

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

**Article VI: Finding Solutions**

With all the problems Miami-Dade County's education system faces, it might seem that finding solutions is impossible. With a population representing so many different cultures, speaking dozens of different languages and working primarily in a service-oriented economy full of low-skill, low paying jobs, how can the educational system cater to each student and find a way to meet so many different needs?

Despite the challenges, educators and administrators in Miami-Dade County are working toward finding solutions. B, C, D and F schools alike are working hard to improve, to provide each child with the same chance at a successful future.

At William H. Turner Technical Arts High School, currently a C school in Miami-Dade County, students are required to read every day for 30 minutes during their homeroom class period. During this time, seniors who have yet to pass the FCAT for the graduation requirement go to the cafeteria, where they receive extra tutoring in the areas they need most. Tutors are also available after school. More reading specialists have been hired to provide extra assistance to students struggling with FCAT reading.

Teachers like Julianna Marcus, a language arts teacher at Turner Tech, are thinking outside the box to find new strategies that will spark interest in their students.

This year Marcus has composed several FCAT songs, using the beats and similar lyrics from songs that are popular among the students. She has also created songs to help the children learn other language arts related material in the classroom. The songs help them to memorize different FCAT strategies and writing techniques, she explains. They make it fun for them.

One of the songs, for example was modeled after a popular hip-hop song by Kelly Rowland. The chorus goes like this—“Told ya’ll I was gonna bump like this. Ya’ll didn’t think that I could bump like this. Said I told ya’ll I was gonna bump like this. Turn around then I make it jump like this.”

The kids in Ms. Marcus’s fifth period English class produce the beats to the song with their hands pounding against their desks as they sing loudly—“Told ya’ll I was gonna cite like this. Ya’ll didn’t think that I could cite like this. Said I Told ya’ll I was gonna cite like this. Citation, citation- citation, citation. I put the tile in quotation, quotation - quotation, quotation. After that? Page number, page number- page number, page number!”

“Incorporating music, incorporating dance, incorporating things that they enjoy will make the medicine go down a little smoother because we do have to take this FCAT pill,” Marcus says.

Even Marta Valdes, a health science and vision care assisting teacher at Turner Tech, teaches her students special reading strategies every day. These include highlighting important parts of passages, reciprocal reading during which the students read passages and then ask each other questions about what they’ve read, and analyzing different articles for main ideas.

Moreover, students at Turner Tech all complete a research paper throughout their four years, called “the capstone.” Because Turner is a vocational school, every student is part of a specific career academy. During their freshman year, each student begins work on a paper in his or her chosen field. By the time they graduate, they are expected to have perfected the paper, Principal Valmarie Rhoden explains.

Turner students also complete career portfolios. Valdes says these teach them how to write resumes, fill out job applications and request letters of recommendation.

Work-related behaviors, like complying with attendance, interacting with teachers and supervisors, using good judgment, and displaying initiative, are required at Turner Tech every day. Many of the students say these behaviors help them to know how to act in and out of the classroom and keep them disciplined.

Rhoden grins excitedly as she explains that she's had internship supervisors tell her Turner's students often act more maturely and do better work than many of the adults at the job.

The fully equipped computer lab at Turner Tech also helps students who may not have access to computers at home. In addition, the school has a parent center equipped with computers and desks. This way, parents can come in and learn about different technology, making them better able to help their children with homework at home, Valdes explains.

There is a schoolwide effort to get parents more involved in the students' education. Rhoden says she takes several hours out of her day each Monday to call every parent and staff member to rehash the entire week before. She gives parents tasks to make sure they are on top of their children's progress. There are an estimated 1,800 students at Turner Tech, but Rhoden feels that at least a minute-long, weekly phone call to each is necessary to keep them involved.

Further, the school is really pushing for the professional development of teachers, says Spanish teacher Axel Mendoza. For instance, during the summer of 2007, he completed a one-week internship at Doral Academy Charter High School in Miami-Dade

County, where he learned many skills that will help him improve his own classroom at Turner.

“You never actually stop learning,” Mendoza says. “It’s a process.”

Many of the teachers and students at Turner Tech describe Rhoden as a wonderful principal who works hard and always keeps morale high. With her unstinting support and encouragement, the faculty and students say they feel they can accomplish anything. Mendoza says the school feels confident that it can raise that C and really prepare the children for brilliant futures.

The faculty’s determination stems from Rhoden’s support, Marcus says.

“When we fail and we fall, she’s always lifting us up. She brings the morale of the school up, and I think that’s what makes us achieve in spite of our obstacles.”

When she worked at Miami Central Senior High (currently an F school), Marcus remembers the administration constantly belittling the faculty and staff. Teachers often lost their motivation to teach, and the students suffered, she explains.

Rhoden’s philosophy is that everyone in her school is an educator, from the cafeteria personnel to the security guards. She encourages teachers to get to know their students intimately and find ways to improve on their weak areas. Teachers at Turner Tech know that failure is not an option, she says.

“This is an A school that the state labels a C,” Rhoden says with a frustrated look. “We have a 91 percent graduation rate. That really came from a community of adults and children that are committed.”

Although Turner Tech is traditionally a vocational school, Marcus says, approximately 98 percent of Turner graduates go to college.

Rhoden and several of the teachers at Turner Tech agree that the greatest challenges to achievement in their school and the county at large lie in the language barrier, keeping the students engaged in learning, a lack of parent involvement and budget cuts.

FCAT grades are based on the learning gains made by the students during one year's time. Marcus explains that it is difficult to bring up a child who has never spoken English. Because of the large ESL population at Turner Tech, this can really bring you down, she says.

Rhoden says the FCAT science test also brought the school down this year. The section counted for the school's grade, but it did not count toward students' graduation requirements. Because of that, many students didn't even try to succeed on the test, she explains.

Parent involvement – or the lack of it – is also a huge issue, the teachers say. The more a child's parent is involved in his or her education, the more likely the child is to succeed. It is not about having money or time, Marcus explains. It is about instilling the right values in the children and making education a priority in the home.

Although many of the students at Turner Tech come from low-income families, their parents often are very strict about education because they know what life is like without it, Marcus says. This helps many students at Turner Tech succeed despite the many barriers they face, such as low income and resources, the need to help raise their own siblings, living in bad neighborhoods and having little home support, often because their parents either don't speak English or work multiple jobs.

Valdes explains that budget cuts have really hurt the school in 2007. This year, the school admitted more students into their freshman class than the county allows, she says, and because of this, school funding was heavily cut by several thousand dollars. This does not make any sense, she explains with a puzzled expression, as more students would actually mean the school needs more money. But because the school failed to comply with the quota of students they are allowed to enroll each year, money was actually taken away.

In previous years, students at Turner Tech had all received calculators, agendas, and booklets teaching them how to cite and write research papers, Valdes says. This year, they might not be able to provide the same incentives to the students.

At Miami Southridge Senior High School, Principal Martin Reid, who became the school's principal this year, is also making some changes designed to give the school's students a better education.

Reid believes in creating a global society where the needs of all students are met and achievement gaps are closed. He is currently putting his focus on creating a more academic environment at Miami Southridge where students are taught to take ownership of their learning by emphasizing academics and post-secondary education to students. Cooperative or group learning is being incorporated into the classrooms, and more technology is being used, such as computers and smart boards.

Reid says he is spending a lot of his time at Southridge preaching to students about working towards their futures. He is talking to freshman about college and explaining that they must start earning high grades from the time they enter high school if they want pursue post-secondary education.

“If you’re thinking about college as a freshman, you’re going to govern yourself accordingly,” he says. “You’re going to realize that there’s a connection between my school work and my GPA, which colleges look at. You’re going to realize that I really need to make sure I pass the FCAT. Not only on the FCAT, but get a good score on the PSAT as well as the SAT and the ACT. It all connects, you know.”

If kids have goals, Reid explains, they will work towards them. This is why he is taking so much time now to talk to his students.

Reid says his school has also started offering a tremendous amount of tutoring to help those students who are struggling with the FCAT.

In addition, Reid has initiated “Future Fridays.” On these days, any student who shows him a college acceptance letter, a military acceptance letter, a vocational school acceptance letter or even proof of registration for the SAT or ACT can wear shorts that day. This is a big deal for students who are never allowed to wear shorts at school, Reid explains.

He is trying to communicate to his students that they have options at the end of their four years at Miami Southridge, and they must plan accordingly for those different options.

“We want to make sure that you [the students] have a focus and that you’re thinking about the future,” Reid says. “That life doesn’t stop June 1 or 2, when you graduate. I want them to focus on their future which is post-secondary education.”

Faculty like Sofia DaSilva, a world history, government and economics teacher at Miami Southridge, and Paul Lobeck, a film, debate and TV production teacher at the school, are already noticing a difference in morale and attitude throughout the school.

DaSilva said Miami Southridge has created a great advanced placement program to help give the students a more rigorous curriculum. The school policy now allows any student who wants to take on the challenge of an AP course to enroll, without teacher approval. This new initiative is taking place at the other schools as well and is allowing lower-level students to learn side by side their higher-level classmates, which helps them learn more.

There are many wonderful, dedicated teachers at Southridge who are really trying to teach the students, DaSilva explains, but when the school became an F, they lost a lot of their honors and AP students to the magnet schools in the area. This makes it more difficult to bring the low-level students up because they have fewer high-level classmates to help them, she says.

To deal with high drop-out rates, the school is involved in a “Drop Back In” program through Miami Palmetto Senior High School’s night school. The program allows students who have already dropped out to take classes to complete their high school diploma.

At Miami Palmetto Senior High School, teachers are running an FCAT academy for low-performing students on Saturdays.

Another important initiative at Miami Palmetto is a new early intervention program being run this year by Dr. Clifford LaGuerre, a counselor at the school. The program’s primary goals are to intervene before at-risk students (those in the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile) disengage from school and to improve these students’ transitions from one grade level to the next, LaGuerre says.



The program is based on four main objectives, he explains. The critical academic skills objective focuses on tutoring and credit recovery, which helps students to find ways to catch up on credits they might have missed by failing classes. Some of the remedies for this are summer school and work-experience which allow students to earn several credits in a short amount of time. The character development objective focuses on the concepts of building values, purpose and self-respect in students. Next, the caring adults component is designed to provide adult role-modeling and mentoring for the students. Finally, the coping skills component is all about fostering problem-solving skills and teaching students to manage difficult social situations, such as a death in the family, divorce and disagreements between different social clicks at school.

Turner Tech's Principal Rhoden argues that Miami-Dade County faces probably the greatest challenge in closing the achievement gap that it has seen in quite a few years.

She believes a real challenge exists in that school leaders know how to run the schools, but are lacking when it comes to finding ways to close the achievement gap and work with teachers to ensure that they are giving their best to the students. She also feels students must be taught how to respect each other, and exhibit good manners and etiquette in their interactions with others.

"...I don't think that the real template for that has come out yet," she says.

Miami Southridge's Reid says the education system in Miami-Dade County is heading in the right direction, in the sense that the system is ensuring the schools meet the needs of all students and that there are forms of accountability.

His only concern is that the accountability offered by the FCAT and Jeb Bush's A+ Plan is unnecessarily harsh. He fears that if teachers and administrators perceive the accountability measures as extreme, it will drive others away from the profession.

Reid believes the county is heading for improvement with its recent emphasis on advanced academics, attendance and parental involvement.

"I believe these are key factors that can push our school system to the next level," he says.

Miami Palmetto Senior High School Principal Howard Weiner calls himself "the eternal optimist." He believes the state of education is probably in far better shape today than it has ever been before.

The biggest challenges the county and the state at large are facing is that "our friends in Tallahassee and Washington keep asking us to perform many, many duties," he says. Weiner's biggest concern is that they are not providing the schools with the adequate resources or funding to perform these duties.

Across the board, teachers and administrators in Miami-Dade County are frustrated. They say they receive more orders from the county and the state every day, with little financial assistance to carry them out. They believe that achievement standards are continually changing, making it almost impossible to reach them. They say the FCAT is putting immense pressure on students, to the point where many are giving up, while also robbing them of the culture that comes from learning traditional pieces of literature and poetry, and taking away crucial class time. Further, they argue, the FCAT grade system degrades schools and communities by labeling them as failures.

Furthermore, they are concerned that schools are becoming more and more segregated as higher-income and magnet schools take away a large percentage of those higher-performing students who could help lower-performing students achieve, also making it more difficult to meet FCAT standards.

Despite the obstacles, the teachers and administrators at these schools say they are working endlessly to improve the education they offer and the communities that they help build.

With many of the new initiatives that are being implemented by the schools to improve achievement, Miami-Dade County Public High Schools are making strides towards correcting a lot of the problems they face today, and administrators like Valmarie Rhoden, Howard Weiner and Martin Reid say they are hopeful for the future of education in the county and the country at large.

“It’s the whole village that raises the children,” says Turner Tech language arts teacher Marcus.

Teachers and administrators say the schools need more parent and community involvement, more home support, more money. They need more support from the government and less conflicting demands. They require equal attention, whether they are situated in low-income areas or high-income areas. They need more role models, more mentors, better trained leaders.

In addition, students need to know someone cares. They need to be made aware that they matter. They need to be given self-confidence and pushed harder.

“Children don’t care what you know until they know that you care,” says LaGuerre, the counselor at Miami Palmetto.

The goal is to meet the needs of every student, to ensure that every child receives an adequate education and becomes a contributing member of society, teachers and administrators explain. Every one must make this their priority. It cannot be done by the schools alone, they insist.

“Every child, a graduate.” That is Rhoden’s slogan.

The community must work together to make this more than just a slogan and into a reality, she says.

Principal Weiner of Miami Palmetto has one piece of advice.

“The challenges are so far greater than what happens inside the school that it really goes to what happens outside the school. So my advice to my colleagues is just to continue to do what they feel is right, to be as vigilant as they possibly can, and always make the decisions that are in the best interest of the kids.”