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## **Beyond the Numbers: A Report on the Impact of the Helping Families Help Students Succeed in Reading Project**

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# Overview of the Project

*You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"*

*George Bernard Shaw*

The *Helping Families Help Students Succeed in Reading* project was developed to address a growing concern among educators that too many high school students were failing the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and thus unable to graduate with their peers. While there are many initiatives that focus on helping students build the academic skills needed to pass the FCAT and meet GPA requirements required for graduation, one key component was often overlooked – the involvement of the individual student’s family. This project was designed to include family involvement as an essential intervention strategy in combination with academic support available through adult education and literacy programs.

Difficult problems require uncommon solutions. The *Helping Families Help Students Succeed in Reading* project provided that uncommon solution by integrating four key components:

- Reviewing best practices across the state of Florida to see what was working and what elements could be added that would ensure a greater level of success.
- Identifying strategies that would positively impact the family’s ability to support the academic achievement of their secondary school child.
- Analyzing the latest research in adult and family literacy to determine the most effective means for improving academic skills and also parental involvement.
- Identifying strategies that work for various populations, including those from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

In the fall of 2003, five pilot sites were identified within the Miami-Dade Public School system: Coral Gables High School, Miami Jackson Senior High School, Miami Coral Park Senior High School, South Dade Senior High School, and American Senior High School. Each site identified 30 students to participate in the project.

With intensive academic and family support provided by the project, students who had been struggling made significant progress and increased their FCAT scores. On average, students gained an average of 23 points on the reading portion of the FCAT, with some gains as high as 183 points. The mean score on the reading

portion of the FCAT for students participating in the project was 289, while the mean score for 12th grade students in Miami-Dade County was 277.

However, the success of this project can best be measured beyond the numbers. Today, in approximately 150 homes across Miami-Dade County there is a greater appreciation for education and what it means for the family. There is also a greater understanding of how the school system works and how parents can become more involved with the educational system, thus impacting their children's future. More importantly, there are students who never believed they would succeed who have now known success and have dreams for the future.

# From Research to Action

*Research supports that the best indicator of a child's school success is the educational level of the mother.*

*Thomas Sticht, 1990*

## Connecting Families and Schools

The *Helping Families Helping Students Succeed in Reading* project conducted extensive research to determine essential elements for success. While there has been anecdotal evidence pointing to the impact of a mother's education level on the success of her children, little hard research had been completed until the 1990s. Today, thanks to the research completed as part of *The Condition of Education 2003*<sup>1</sup> and *America's Kindergartners – Early Childhood Longitudinal Study*,<sup>2</sup> there is hard evidence that supports the need for a literate family in order for children to be successful in school, not only in the early years, but also during the secondary and postsecondary segments of education. With this research in hand, the project focused on ensuring that family involvement be a core component.

Research shows that when parents are involved, students have:

- Higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates
- Better school attendance
- Increased motivation and better self-esteem
- Lower rates of suspension
- Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
- Fewer instances of violent behavior<sup>3</sup>

Increasing parental involvement is a complex process that requires a commitment of time, energy, and a high level of personal support for the family. Parents who have not been involved in the education of their children during the elementary years are extremely reluctant to engage in the process at the secondary level. Add to that a high school age student's natural reluctance to have his/her parents involved and parents become totally unaware of what is happening.

The *Helping Families* project sought first to engage the parents in what was happening in the school. During initial interviews, many parents expressed genuine surprise that their children had not been successful on the FCAT. However, few parents indicated a lack of interest in what their children were doing in school.

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<sup>1</sup> The Condition of Education 2003. National Center for Education Statistics (June 2003). U. S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. NCES 2003-067.

<sup>2</sup> America's Kindergartners – Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class of 1998-99, Fall 1998. National Center for Education Statistics. (February 2000). U. S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. NCES 2000-070.

<sup>3</sup> National Educational Service (2002) Research papers retrieved from the World Wide Web on 06/10/03 at <http://www.nes.org/Public/index.asp>.

*“As a concerned parent, I sought any solution that was at my disposal. But first, I had to start by trying to find out what was the FCAT and its purpose.”*

*Parent – Miami-Jackson Senior High School*

Despite the best efforts on the part of the school system to educate parents, many just don't understand the significance of the FCAT and what it means as their child advances through school toward graduation. The *Helping Families* project conducted workshops for parents so they could better understand the FCAT and the types of skills their children needed to be successful. They also learned how to help their children prepare for the FCAT. Parents were provided with study books, pamphlets, and other materials they could use at home to encourage better study habits.

*“We were given material and supplies that would not have been available if not for the program. We were also encouraged to exhibit a more positive and active role in our child's school and toward education in general.”*

*Parent – Miami-Jackson Senior High School*

Workshops alone cannot provide the support that parents need to connect with their child's school and the educational process. *Helping Families* site coordinators and other team members visited parents on a regular basis to provide the ongoing support and encouragement that the parents and their children needed.

Parents received a wide range of information and support. For some, this was the first time that someone from the school visited their homes. These visits were not one-time affairs, but rather ongoing visitations that enabled parents to ask questions and better understand what they could do to support their children.

*“This program has helped me understand my son and his stress of not passing the FCAT. I learned to communicate with him and show him support. I am more positive and committed to my son's education. This program and the coordinators has been a blessing to us; they are true guardian angels and the support we received from them was endless any time day or night.”*

*Parent – Miami Coral Park High School*

For some students and their parents, the program provided their first real opportunity to learn better communication skills. Parents learned through the workshops how to listen to their children and talk with, not at, them.

*“My wife participated in a Communication workshop that helped her understand the importance of listening to your children and communicating with them. As a result of this, my wife has changed. She now carefully listens without judging and communicates more with our son. I do the same too.”*

*Parent – Miami Coral Park High School*

# Getting Back to Basics

*That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.*

*Doris Lessing, Author*

## Connecting with Adult Education and Literacy Programs

Today, high schools are pushed to the limit to meet the needs of their students. They are asked to do more with less and to meet the needs of many students who have more challenges today than ever before. The *Helping Families* project provided another alternative for schools to help their students meet the challenges of the FCAT and graduation requirements.

As part of the project, students were able to take advantage of special courses offered through adult education and literacy programs in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. While most of the schools already provided some type of FCAT remediation program, *Helping Families* provided another option that could help students receive even more assistance in preparing for the FCAT.

Each pilot site developed a *Helping Families* team consisting of representatives from the day school as well as the adult education program. This ensured that the project's efforts would support, rather than duplicate, something already provided through the regular school program. The pilot sites provided a wide range of services, including:

- A tutoring program focused on improving reading skills, including evening and Saturday programs to better meet students' schedules
- A test preparation class focused on test-taking strategies and techniques
- One-on-one meetings with students that focused on how to set goals and identify postsecondary opportunities that are available to them
- Native language support to ensure that parents and students understood what the program offered and the services that were available
- Adult high school credit classes to assist students in increasing their overall GPA and meet graduation requirements

In addition to the services provided, the project also purchased instructional materials for teachers and students to help enhance the academic program, including basic supplies, reading books, tape recorders, FCAT flash cards, and book sets. Each student received a planner and basic supplies to use in class. When funds were needed, the project also covered the cost of an interpreter and a certified teacher to serve as a tutor for selected students.

For some students, this intensive one-on-one approach was just what they needed to restore their self-confidence and to motivate them to succeed. Many of the students in the program had taken the FCAT repeatedly with little or no increase in scores from one testing session to the next. Many students felt that they would never be able to achieve their career goals because they were unsuccessful on the FCAT or had not attained the required GPA for graduation.

*I strongly thank the program for what it did for me. Now I can go on and be someone in the world.*

*Student – South Dade Senior High School*

*The program really helps students learn to study and pass the FCAT exam that for me is so very difficult. This program makes me feel more secure as I learn more skills.*

*Student – South Dade Senior High School*

Reading is an essential skill for everyone. It impacts what a person can do at home, in school, on the job, and in the community. However, reading is a very complex process. The *Helping Families* project used the latest in reading research in order to develop tutoring programs that help students increase their reading rate, fluency, and comprehension. Teachers who worked within the reading tutoring program used one-on-one and small group instruction to focus in on specific problems that each student was experiencing. As a result, reading scores increased. For many of the students in the program, reading became something that they wanted to do rather than avoid.

*I increased my FCAT reading score by 62 points to a 343. I am already enrolled at Miami-Dade Community College. I will become a nurse.*

*Student – Coral Gables High School*

*I graduated with a GPA of 2.0 improving my GPA from a 1.725 this year. I also passed the FCAT reading test. I have plans for the summer...then I will go to the Marines. Thank you for this program. It was cool. It was a new experience for me.*

*Student – Coral Gables High School*

*I graduated with a GPA of 2.489 and I increased my FCAT reading by 40 points to a 314. I am very excited that I graduated. My plans for the summer...I want to continue my education. I am not sure where to study. I want to carefully study which are my options.*

*Student – Coral Gables High School*

For those students who did not pass the FCAT this year, they still experienced success in seeing their FCAT scores increase. They also saw improvements in their other classes and know that they can succeed if they are willing to work hard and stay focused on their goal of earning a high school diploma.

*I did not graduate because I didn't pass the FCAT, but I did improve my scores. I will take tutoring classes during the summer. Once I pass the FCAT, I will study Business at Seminole. I already registered. Thank you for the project.*

*Student – Coral Gables High School*

*Working in this project, I've improved my tests not only by passing the FCAT but by improving other academic classes' grades.*

*Student – Coral Park Senior High School*

# Exceeding Expectations

*We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.*

*Marian Wright Edelman, Families in Peril, 1987*

## Expect the Unexpected

The *Helping Families* project had two primary goals: (1) to increase parent involvement in their children's education and (2) to assist students in passing the FCAT and meeting graduation requirements. The project was successful in reaching each of these goals: parents were involved, students increased their FCAT scores, and many students graduated with their peers. However, the project had an even greater impact by reaching out and touching the lives of families throughout Miami-Dade County. While not as easily measured as test scores or GPAs, the human factor stands to have the greatest impact over time. As a result of this project:

- Parents enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages programs. As these parents gain control and understanding of the English language, they release their children from the burden of serving as the family interpreter – allowing their children to just be children and not to shoulder the responsibility of the adult world until they are ready.
- Parents enrolled in Adult Basic Education and General Educational Development programs. Parents who thought they could not possibly earn a high school diploma were motivated to go back to school because they saw their own children's success. Research has shown that parents with a high school diploma are more likely to read to their young children, thus laying the foundation for success in school.
- Parents learned what the FCAT is all about and what it means to the student who has aspirations to continue on to higher education and/or technical training.
- Parents learned how to better communicate with their children. A difficult job at best, parents learned that they can talk with their teenagers and listen to their concerns. The skills they learned have opened opportunities for better communication within families – moving some from silence to real discussions about the future and the dreams that they share.

## From the Heart

*In his personal aspect, the class motivated him more due to the fact that it was a smaller count of students. He understood the concept of the general foundation in English grammar and discovered abilities that helped him in his other classes. I learned to notice all the differences in my son, due to his enthusiasm.*

*Parent – Coral Park Senior High School*

*I was the only parent that had attended each workshop. The counselors were so impressed that in the ceremony I was given a gift of appreciation. I learned how to read the FCAT scores, about the SATs and ACTs, about graduation requirements. I gathered so much information from this program that I am prepared for my daughter's future (she is due in June).*

*Parent – Coral Park Senior High School*

*I have seen a great difference in the attitude of my nephew who has a life threatening disease. Taking his physical problem into consideration, he becomes quite frustrated and upset. This situation actually stifles his performance and comprehension in reading. However, with the assistance of the project, he has begun to show interest in reading and now enjoys listening to and interpreting stories. His talent in writing poetry and some rap has been reinforced. His self-esteem has increased and he is able to remain on task for longer periods of time.*

*Family Member – Miami Jackson High School*

*My daughter has more concentration in her studies and is more relaxed. She has learned to be patient and has a positive attitude toward her chosen career. I'm really happy about the turn around that this program has made in our child. With these new skills and knowledge, she has realized that there is a whole new world of studies/learning ahead of her.*

*Parent – Miami Jackson High School*

*Since my son's participation in the project, his interest in and desire to read, as well as his willingness to pass and study for the FCAT has increased tremendously beyond my expectations. There are little to no battles of the wills between us over the respect of academics vs. extracurricular activities – there is a balance now.*

*Parent – Miami Jackson High School*

Parents weren't the only ones to experience more than they expected. While the students' main goal was passing the FCAT and graduating with their peers, they also experienced the unexpected. A common theme running throughout the reports from each site was the excitement from students about their parents' new involvement in their education. For some students, this was the first time that they felt they could talk to their parents about their fear of failure – of not passing the FCAT and graduating.

These new lines of communication extended to other family members where these students saw an opportunity not only for themselves but for their younger siblings as well. Thankfully for many of the students and their parents, they discovered that education is a family affair – that working together they could accomplish more.

*My parents participated in the workshops and understood the stress that I had due to not passing the FCAT. They learned how to read scores and understand. They also learned other things like financial aid, community service hours, the importance of communication at home as well as in the school and how to be involved with my education. This is the best thing that ever happened to my parents and me.*

*Student – Coral Park Senior High School*

*Please continue this program so when my sister gets to high school she will have the opportunity to experience what I did.*

*Student – Coral Park Senior High School*

While focused on reading, the project provided students with skills that crossed over from one content area to another. For some students, this meant greater success in other classes. For other students, this meant now having the study skills they need to succeed in higher education and training. For still others, it was the understanding that they could succeed – a feeling that many had not felt for a long time.

*This project has helped me in many ways that I can't explain. The program has organized my testing habits and has improved my exam scores not only in reading comprehension but in other academic classes such as math. The teachers were able to help me one-on-one when necessary. Anything I needed material wise they went out of their way to get for me and the other students.*

*Student – Coral Park Senior High School*

Each day, thousands of teachers across Miami-Dade County go to work carrying with them the hope that something they do will make a difference in the life of a child. For the teachers involved in the *Helping Families* project, they had an opportunity to see what a difference they can make in the lives of students who are struggling to achieve. This project provided select teachers with a chance to once again truly understand why they chose to focus their talents in the classroom.

*This program was so fulfilling for me as a teacher because the students benefited from it. It was wonderful to see those "light bulbs" lighting up in the students. The hard work paid off for many of my students when they received the news that they had passed the FCAT reading test. They looked as though they had just won the lottery. It was so gratifying to see the exhilaration, sense of accomplishment and relief in their eyes.*

*Teacher – American Senior High School*

# Beyond the Numbers

*Small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises.*

*Demosthenes*

The *Helping Families Help Students Succeed in Reading* project revealed much about the importance of educating the entire family. Along the way, project team members learned that:

- Sometimes all that students need to succeed is a little one-on-one instruction to help them fill their personal gaps in knowledge.
- Students want their parents to be involved in their education even when they are teenagers.
- Students will adjust their schedules and give up extracurricular activities when they experience success in a supportive learning environment.
- Students are motivated by their own successes to do more and to reach for higher goals.
- Parents want to be involved with their children's school, teachers, and counselors, but often don't know how.
- Parents appreciate teachers who make the time to visit their homes.
- Parents hunger for ways that they can better communicate with their children, especially their teenagers.
- Parents want to understand what the FCAT is and what it means to their children, but often they don't know what questions to ask.
- Parents want to improve their own skills, but sometimes don't know where to find programs that meet their needs.
- Teachers embrace the chance to work one-on-one or in small groups with students.
- Teachers enjoy watching the "light bulbs" light up as students grasp new concepts and knowledge.
- Difficult problems call for uncommon solutions and yield uncommon results.