/they in
3. What grade does your child's school currently have on the FCAT? Why do you think they received that grade? What factors contribute to the success or failure of a school on the FCAT?
4. On a scale of 1 (being none) to 10 (absolute), what would you rate the influence of the FCAT in your child's daily activities while in school? Why did you choose that rating?
5. How does your child feel about the FCAT?
6. How does your child's teacher feel about the FCAT?
7. If your child has taken the FCAT in the past, how has he/she performed?
8. What is your position, if any, on the effectiveness and usefulness of the FCAT?
9. Why do you think the FCAT was developed and put into use in Florida?
10. What sort(s) of people dislike the FCAT? What sort(s) like it?
11. Did the FCAT have any impact on who you voted for for governor or for any other elected official?
12. Do you think that the new governor will change the current FCAT policy? Why/why not?
13. If you were given the office of the governor for a day, what changes (if any) would you make to the FCAT?
14. What do you think the government's priorities for education are?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent

### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research**

#### **Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study**

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Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. This form tells you about this research study.

We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called:

#### ***High-stakes testing in Florida: Media portrayals and parental realities***

The person who is in charge of this research study is Jennifer Hunsecker.

The research will be done at a location convenient for you.

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#### ***Purpose of the study***

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact and the perceived impact that high-stakes testing, such as the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test has Florida's elementary school children.

#### ***Study Procedures***

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one or more of the following: 1. answer questions in one or more interview session with the researcher, each one lasting up to one hour; 2. participate in a focused group interview with other parents lasting up to two hours. The researcher will use a digital voice recorder to capture the interviews unless asked not to by the participant.

#### ***Alternatives***

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

#### ***Benefits***

There are no known benefits from taking part in this study, other than contributing to knowledge in this area.

#### ***Risks or Discomfort***

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

## Appendix B: Informed Consent continued

### ***Compensation***

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

We must keep your study records confidential. All digital audio recordings will be kept on the researcher's home computer in password protected files. The researcher's home computer is protected from Internet attacks by a firewall. These recordings will be kept for up to three years, but will only be used until August 2007 or when the researcher finishes writing her results. The only other person who will hear the tapes will be the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Bird.

Confidentiality of the focused group interview participants cannot be guaranteed. Participants will be asked not to share information revealed during the interview, but the researcher is unable to guarantee confidentiality on the part of other participants.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:
  - the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
  - the Florida Department of Health, people from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and people from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

### ***Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal***

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the researcher. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Appendix B: Informed Consent continued

**Questions, concerns, or complaints**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Jennifer Hunsecker at 813-325-9814 or Dr. Elizabeth Bird at 813-974-0802.

If you have questions about your rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-9343.

If you experience an adverse event or unanticipated problem call Jennifer Hunsecker at 813-325-9814.

***Consent to Take Part in this Research Study***

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

**I freely give my consent to take part in this study.** I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

***Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent***

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

- What the study is about.
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
- What the potential benefits might be.
- What the known risks might be.

I also certify that he or she does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research. This person speaks the language that was used to explain this research.

Appendix B: Informed Consent continued

This person reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her.

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Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

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Date

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Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent