

Urban Academies Program

SCHOOL BOARD OF BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA

Retaining Top Teachers in Tough Schools

URBAN SCHOOLS are infamous for their ability to chew up rookie teachers. Unprepared for the cultural and academic challenges presented by the toughest to teach, new teachers frequently quit teaching entirely or run to the closest suburban school district.

National studies show urban schools have the least qualified teachers and the highest teacher attrition—50 percent. The problem goes hand-in-glove with the fact that urban schools are chronic under-performers.



To relieve the shock of such hard-scrabble teaching environments and to build early school loyalty among potential hires, in the mid-1990s the Broward County School Board began a group of experiments to boost teacher preparedness. Such efforts evolved into the Urban Academies Program of Broward County, an effort involving a group of predominantly poor and minority K–12 schools, two state schools—Broward Community College and Florida Atlantic University, and two private schools—Barry and Nova Southeastern universities.

The academy's strategy is two-fold: First, find college students interested in teaching and give them real-world and well-supported experience in urban schools (and full college scholarships). Second, begin grooming potential new teachers as early as freshman year in high school through a three-tiered strategy: First, by exposing them to the notion of teaching as a career; second, by offering them real-world experience teaching at the elementary school level; and, third, by offering them guaranteed college enrollment and full tuition reimbursement.

While no high schooler has yet to go the full eight-year course, the opportunities presented by the program have been transformational for both the high school and college students who've participated. As of 2004-05, the 15 participating academy schools have a 93 percent retention rate for third-year teachers, compared with 83 percent and 67 percent district and nationwide, respectively; no academy teachers were terminated during probation; 100 percent of participating high school students have gone on to college; and the four original academy schools have seen increased scores in every subject on statewide assessment tests.

Most important, though, the attitude of new teachers has changed dramatically. Being assigned to an under-performing urban school as a student teacher used to be viewed "as punishment," notes Michaelle Valbrun-Pope, a principal at academy school North Side Elementary. But under the academies program, she remarks, it's now seen as a career-boosting move.

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