

EDUCATION MARCH 31, 2016 5:41 PM

Hialeah, Miami schools rated among most equitable in the nation for poor students

HIGHLIGHTS

Miami-Dade schools recognized for the performance of poor students

New rankings compare student achievement across the country



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It's an unfortunate fact in the world of education: low-income students tend to perform worse in school than their more affluent peers.

Education leaders call the phenomenon the "achievement gap." Despite considerable attention, the gap remains stubborn and wide across the country.

But not in Hialeah. Even with 83 percent of students coming from low-income households, Hialeah is home to the smallest achievement gap in the nation, according to the inaugural Education Equality Index. Greater Miami also fared well, with the third-smallest gap in the country among 100 large cities in 35 states that were analyzed.

"Our children — no matter the financial situation of their family — are at the same competitive level of children with a lot more money, with many more opportunities," Hialeah Mayor Carlos Hernandez said.

City and education leaders pointed to the findings to highlight everything from the contributions of immigrants to the success of charter schools, but the accolades come with a few caveats. One expert questioned an extraordinary jump in test scores at some schools highlighted in the report. And the nonprofits that put out the index, released for the first time this year, had to retract a portion of the rankings that compared states to each other.

Still, Superintendent of Schools Alberto Carvalho said it's "absolutely an accomplishment" that two of the top 10 cities in the U.S. for reducing the achievement gap are in Miami-Dade County.

"It is clear that kids in Miami-Dade are achieving," he said. "Education in our community is unparalleled."

The index was compiled by the nonprofits Education Cities and GreatSchools, with funding from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. Rankings were determined by measuring how many low-income students in a particular city scored "proficient" on state tests. Their performance was then compared to all students in the state who took the same tests.

At a press conference on Thursday, city and education leaders said the accomplishments of Hialeah and Miami stand in stark contrast to rhetoric on the presidential campaign trail regarding immigrants.

“This is important, because our cities are cities of immigrants,” Miami Mayor Thomás Regalado said in Spanish. “This has to be a message for those who aspire to be national leaders: that immigrants have the vision, the desire and the will to achieve the American Dream.”

In Miami-Dade, 20 schools were recognized by the Education Equality Index for having an achievement gap that is particularly low — or nonexistent. Many were charters, which are publicly funded but privately run.

Among them were a group of schools under the Mater Academy name and management. Judith Marty is principal of Mater Academy Middle, Mater Academy High and Mater Performing Arts and Entertainment.

Marty said her schools excel because of a “culture of high expectations for everyone,” along with support such as tutoring for both high achievers and struggling students.

“I think that everybody can learn, but not everybody can learn at the same pace,” Marty said.

Some schools that were singled out saw double-digit test score gains among poor students.

At Pinecrest Academy North, also a charter, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students earning a “satisfactory” score jumped by 38 points in math and 21 points in reading over four years.

In the same period, Miami-Dade as a district posted gains of nine points in math and five in reading. The state improved six points in math and three in reading.

Walter Haney, a professor emeritus at Boston College, said extreme test score increases stretch the limit of credibility. A testing expert who has studied Florida’s accountability system, Haney said gains of 10 points are more typical. Dramatic changes could be the result enrolling fewer poor or minority students, he said.

“I would be very skeptical,” Haney said.

State data don’t show wide variance in the enrollment patterns at Pinecrest. Victoria Larrauri, principal at Pinecrest, credited the school’s targeted approach to tutoring struggling students in small groups.

“We think what’s really working for us is small group instruction from kindergarten all the way to sixth grade,” Larrauri said. “We don’t focus on assessments.”

Ethan Gray, founder and CEO of Education Cities, said the rankings provide a starting point to ask questions about what's going on in individual schools — and how to replicate successes.

“There are a lot of stories to be told. The Education Equality Index is just scratching the surface,” he said. “When it comes to individual schools and why they succeed or why they struggle, that's not a question we were able to answer.”

Education Cities and GreatSchools had to retract its state rankings after discovering their methodology gave more weight to states with high poverty levels. However, the organizations stand behind their city rankings, since those are based on comparisons within each city's own state.

“It's a fundamentally different measurement issue,” Gray said. “As soon as we were made aware of the issue in the state rankings we immediately moved to correct that issue.”

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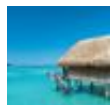
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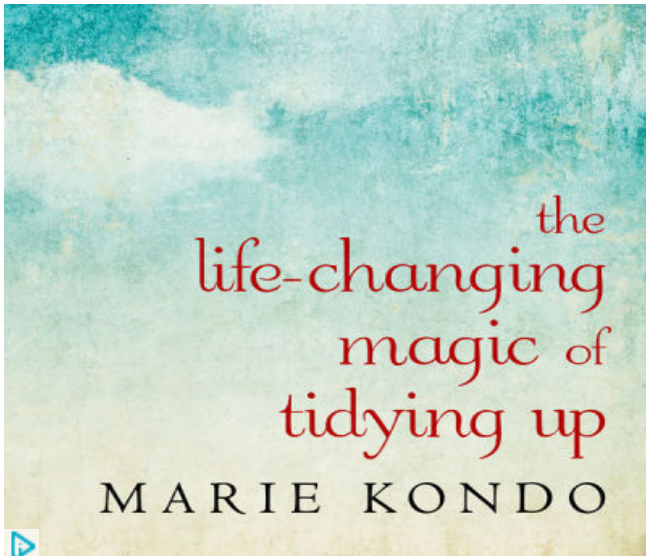


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