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Partnership Between Miami-Dade County Public Schools and FIU Sparks Educational Innovation and Improvement

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Innovation and improvement characterize the partnership at Miami Northwestern Senior High School between Florida International University (FIU) and Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Northwestern, located in Liberty City, an economically disadvantaged section of Miami, received a school grade of "D" or "F" every year between [2000 and 2010](#). These grades are calculated from three criteria: the percentage of eligible students taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), their overall performance on the FCAT, and the amount of progress made by students in math and reading. It was declared a "dropout factory" in 2007 by a Johns Hopkins Study that found [59 percent](#) of the school's students [failing to finish high school](#).

A partnership between FIU and Miami Northwestern called "[The Education Effect](#)" was funded by a 1 million dollar seed investment from the JPMorgan Chase Foundation and began in the 2011-2012 school year. The funding supports a full time faculty director from the FIU College of Education and initiatives such as the construction of an aquaponics laboratory, increasing dual enrollment which give Northwestern students the opportunity to take college courses for college credit, financial literacy and investment workshops with the FIU College of Business and a program that brings Northwestern students to FIU campus for academic enrichment. Miami Northwestern, under the leadership of principal Wallace Aristide, is now a B school.

FIU Vice President of Engagement Dr. Irma Becerra-Fernandez stated that in one year, the number of freshman students from Northwestern attending FIU tripled. She went on to describe how this initiative has become a platform to scaffold other related projects, citing plans to expand the use of the school-based health clinic to serve community needs. The grade improvement at Northwestern is indicative of a district wide trend under the leadership of Miami-Dade County Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvahlo. There are currently no "D" or "F" schools in a the fourth largest school district in the country where 74 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and 90 percent of the students are Black or Hispanic. This improvement has garnered high profile accolades including the Broad Award for Urban Education which [awarded](#) the school \$555,000 in college scholarships for deserving students who have improved academically and have a demonstrated financial need.

Carvahlo, faced with many district schools in need of repair or reconstruction and dwindling state funds for education, turned to the local level in an effort to convince the people of Miami-Dade County to invest in their public school system in the face of that budget environment at the state level. The school district put a 1.2 billion dollar bond [referendum](#) on the ballot for the November 6 election. The measure passed in spite of the increased property tax burden for homeowners. The victory was due in no small part to the personal crusade of the charismatic Carvahlo as he campaigned for the passage of the referendum in churches, schools, and multiple other venues across the country.

Plans are currently being developed for another partnership between FIU and Miami-Dade County Schools. This time they will partner with Education for a Better America (EBA) as part of a Higher Education Awareness, Dropout Prevention, and Health Initiative on May 10 of this year. EBA President Dominique Sharpton (eldest daughter of Reverend Al Sharpton) stated that "the initiative is aimed at urban high school students with the purpose of increasing the pursuit of post-secondary education, increasing civic engagement, preventing school dropouts, increasing financial literacy, and promoting health wellness." Hundreds of students are expected to be brought onto the FIU campus from Miami-Dade County Public Schools to take part in higher education awareness, financial literacy, and health and wellness workshops as well as take part in a youth town hall with state and local policymakers. Innovative partnerships such as these will be needed across the nation as the nation struggles with a dropout crisis and the specter of massive cuts to funding for education looms in the coming years.

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