



A Union of Professionals

Miami-Dade School Improvement Zone

Despite gains made through the Zone Schools Initiative, a joint effort between UTD and Dade County Public Schools, funding ceased to be available to continue the process effective June 2008. The related longer school day and year, professional development as well as the related salary incentives were rescinded due to district budget constraints.

Introduction

In recent years, many large urban school districts have implemented a targeted intervention strategy to increase achievement in their lowest-performing schools. New York City once had the Chancellor's District, Chicago has Fresh Start schools and Miami has the Zone schools.

Started during the 2004-05 school year, Miami's School Improvement Zone is made up of 39 schools within the Miami-Dade County Public School System (MDCPS). The districtwide Zone schools all have experienced chronic low academic performance. These schools now implement special programs and services aimed at boosting student achievement.

Characteristics of Zone schools

- Thirty-nine schools within eight feeder patterns make up the Zone school district. There are 20 elementary, 11 middle and eight high schools. The Zone schools serve about 45,000 of Miami-Dade's 362,000 students.
- Zone schools are characterized by a high student mobility rate. Approximately 40 percent of students in Zone schools are in different schools from one year to the next.
- There are 3,600 teachers in the Zone schools, and 21,000 teachers overall in the Miami-Dade school district.
- Schools were selected to be part of the Zone based on low test scores for three consecutive years and leadership capacity at the school. Zone schools represent all geographic areas of the city.

How do Zone schools differ from other schools?

- **Extended school day and year.** The school day is one hour longer and the school year is 10 days longer. Extra time each day is spent on small class tutoring in reading or math for students that have not met standards on the statewide test and on enrichment activities for those students who have.
- **Additional compensation.** Teachers in Zone schools are paid 20 percent more than their non-Zone counterparts, in exchange for the additional days and hours worked and the requirement that they participate in additional professional development beyond the workday.
- **Mandated common reading curriculum.** All Zone elementary schools use Houghton Mifflin's Soar to Success and Early Intervention reading programs. All secondary schools use Scholastic's Read 180.

- **Intensive small group instruction** for students scoring at the lowest levels on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), Florida’s accountability assessment, and for those retained in grade 3.
- **Block scheduling** in middle and high schools so that students who score low on state tests participate in two reading and/or two math blocks.
- **Site based, job-embedded professional development for teachers.** Teachers in Zone schools are required to complete 56 professional development hours per year outside the regular school day, as opposed to the 24 hours required of non-Zone school teachers. Each Zone school is required to have a professional development plan, created by a professional development team that includes a reading leader, the principal or assistant principal, a union representative at the school and six other members elected by the teachers. This team is responsible for identifying the professional development necessary to support the school’s instructional needs.
- **Professional development for principals.** The district offers leadership academies for Zone principals, emphasizing instructional strategies and literacy. One-year internships shadowing strong veteran principals are also available for principals of Zone schools, and some Zone schools have adopted co-principal models.

Innovations

Based on research indicating that students who have been retained at least once by third grade will not graduate from high school, the Zone schools target interventions to this group of students. In 2004, there were 800 such students in the Zone schools. To address this challenge, district psychologists and social workers were enlisted to compile case histories and diagnostic profiles of each student. The children were then grouped together for mandatory after-school tutoring. The tutoring providers started out as a hodgepodge of community based organizations that had previously provided after-school care. Now, the Zone schools prescribe the curriculum, materials and schedules to be used by all after-school tutoring programs serving students in Zone schools.

The Role of the United Teachers of Dade

The United Teachers of Dade (UTD), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is the teachers union representing teachers in MDCPS, including teachers at the Zone schools. In 2004, UTD and the MDCPS negotiated a memorandum of understanding that would provide for the unique teaching and learning conditions warranted in the Zone schools. It provides for:

- the Zone schools’ longer school day and year, and the extra compensation for the additional hours;
- the transfer of teaching staff into and out of the Zone schools in a way that incorporates teacher choice, seniority and the instructional needs of the Zone schools;
- collaborative planning time for teaching and learning; and
- data-driven professional development, including the provision of a professional development team and professional development plan at each school site.

UTD also worked with the district in allowing for the implementation of a uniform curriculum. For many years, local autonomy had been very important in Miami schools.

Schools had been allowed to choose their own textbooks and curriculum. Although this was popular, there also was a realization that in a district with 40 percent student mobility, there were definite drawbacks to this local autonomy.

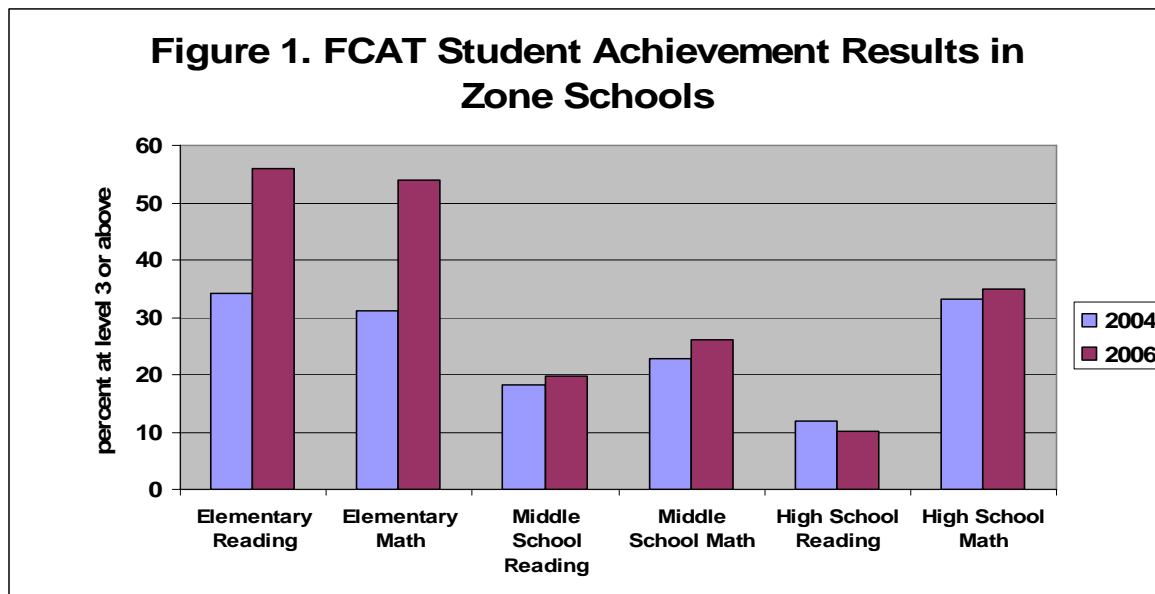
One staff member of UTD is a full-time dedicated liaison to the Zone schools. And, the UTD worked with the national AFT to provide professional development to Zone schools through the national union’s Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) program. ER&D translates educational research into instructional practices through its teacher-delivered courses on reading and math instruction, classroom management, etc.

Student Achievement Results

The Zone school district was established during the 2004-05 school year; therefore, test scores from 2004 are the baseline scores to be compared with test scores from 2005 and 2006, the years in which the Zone schools functioned as a district with specific interventions and services.

Elementary Zone Schools

In the 20 elementary Zone schools, the percentage of students receiving a 3 or above* on the FCAT rose 22 points in reading for third-graders, from 34 percent to 56 percent, and rose 23 points in math, from 31 percent to 54 percent. In comparison, scores for third-graders in all of Dade County (including the Zone schools) rose 14 percentage points in reading and 13 percentage points in math during this two-year period.



Secondary Zone Schools

Success has been more modest in Zone secondary schools. From 2004 to 2006, the percentage of eighth-graders in Zone schools scoring at 3 or above in reading rose 1.4 percentage points. In math, this number rose 3.1 percentage points during the two year period.

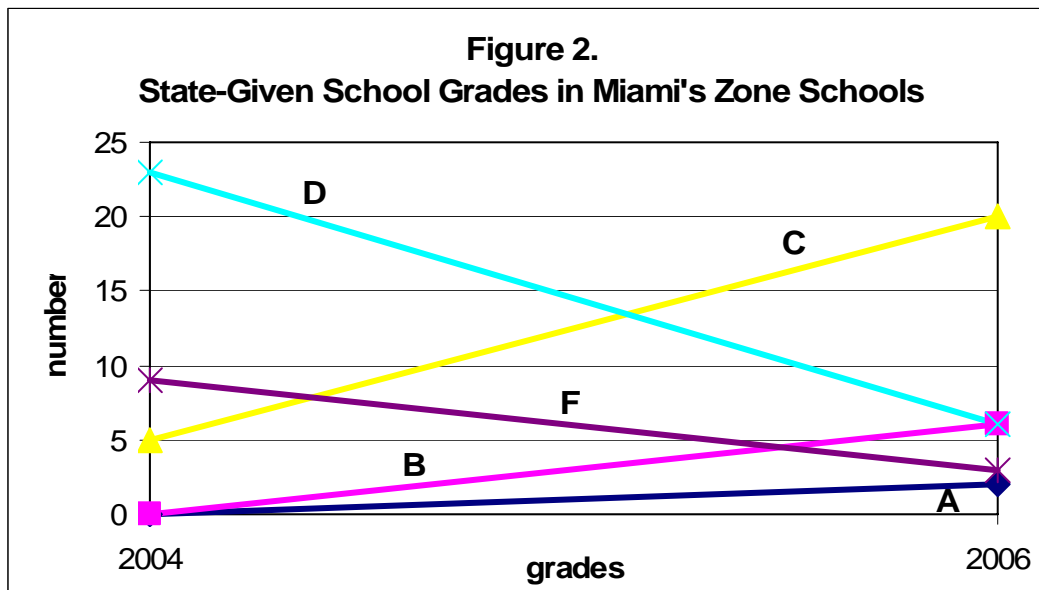
* Student FCAT scores are broken down into five achievement levels: scores of 1 or 2 indicate below grade level, 3 indicates on grade level, 4 indicates proficient, and 5, advanced. Additionally, FCAT results are used to grade all schools on an A (high) through F (low) system.

In the eight Zone high schools, reading scores for 10th-graders actually fell nearly 2 percentage points from 2004 to 2006. However, the 10th-grade reading scores for all of Miami-Dade were also flat during this time period. In math, scores for 10th-graders in Zone schools rose almost 2 percentage points from 2004 to 2006.

Student test results in the Zone schools follow a pattern similar to what has happened in many other concentrated reform efforts: student achievement scores respond to interventions in the elementary grades—and rise fairly easily. In the secondary grades, however, scores are slower to rise and more resistant to interventions. However, as the students currently in Zone elementary schools enter Zone secondary schools, they will have a solid foundation of high-quality instruction and tailored interventions and supports. Because these supports will continue through middle and high school, it is likely that test score gains will trickle up throughout the system as Zone school students progress through the years.

Zone School Grades

In addition to student achievement scores, the state of Florida gives each school a letter grade based on student academic progress and overall performance. The schools selected to be part of the Zone district were chosen for their chronic underperformance, and a stated goal of the Zone schools is to eliminate this chronically low-performing distinction. As indicated in Figure 2 below, in 2004, 32 of the 39 Zone schools received a D or an F from the state. Two years later, 28 of these 39 schools had received an A, B, or C. The number of A or B schools grew from zero to eight in the two-year period, and the number of D and F schools dropped from 32 to nine during that time.



Discussion

The agreement between UTD and MDCPS stipulates that the initially selected 39 Zone schools would remain part of this Zone district and receive the special interventions and supports for at least three full years. This period expires at the end of the 2006-07 school year. It remains to be seen whether some or all of the current Zone schools will remain in the Zone school district, or if any new schools will be added.

There is certainly room for improvement in the Zone schools. Secondary math and reading scores are slowly increasing, but there are still far too many secondary students below grade level, especially in high school reading. Though, as the students who have received the Zone school supports beginning in elementary school start to enter the later grades, it is likely that we will see the full effects of the Zone reforms in secondary school test scores.

Perhaps the biggest question for Miami is how to sustain its positive reforms, possibly even after a school exits its Zone school designation. Research indicates that proven interventions should be maintained even after a school starts to improve. Schools are fragile organizations; once they achieve, they need continued support to solidify their accomplishments—including the financial resources to continue the successful interventions. Miami's task will be to provide the resources necessary to sustain the accomplishments of the original Zone schools while expanding the reforms to the many other district schools that also need supportive, intensive interventions.