

**Faces of Miami-Dade County Public High Schools:
An Intimate Perspective on the Struggle for Education
(A Series)**

Article I: An Introduction to the Problem

Desmond Wilson, 14, is a freshman at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School in Miami-Dade County (currently a C school). He does not attend his home school, Miami Edison High (currently an F school), because he thinks there are too many bad influences there. Still, he plays football for the school, because Turner Tech, the alternative he chose for a better chance at an education, does not offer sports.

Gina Guerrier, 17, is a senior at Turner Tech. She does not get along with her mom. Her older sister had a baby while in high school, and now Gina's mom is constantly on her back about making sure she doesn't do the same. Gina often takes care of her sister's baby while she works and goes to school, and her parents work as well. Gina says she feels like a teenage mother, even though she wasn't the one who made the mistake. She hopes to go on to college in the fall and study to become a pediatric nurse.

Johanna Tejeda, 14, is a freshman at Turner Tech. She chose Turner Tech because she is terrified of attending her home school, North Miami High (currently an F school); friends always tell her there are constant fights at North Miami High and cops patrolling the campus. Johanna says the FCAT makes her nervous. She worries about whether she will pass it next year.

These are just some of the things that young students in Miami-Dade County are dealing with and thinking about on a daily basis.

According to the reports that appear frequently in news outlets across the state, Florida lags behind most of the nation in high school graduation rates, preparing students for college or careers after high school, and decreasing drop-out rates.

As reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Florida's graduation success ranked 43rd among the states, with a 66.7 percent graduation rate during the 2002-2003 school year. A 2005 study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pegged Florida's graduation rate at 57.5 percent, compared to a national rate of 69.6 percent.

Former Florida Education Commissioner John Winn reported that 32,707 students gave up on high school in Florida during the 2005-2006 school year, compared to 27,172 the year before. Winn estimates that nearly 70 percent of the increase in drop-outs came from South Florida schools, primarily Miami-Dade and Broward County, the two largest school districts in South Florida.

South Florida's problems are unique, education experts say, because of several distinctive factors that characterize the community. The news media, along with some teachers and school administrators, point to poverty, cultural differences and the increasing number of students in South Florida who speak English as a second language as reasons for the dismal graduation rates in the region, especially in Miami-Dade County, which currently claims the largest percentage of drop-outs in South Florida.

The growing number of ESOL students in Miami-Dade County makes it increasingly difficult to meet Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) demands from the state, says Miami Palmetto Senior High School counselor Clifford LaGuerre. Students like Kettlie Pyram, a junior at Miami Palmetto, can't pass the FCAT because they do not understand what they are reading.

Kettlie arrived to the United States from Haiti just last year. She is having trouble in all of her classes because her English skills are not strong. When she received tutoring

in biology last year, she passed the class. She's a smart girl, says LaGuerre. She just needs a little more help than other students because of the language barrier.

Many students in Miami-Dade County find themselves in similar situations. Still, students like Kettlie are assessed based on the same standards as native English-speaking students.

"FCAT is difficult for native English speakers," says Martin Reid, principal at Miami Southridge Senior High School, noting that the test is doubly challenging for students who have not grown up speaking English.

In addition to the problems language barriers create, poverty is another huge factor in Miami-Dade County's educational difficulties. A September 2006 article by *The Miami Herald* reported that South Florida has a service-oriented economy providing primarily low-skill, low-income jobs. Further, South Florida generally, and Miami in particular, are near the bottom of the poverty ladder. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Miami poverty rate is at 28.3 percent.

More generally, Florida ranks fourth in the nation in numbers of poor children. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that 17 percent, or 682,759, of Florida's children live in poor families.

Consequently, about 70 percent of the students at William H. Turner Technical Arts High School in Miami-Dade County (currently a C school) are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches. At Miami Southridge Senior High School (currently an F school), 58 percent of students are eligible. By comparison, only 21 percent of students at Miami Palmetto High School (Currently a B school) are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches.

Turner Tech principal Valmarie Rhoden believes the poverty issue can be overcome with “nurturing and caring school climates.” Still, she acknowledges that poverty is a real issue, especially at her school, where she says many of the students are practically raising themselves with little or no adult supervision because their parents often hold multiple jobs.

Turner Tech is located in an area where the median annual household income is about \$22,000, according to the Public School Review, a non-profit service that provides detailed profiles of U.S. public schools and the communities that surround them.

Turner Tech also has a large number of students of Haitian descent. Many are only learning proper English at school, says Rhoden. In addition, many are from low-income families, and their parents often do not encourage them to read.

The school is 61 percent Black, 35 percent Hispanic, 2 percent white and 1 percent other, according to the school’s latest fact sheet.

Turner Tech language arts teacher Julianna Marcus says she is the only black parent at the library with her child on Saturdays.

“You know, a lot of poor people are black, and we don’t take our kids to the library,” she says. “We don’t take them to the bookstores.”

It is a sad cycle, she explains, but it isn’t due to their race or because they don’t want to encourage reading. Instead, black mothers often have to work two jobs because there is no father in the home, leaving the mother little time for library visits.

Marcus says another source of the problem is the large number of very young mothers, those who became pregnant as teenagers. These parents are not focused on education, so their children grow up and follow the same cycle with their own children.

“How do you stop that?” Marcus says. “There’s really no way. I don’t know.”

Marcus, along with co-workers Marta Valdes (health science and vision care assisting), Tombi Bell (physical education), Axel Mendoza (Spanish) and Principal Rhoden agree that urban areas like the one where Turner Tech is located have a special challenge when it comes to achievement levels.

Although they agree with the accountability offered by the FCAT, the governor’s A+ plan and the No Child Left Behind Act, these educators and administrators believe labeling the schools and the children who attend them as “A” or “F” is simply too harsh.

Mendoza, who has taught Spanish at Turner Tech since the school opened in 1993, argues that the test is biased and often unfair for students from low-income black communities.

“I mean, you can look at the lower income schools in this area,” he says. “It’s Norland, Edison. They’re always F. MAST Academy, Coral Reef High School, you know, all high-income areas. They are always A or B.”

“Those [parents] with higher income have more time to spend with the kids,” he adds. “They have computers at home. They have more resources than the low-income kids. You can tell the difference.”

Howard Weiner, the principal at Miami Palmetto Senior High School (currently a B school in Miami-Dade County), has a different perspective.

“I think we have a misconception that students that come from low-income homes can’t achieve,” he says. “I think folks who value education, regardless of what their economic status is, can succeed.”

Across the board, teachers and administrators at lower income and low-achieving schools like Turner Tech and Miami Southridge say economic factors do not make it impossible for their students to succeed, but they do present bigger challenges.

Rhoden says affluent schools generally attract better teachers and more supplies. More importantly, affluent schools have affluent children who have been exposed.

“Exposure is what our poor children don’t have,” she says. “If I grew up in a home where at the dinner table we talk about the stock market, and we talk about what’s happening around the world, and I can travel there during the summer or my grandpa from Lithuania can come and spend the summer with me and tell me about it...my dad, when he goes on business trips, sometimes we go with him, and we go to Italy or we go to the museum or art shows and all of that...just being exposed,” she explains.

Exposure to culture and the world around them – or the lack of such experiences - - can make a difference in a child’s education, she says.

Miami Southridge Senior High School Principal Martin Reid adds that while low-income status does not take students completely out of the race, it does lower their chances of beating the odds.

Miami Southridge, like Turner Tech, is located in a low-income area in Miami-Dade County, a town called Cutler Bay. With a population that is 48 percent Hispanic, 39 percent Black (largely of Haitian descent) and only 11 percent White, Miami Southridge faces some of the same obstacles Turner Tech faces: the language barrier, fewer resources and less home support for the students.

“Whereas I can sit down at home with my kid and provide that academic support that he needs, a kid in a lower economic status, where mom is working two jobs and dad

is nowhere to be found, he can still achieve and do well, but it helps,” Reid says. “It helps when you’re coming from a household where you have support.”

Weiner, principal at Miami Palmetto, says educators have a responsibility to advocate for those students whose parents are not effective advocates.

Comparing his school’s challenges to those in higher-income area schools, Miami Southridge’s Principal Reid often pointed to its nearest high-income peer, Miami Palmetto.

This school is located in the Village of Pinecrest in southeastern Miami-Dade County. Here, the average household annual income is about \$87,000, compared to about \$47,000 in Cutler Bay, according to the Public School Review. The school’s population is 40 percent White, 34 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Black and 5 percent Asian.

The atmosphere at Miami Palmetto clearly differs from that of Turner Tech or Miami Southridge. At Miami Palmetto, students stroll into the main office to get late passes, sipping on Starbuck’s frappuccinos. They wear brand name clothing and shoes.

At Turner Tech, many students have only five minutes to cram down their free breakfast because they are bused in from so far away that they arrive on campus just a few minutes before classes begin. Busing keeps them from having to attend their home schools, which may be even more dangerous and low-achieving, like Miami Senior High School, North Miami High, and Miami Edison High, said by many students to have substantial discipline and achievement problems. At Miami Southridge, there were no fancy drinks or fancy clothes either.

At Miami Palmetto on the day of the homecoming dance, dozens of mothers walked into the main office during the late morning hours, wearing their gym tights and tank tops, asking to take their daughters out early for dance preparations.

At Turner Tech a few weeks earlier, a distressed mother complained to the security guards that she has had to miss work three times already this semester. She has been called down to the school because one of the students continues to harass her daughter.

At Miami Southridge, in early October, Principal Reid has to cancel a meeting. He has to meet with a private investigator regarding an incident that had occurred the week before on school grounds.

Not everything is bad at Turner Tech and Miami Southridge, and neither is every Miami Palmetto student's situation perfect. However, the general differences are obvious.

Teachers and administrators express their frustrations with the state's insistence on labeling schools with one letter, reducing a school's entire personality, its achievements or lack thereof, to one simplistic measure. It is more complicated than that, they insist.

Teachers and administrators in Miami-Dade County are trying. They are thinking of solutions. They are working hard, dedicating their time and resources to improving education and students' futures.

Low-income students have and are achieving, Miami Palmetto's Principal Weiner says. Graduates of C, D, and F schools have become successful and productive members of society, he adds.

Miami Southridge's Principal Reid feels that success stories can give hope to struggling youths everywhere, in Miami-Dade County and beyond.

Turner Tech Principal Valmarie Rhoden then asks, "Where is the ministry in administration?"

Her question is in great need of an answer, she says. Schools and communities must work together to find solutions to the problems education is facing in Miami-Dade County and around the country, she concludes.