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ON EDUCATION

## Experiment Begun in New York Is Transformed in Miami Schools

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PARTLY wary and partly intrigued, Kennetha Jones stepped into Lakeview Elementary School here for the first time last December. She eyed the mismatched chairs and wobbly desks. She heard the shouts of arguing and fighting echoing down the halls. And with the practiced perspective of a veteran teacher, she could tell that nearly all the children were working at the lowest reading level for their grades, and she knew they all couldn't be that slow by nature.

Mrs. Jones was not naïve about urban education. She wasn't exactly teaching in a country club at Hialeah Gardens Elementary, then her current school. It ran well above capacity, dealt with an immigrant population, and had three-quarters of its students on free or reduced lunch. But it was a place of possibilities, with a butterfly garden and a new playground in bright crayon colors, with an active PTA to endow academic medals and an A on the Florida state report card.

Yet, after five satisfying years at Hialeah Gardens, it suddenly seemed as if everybody was trying to convince Mrs. Jones, 40, to transfer to Lakeview, that sinkhole. The principals of both schools wanted her to do it. Mrs. Jones's brother and daughter, both educators, wanted her to do it. Above all, the new superintendent of schools in Miami and Dade County, Rudy Crew, wanted her, or at least people like her, to do it.

Under a new program devised with the teachers' union, Dr. Crew was offering 20 percent more pay for 20 percent more hours for all teachers willing to work in the 39 most-troubled schools in the county, the ones he had designated as the "School Improvement Zone." He liked to describe the plan as "an internal Peace Corps."

So Mrs. Jones listened to him and the others and transferred into Lakeview, one of 10 incoming teachers on a faculty of 33, replacing 10 others who had retired, shifted schools, or been fired. All of that turnover had been accomplished by Jeffrey Hernandez, a principal installed by Dr. Crew after he demoted the previous principal, along with eight other principals of failing schools.

There Mrs. Jones sat, then, on a recent afternoon, leading a session of guided reading for eight first graders who were already, in her estimation, two years behind in their reading skills. As she patiently steered them through a story about a red fox, paying special attention to phonics, she helped them sound out words as simple as "hers," "getting," and "fed."

She had been up since 4:45 in the morning, and already had done a math review session for 40 pupils who volunteered to come to school by 7 a.m., 90 minutes before the official class day began. Over the course of the week, she also would serve as the mentor to a less-experienced colleague, observing and critiquing a reading lesson before delivering a model version of it herself. She generally headed back home at 8:30 p.m.

"When you come to a school like this, you have to come with your heart," Mrs. Jones said during a brief break. "For so many of these children, you're the only stability they have. As soon as you can show them you care about them, about their learning, they come to you like sponges. For me, it's about more than the money."

The roots of the Miami experiment go back to New York City, where Dr. Crew served as schools chancellor in the middle to late 1990's. There, he identified and took direct control over chronically low-performing schools, putting them into a "chancellor's district" that is a direct precursor to Miami's "School Improvement Zone." He incorporated diagnostic testing and a traditional, phonics-based reading curriculum, as he has in Miami. The schools, as later studies showed, improved markedly.

But Dr. Crew was a prophet without honor in his adopted land. The mayor at that time, Rudolph W. Giuliani, whose education policy basically consisted of putting public dollars into tuition vouchers for private schools, drove the chancellor out of town with a campaign of public criticism.

Joel Klein, the current chancellor, disassembled the chancellor's district and implemented a citywide reading curriculum with a largely unproven record, Balanced Literacy. (Interestingly, however, a City Council commission just this week endorsed the policy of incentive pay, and Mr. Klein has often spoken favorably of it.)

When Dr. Crew took over the Miami-Dade County district last July, he picked up New York's unfinished business and added one missing element: a formal structure of pay increases for teachers in the troubled schools.

While teachers' unions around the country have largely resisted such changes as divisive, the United Teachers of Dade had several reasons to be willing to compromise. The union's administrator, Mark Richard, had served on the screening team that helped select Dr. Crew and knew of the superintendent's constructive relations with union leaders in New York.

Perhaps as important, the longtime president of the Miami-area union, Pasquale Tornillo, had gone to prison in 2003 for mispending more than \$2 million in union money on personal luxuries like \$2000-a-night hotel rooms and a python-print bathrobe.

BY agreeing to the new system - an extra hour of class or professional development every working day in exchange for 20 percent more pay, meaning about \$10,000 annually on the average - Mr. Richard put a disgraced union firmly on the side of reform.

As a kind of trial balloon, Dr. Crew and Mr. Richard held a job fair in Miami last December. Some 600 teachers, including 100 from outside of Dade County, came to hear about the program. Ultimately, 177 of them transferred into the problem schools. At Lakeview, Mr. Hernandez enjoyed the unanticipated luxury of interviewing 60 applicants for 10 positions. "The principal who sent me Kennetha," he said, "I kiss the ground he walks on."

Because the teachers arrived in mid-January, it remains far too soon to measure their effect on the schools. In May, though, Florida will administer its statewide test, the one on which Lakeview has repeatedly scored a D.

"I know where they are," Mrs. Jones said, referring to the first graders she tutors. "They are at the bottom. But I want to move them up a level or two. I know we're not going to solve the problem overnight. But it wasn't the money that persuaded me to come here. It was the challenge."

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