INFORMATION CAPSULE

Department of Research Services

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How The Miami-Dade County Public Schools Compare With Other Florida Districts

Importance of the Social and Environmental Context

The playing field should be leveled as the State attempts to grade Florida public schools. Allowances should be given to districts and to schools that operate within social and environmental contexts that negatively affect a student's capacity to learn. This paper will provide evidence for the position that the social or environmental context in which a child lives affects his/her ability to achieve academically.

Early experiences may have lasting effects, for better or for worse. Development can be slowed if children are exposed to a deficient environment where their needs are not met. Unequivocal scientific evidence supports the notion that the environment affects one's capacity to learn and therefore one's ability to perform in an academic setting. The factors listed below impact the nature of the environment in which children grow. These environmental circumstances affect the well-being of children and their ability to learn.

Child Well-Being Indicators

Miami-Dade County ranks first among other Florida counties on factors that reflect negatively on the well-being of children residing in the county.[1] The County ranks:

- first in child deaths
- first in births to teenage mothers
- first in runaways
- first in children affected by divorce
- first in the number of families receiving Aid to Families and Dependent Children and food stamps
- first in youths referred for delinquency to the juvenile justice system
- first in youths committing violent offenses
- first in abortions
- second in the number of cumulative AIDS cases reported from 1980 to 1997

[1]University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, *Florida County Rankings: 1998*, January 1999

Department of Research Services
Office of Evaluation and Research, Miami-Dade County Public Schools
1500 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 225, Miami, Florida 33132
(305) 995-7503 Fax (305) 995-7521

Diversity of the Student Population

The very nature of education demands that "individual differences" be taken into account. There is great variation in the students attending schools in Miami-Dade County. The County ranks first in Hispanic population in the state and second nationally after Los Angeles County. The County also ranks first in Black population in the state and 10th nationally. Because of the factors listed below, M-DCPS students as a group present more of a challenge to educators than students attending public school in other parts of the state. To illustrate this point, M-DCPS ranks: [2]

- first in the number of ESOL students, comprising approximately 30 percent of the state total
- first in the number of LEP elementary students (22 percent vs. statewide average of 8 percent)
- first in the number of at-risk students, comprising about 25 percent of the state total
- first in the number of ESE students, or 14 percent of the state total.
- first in the percentage of elementary school students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch (70% vs. statewide average of 52%)
- second in dropout rate when compared with all Florida school districts

Prevalence of Poverty in Miami-Dade County

In 1994, Miami-Dade County was ranked as the ***sixth poorest large urban county in the United States***.[3] Additionally, a study by the Children's Defense Fund indicated that, persons under 18 living in Miami were much more likely to live in poverty than persons under 18 who live in any of eight other large Florida cities. Approximately 44 percent of the persons under 18 living in Miami live in poverty compared with an average of only 24 percent in the eight other cities. The economic conditions for Black persons under 18 are much more severe since approximately 58 percent of the Black persons under 18 residing in Miami live in poverty.

Percentage of Persons Younger Than 18 Living in Poverty

	Total	White	Black	Hispanic
Miami	**44.1**	**33.3**	**58.4**	**37.2**
Fort Lauderdale	31.0	10.8	48.7	24.3
Tampa	30.9	15.6	53.7	28.7
Orlando	27.1	10.1	47.1	27.7
Hialeah	24.7	24.7	37.8	26.2
St. Petersburg	22.4	10.8	43.3	13.3
Tallahassee	21.6	6.9	40.8	34.3
Jacksonville	18.6	9.0	38.2	18.3
Hollywood	15.6	10.6	41.8	18.8

Source: Children's Defense Fund, *City Child Poverty Data from the 1990 Census*, 1992.

[2] Florida Department of Education, www.firn.edu/doe, September 1999
[3] Personal Correspondence from Oliver Kerr, Metropolitan Dade County Planning Department, September 1999

Effect of Poverty on School Outcomes

Poverty affects children. The negative impact of poverty on a child's capacity to learn has been well documented in the literature (Renchler, 1993). The relationship between socioeconomic level and academic achievement was established many years ago. A review of the literature concerning variables that influence outcomes of education by Collazo (1976) concluded that, "...the quality and quantity of education will directly influence socio-economic status, which in turn is the most important variable influencing educational outcome." Collazo also states, "The higher the socio-economic status of the student's family, the higher his academic achievement and educational aspirations. This relationship seems to hold no matter what measurement of socio-economic status is used. The usual measures, however, are the education and occupation of the head of household."

The studies listed below represent only a sample of the more recent research literature addressing the issue of how poverty effects school outcomes.

- The health problems of poor children generally begin before they are even born. Since poor mothers are less likely to eat properly and do not receive adequate prenatal care, their babies are more likely than babies of non-poor mothers to be of low birth weight, to be stillborn, or to die soon after birth. They are more likely than other children to suffer from hearing and vision loss, behavior problems, psychological disturbances, and learning disabilities (Santer & Stocking, 1991). In addition, many poor children are exposed to lead poisoning high enough to interfere with cognitive development associated with sensorimotor deficits, lower IQ, and poorer academic achievement. (Tesman & Hills, 1994). In fact, Winick, Brasel, and Rosso (1972) found that the brains of infants suffering from malnutrition in utero contained 60 percent fewer brain cells than normal. Malnutrition is a condition which frequently accompanies poverty. The effect of such a condition on educational outcomes is obvious.

- Pungello, Kupersmidt, Burchinal, & Patterson (1996) following 1,253 second- through fourth-graders found that, those from low-income families tended to have lower reading and math achievement test scores, and the gap in math widened as time went on. In addition, when holding the effect of income constant, Black children still tended to score lower than white children.

- Carta (1991) cites several sources showing that low-SES children living in inner cities are much more likely to have educationally damaging circumstances as part of their normal life experiences when compared to higher SES children. Low-SES children face exposure to drugs, AIDS, low birth weight, poor nutrition, lead exposure, and personal injuries and accidents. Any one of these factors or a combination of them places low SES children at risk for having below average academic achievement. This author also states that such environmental factors lead low-SES students to drop out of school far more frequently than their higher SES counterparts.

- Cohen (1993) reported a strong relationship between family income levels and children's IQ. This author cited a study of 900 children born with low birth weight who lived in "persistent poverty" during their first five years of life. Such children averaged 9.1 IQ points lower than the IQ's of the children in the sample whose families were not living in poverty. The author concluded that, "there is little doubt that child poverty . . . is scarring the development of our nation's children."

- Datcher-Loury (1989) studied a group of low-income Black children from three sites to determine if differences in academic performance were attributable to "differences in behavior and attitudes among the families." Based on interviews with the mothers and achievement test scores in reading and math for the children, the author concluded that differences in family behavior and attitudes did have a "large and important long-term effect on children's academic performance."

- Poverty can complicate family relationships and harm children's development through its impact on parents' emotional state. Unemployed mothers tended to become depressed and as a result of this depression tended to be negative in their perception of their maternal role and punitive with their children. Children of these mothers tended to be depressed and to have trouble in school (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994).

The Effect of Student Mobility on Educational Outcomes

Student mobility affects student achievement. Most research shows that high student mobility (more than one to two moves during the school years) lowers student achievement. This is particularly true of students from low income, less-educated families (Straits, 1987). High school students who move are more likely to drop out (Coleman, 1988). Student mobility causes problems for schools as well. Research shows that schools with high mobility rates do not succeed even with those students whose residence is stable (Neuman, 1988).

The problems that accompany high student mobility burden Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In 1997-98, the districtwide mobility rates varied from 30 to 36 percent depending on grade level. At 31.4 percent, M-DCPS elementary school mobility was fourth among the six largest Florida districts. At the middle school level, M-DCPS ranked fourth again at 30.9 percent. At the senior high level, the M-DCPS mobility rate was 35.3 percent, the second highest (behind Duval County) and well above the state average of 28.6 percent.

In conclusion, students attending public school in Miami-Dade County as a group represent a more difficult student population than students attending public schools in most other Florida districts. The extent of poverty in Miami-Dade County with the accompanying factors that have been shown to negatively affect cognition in school-aged children and the diversity of the student population sets the county apart as unique from other counties in Florida. This uniqueness must be considered by any program which intends to make valid comparisons among the counties.

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