

# Challenges to Promoting Industry Certifications in Florida High Schools

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## ABOUT THE ISSUE BRIEF

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This issue brief is part of a body of work on the implementation and outcomes of Florida’s Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act. *“The role of industry-recognized credentials in high school completion and postsecondary enrollment in Florida”* (Florida Industry Certification Study) is examining the ways districts and schools in Florida support high school students in earning industry certifications and the benefits and challenges of these programs. The experiences of Florida’s districts and schools can inform policymakers and educators in Florida and nationally who are considering similar policies.

The Florida Industry Certification Study is being conducted by RTI International with funding from the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences under Grant No. R305A170222. The views represented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

Visit [www.flcertificationstudy.org](http://www.flcertificationstudy.org) to learn more about the study and to explore findings on topics such as school strategies for promoting industry certifications, teacher supports in this program, perceived costs of the program, and challenges to the program.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Elizabeth Glennie is a senior research education analyst at RTI International and is the principal investigator on the Florida Industry Certification Study. She designs and leads studies that examine the implementation and impact of U.S. educational policies on schools, teachers, and students. Many of her projects focus on factors influencing success in secondary school and access to postsecondary education for disadvantaged students. These studies have involved analyzing large national databases and data collected by states and specific intervention programs. She has developed surveys and interview protocol for students, teachers, and educational leaders.

Dr. Glennie has studied early college high schools, STEM schools, and other new models and strategies that have proliferated in North Carolina and across the country. Throughout her work, she communicates and collaborates with policymakers and service providers so that her studies can inform best practices.



## Introduction

In Florida, students can earn industry certifications in high school through programs supported by the Career and Professional Education (CAPE) Act. In 2018, as part of a study on implementation of the CAPE Act, we asked one representative in each district and public high school in the state to respond to a web-based survey with questions about industry certification program administration, resources and supports, promotional activities, policies, and costs. Eighty-one percent of Florida districts and 76 percent of high schools responded to the survey. Of those, all of the districts and 96 percent of the schools reported offering industry certification programming to students. Districts and schools responded to questions related to the benefits and challenges of offering certification programs. While almost all districts and schools recognize the overall benefit of these programs, implementation of the CAPE program poses some challenges.

## What are the challenges associated with implementing the certification programs?

We asked districts and schools, “What are the challenges associated with implementing programs so that students can obtain certifications? Respondents could choose as many items as applied from the set of responses below and could add descriptions of other challenges. Additionally, respondents expressed opinions about the program by noting whether they “strongly agree/disagree” with different statements, including statements about challenges. We recognized that perceived challenges fell into three broad categories— **Logistics**, **Staffing**, and **School Culture**.

### Logistics

- Challenges in scheduling exams
- Lack of necessary equipment and technology
- Insufficient staff time to manage certification programs

### Staffing

- Requires significant professional development
- Shortage of qualified teachers

### School Culture

- Difficulty matching students and exams
- Shifts resources from other programs
- Meets resistance from teachers
- Lack of student interest

In this brief we report the percentage who identified a challenge and those who “agree” or “strongly agree” with statements about challenges. First, we compare district and school responses. For schools, we then consider whether these perceptions differed based on school characteristics— locale, poverty level, and past certification rate.

Districts and schools both report difficulties in implementing programs in which students earn industry certifications, but they differ in what they perceive as the biggest obstacles. These differences may reflect the particular responsibilities of schools and districts.

### **Logistics can present a clear barrier.**

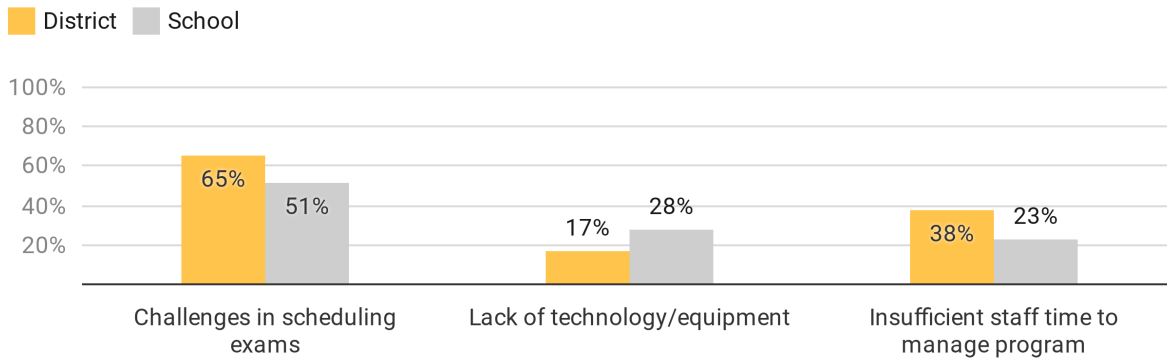
More than half of districts (65 percent) and schools (51 percent) report that scheduling exams is difficult. Difficulties with scheduling exams can arise because different industry vendors offer their own certification examinations, some certification exams require equipment or technology that may be scarce, and some exams must be taken at offsite locations. Schools and districts need to fit multiple certification examinations into their schedules with other examinations that students may take, such as end-of-course exams, SATs, or Advanced Placement tests.

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Further, some students do not pass the exam on their first attempt, and schools and districts must reschedule exam retakes. The state of Florida requires students who fail an examination wait 20 days before re-taking it. Survey respondents had concerns about the *“limit on amount of times a student can take the industry certification test during the school year,”* and pointed out that *“having delay requirements forces students to have to face failure without quick fix.”*

Inadequate time to manage certification programs is viewed as a challenge by approximately 38 percent of districts, compared with only 23 percent of schools. As with scheduling, having sufficient staff time to manage the program presents difficulties as districts may promote many certifications from multiple vendors, and CAPE is only one of many initiatives within the districts and schools. Access to equipment and technology can create a barrier. Some types of certification courses require special equipment and technology, which some schools and districts may not be able to provide or manage. One respondent pointed out, *“Prep courses often require expensive equipment (culinary, biotechnology, etc.), or computing privileges not available to teachers/students.”* Another said, *“Technical difficulties, specifically continuous updates from the companies providing the test, make it difficult for our IT department to keep up.”*

## Logistical challenges for districts and schools implementing the certification program

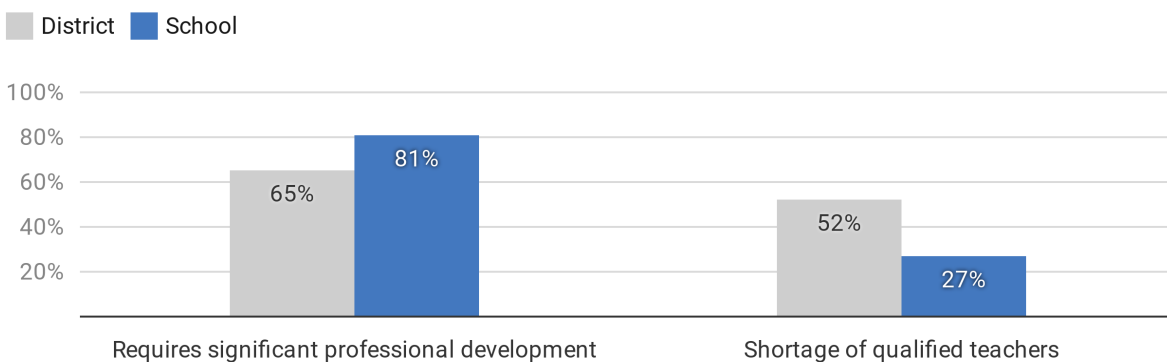


## Staffing presents challenges for both schools and districts

Leaders in schools and districts want to ensure that teachers have the qualifications needed to prepare students to take and pass industry certification exams. In another issue brief, *Administering the CAPE Act: Qualifications of and supports to Florida teachers*, we show that of the schools offering certifications, 92 percent said that teachers had to have certain qualifications to teach courses leading to certifications. Twenty-seven percent of schools and 52 percent of districts agree that a shortage of qualified teachers is an obstacle.

For schools and districts, the requirement for professional development for teachers is the greatest obstacle, with 81 percent of schools and 65 percent of districts agreeing with this statement. In another issue brief, we reported that professional development is one of the highest costs for districts and schools. Open-ended responses support this finding, with respondents noting “staffing plans/money” and “lack of materials to train teachers” can cause difficulties. Professional development for teachers can be costly in terms of expenditures associated with trainers and workshop facilitators, materials, certification licensing and renewal fees, and teacher time to attend professional development sessions.

## Staffing challenges for districts and schools implementing certification programs



## Courses leading to industry certification are not always a priority.

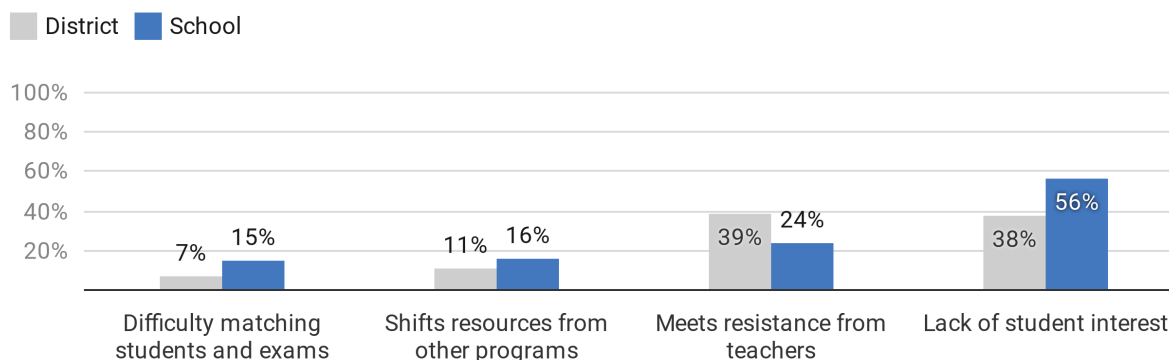
Fifty-six percent of schools report a lack of student interest as an obstacle, compared with 38 percent of districts. Districts see resistance from teachers as a greater problem than schools do (39 percent vs. 24 percent). Students and teachers may not understand the value of earning industry certifications if they do not know the ways in which earning a certification can benefit students. Also, schools must manage many competing priorities. The CAPE program is only one of the available programs for teachers and

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students, who may place a greater priority on other initiatives, such as Advanced Placement. One respondent expressed difficulty with *“getting buy in from [the] advanced program department.”* Furthermore, given the qualifications needed to teach courses leading to certifications, teachers may resist doing so because they have other priorities for their professional development.

In describing the lack of student interest, one respondent noted, *“Some students don’t understand the importance of certifications.”* Comments also suggest that student motivation is a problem, and it can be difficult to get students to complete the program and put in the additional time. One said, *“some students do not want to put the practice time in, in order to pass the exam.”* Alternatively, a student’s lack of interest may actually be related to scheduling conflicts, lack of time in the school year, and prioritizing other courses that meet graduation requirements but do not lead to certifications. One respondent noted, *“Only six period class day; not enough room for electives, so students choose not to take the classes,”* and another said that students are more focused on *“other course requirements they need for graduation.”* Students who have multiple classes and extracurricular activities, jobs, or home responsibilities may not be able to find time for this activity. One respondent commented on students’ *“lack of knowledge about what certifications are offered and how to obtain them.”* We also heard that some students *“stress over all the testing throughout the year in all courses,”* indicating that courses requiring additional testing to earn certification add to the tension students may feel.

## School culture challenges for districts and schools implementing certification programs



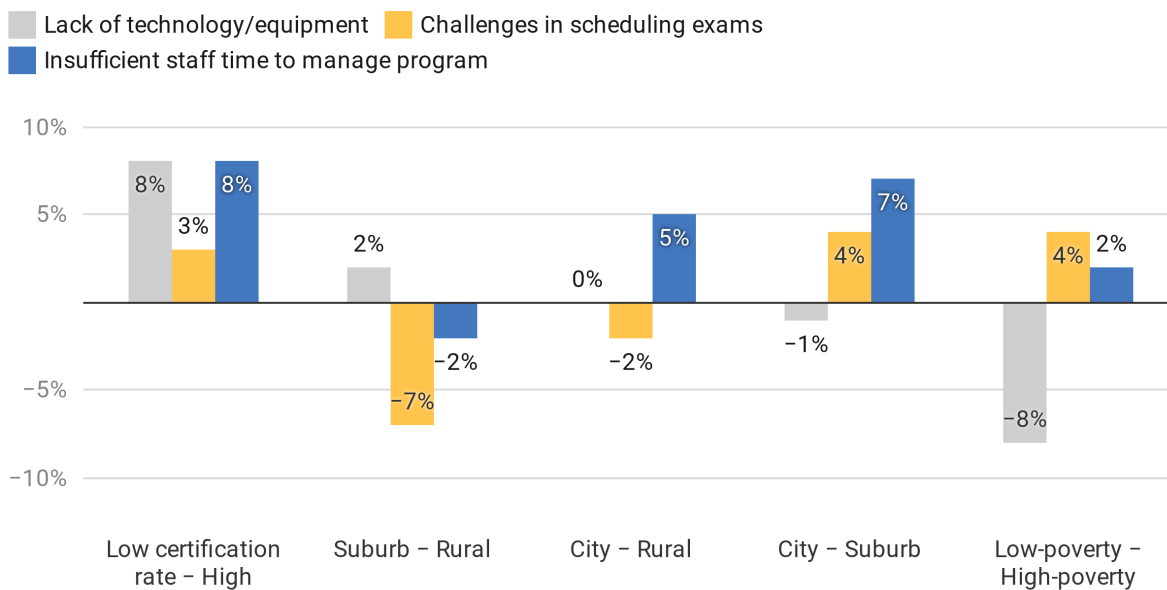
## Do perceptions of challenges differ by school characteristics?

Next, we examine school perceptions of challenges by past certification rate (low vs. high certification rate), by locale (city, suburb, rural), and by school poverty level (low-poverty vs. high-poverty). The following figures report the percentage-point differences in these perceptions between each type of school (low certification rate minus high certification rate; city minus suburb, city minus rural, suburb minus rural; low-poverty minus high-poverty).

### Low certification rate schools cited each type of logistical challenge more frequently than high certification rate schools did.

For *lack of technology* and *insufficient staff time*, the rate for low certification rate schools is 8 percentage points higher than it is for high certification rate schools. By locale, schools face similar barriers in the *lack of technology*: differences are within 2 percentage points of each other. City schools more frequently report difficulties with *insufficient staff time* than either rural or suburban schools do, and differences here are at least 5 percentage points. Suburban schools less frequently stated *scheduling exams* poses a problem than rural schools did (7 percentage points lower). As we see in a 9 point difference, higher poverty schools have concerns about lack of technology and other equipment needed for courses leading to industry certification.

### Differences in logistical challenges, by school type



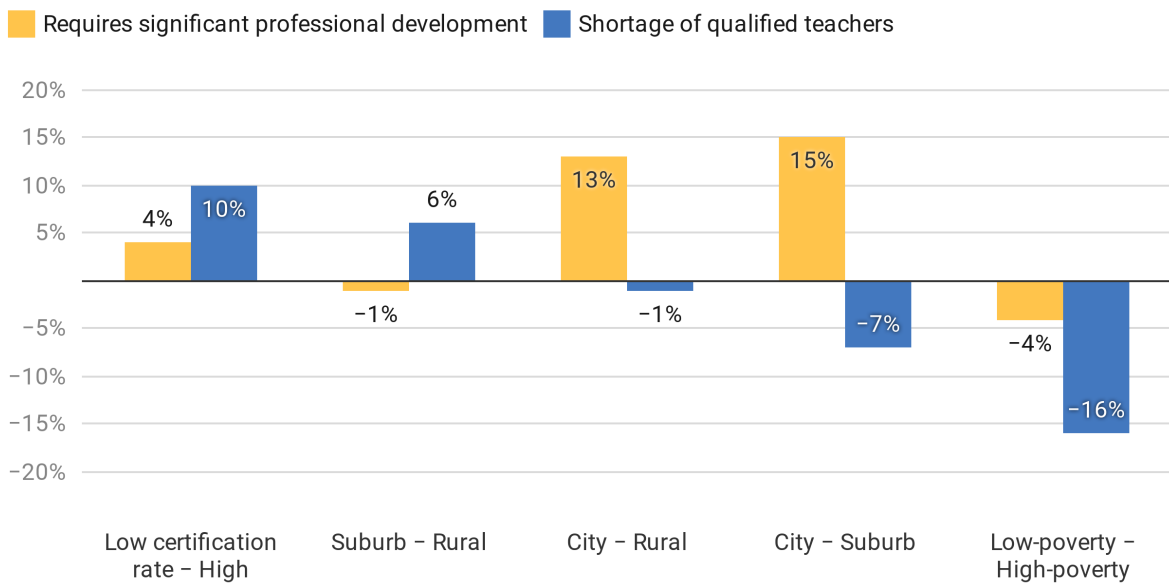
## Low-certification rate schools and high-poverty schools face greater challenges in having qualified staff.

In another issue brief for this study, specifically related to teachers, we reported that three-quarters of the responding schools and almost 90 percent of responding districts offered certification-specific professional development.

Low certification rate schools more frequently said that a *shortage of qualified teachers* is an obstacle (10 percentage-point difference) and that *professional development requirements* are a challenge (4 percentage points). By locale, the biggest differences were in the challenges with professional development. City schools more frequently cited the *need for professional development* than either suburban or rural schools (at least a 13 percentage-point difference). When comparing responses by school poverty level, low-poverty schools listed a *shortage of qualified teachers* less frequently than high poverty schools did (16 percentage-points lower).

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### Differences in perceptions of staff challenges, by school type





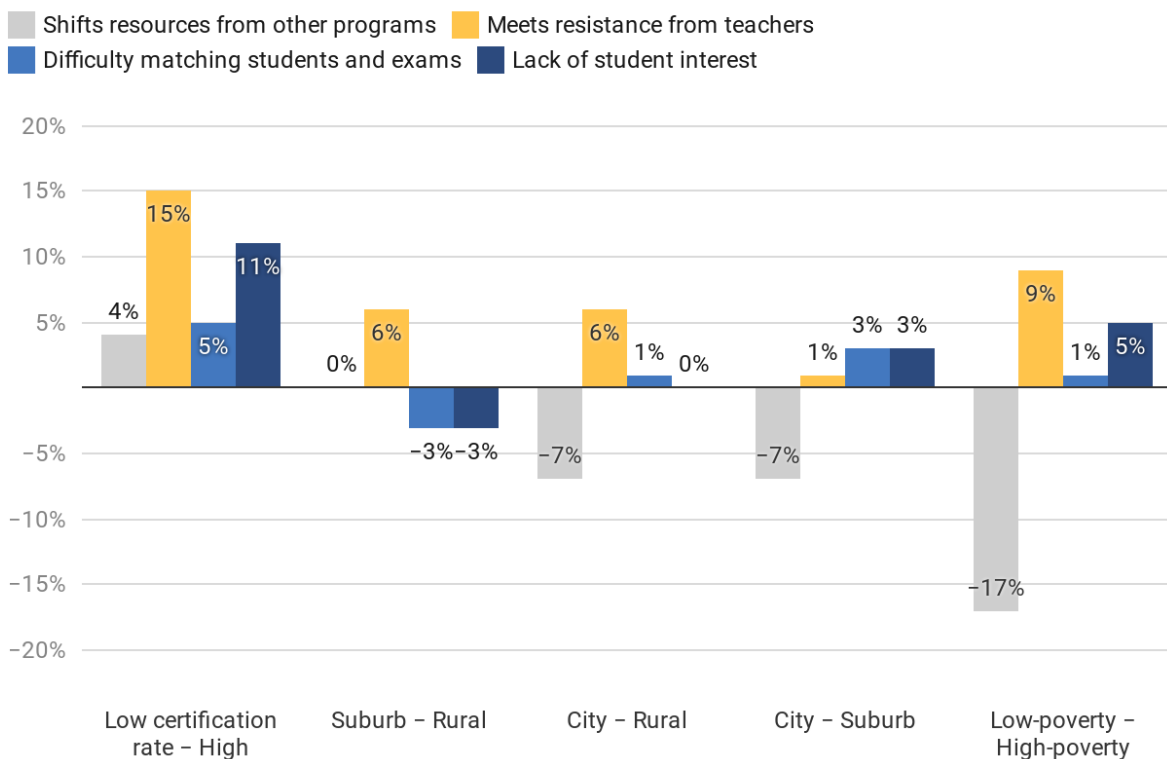
## School culture challenges highlight a difference of values.

Comparisons of low certification rate and high certification rate schools show that the biggest differences in perceptions of cultural challenges are meets *resistance from teachers* and *lack of student interest* (differences are greater than 10 percentage points). **Students and teachers in low certification rate schools may not fully understand the value of earning industry certifications or may encounter other barriers such as scheduling and other course requirements.**

By locale, the greatest difference is in perceptions of *shifting resources from other programs*, where city schools stated this problem less frequently than either suburban or rural schools did (7 percentage-point difference for both). Both city and suburb schools more frequently reported resistance from teachers as a problem (6 percentage-point difference for both). **Perhaps teachers in rural areas place greater value on promoting certifications than their counterparts in suburb and rural schools do.**

By poverty level, we see the greatest difference with *shifting resources*, with the frequency of this response is 17 percentage points higher for high-poverty schools than for low-poverty schools. Low-poverty schools more frequently cite meeting resistance from teachers (9 percentage-point difference) and *lack of student interest* (5 percentage-point difference) than low-poverty schools do. **In high-poverty schools, teachers and students may more easily see the value of industry certifications for students.**

### Differences in cultural challenges, by school type



## CONCLUSION

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Almost all of the schools and districts in this study do offer industry certifications and agree that these opportunities can benefit students. However, the complex nature of earning certifications leads to implementation difficulties for districts and schools in terms of logistics, staffing, and school culture. These obstacles may inhibit offering a full range of certifications and prevent all students from having access to or taking advantage of this opportunity.

### District and school challenges

*With logistics, scheduling exams presents the greatest challenge.* Multiple vendors offer certification exams, so schools and districts need to coordinate with multiple organizations. Scheduling certification exams is more difficult than working with the state Department of Education to schedule all end-of-course exams or with the College Board to schedule all Advanced Placement exams. Additionally, scheduling exams must account for the fact that some examinations require access to particular technology, and students must take some exams off-campus.

*With staffing, professional development requirements are the greatest challenge for schools and districts.* In most cases, teachers of the courses leading to certifications must have that certification themselves. Teachers then need to maintain credentials through ongoing professional development. Therefore, increasing the number of certifications offered at a school requires investing in professional development for teachers of each certification.

*The primary cultural challenges of implementing CAPE Act programs are student interest and teacher buy-in.* A lack of student interest may reflect scheduling conflicts, a focus on graduation requirements, and feelings of stress over testing. Resistance from teachers could result from their feeling unable to assume additional administrative responsibilities for coordinating exams. Competing demands across programs within schools require making difficult choices about resource allocation, which may displease teachers in other departments. *School leaders may be able to address cultural barriers by working with students and teachers to help them understand the benefits of earning industry-recognized certifications.*

### Different perceptions of challenges by school type

The challenges explored in this study affected all school types, but we found some differences by schools' past certification rates and poverty level.

Low certification rate schools more frequently reported all types of challenges than high certification rate schools did. For schools with low past certification rates, their relative challenges are broader-based, and they may need more overall support to expand their certification opportunities.

Higher-poverty schools may have greater student interest than lower-poverty schools do, but these schools face other barriers (lack of qualified teachers, technology/resources) that result in a lack of access to certification programming.

**Even with these difficulties, schools and districts do find ways to participate in the CAPE program. By identifying the key obstacles and working to resolve them, educational leaders can expand certification offerings and give more students the opportunity to earn certifications.**

## END NOTES

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### Overall Notes

Results reported in this issue brief include school survey data collected through the [Florida Industry Certification Study](#) and are based on the schools that offer certifications.

### Definitions

Poverty level: percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

- High-poverty - More than 75% (83 schools)
- Middle-poverty - 26-75% (383 schools)
- Low-poverty - Less than or equal to 25% (58 schools)

Locale:

- City (136 schools)
- Suburb (258 schools)
- Rural (130 schools)

Past certification rate: percentage of 9th graders in academic year 2013-14 who earned certifications by academic year 2016-17. This is the year before the survey when they should have been in 12th grade.

- Low certification rate - Less than 10% (151 schools)
- Middle certification rate - 10-25% (237 schools)
- High certification rate - More than 25% (136 schools)

### Sources

[Florida Industry Certification Study](#)

[Florida Department of Education, Education Data Warehouse](#)