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Better bridges for at-risk students



PHOTOS BY JEROME T. NAKAGAWA/MIAMI HERALD STAFF



TOP:
BREAKING DOWN WALLS: Students at Miami Bridge Youth and Family Services, left and right, are five times more likely to drop out than their peers in 'regular' school. Teachers often must surmount 'barriers of distrust' before reaching them.

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Beyond the living room where music videos flicker on a massive flatscreen TV, past the pool table under hanging banners that boast 'Respect' and 'Caring,' the cafeteria at the Miami Bridge is getting crowded.

It's where teachers have placed a chalkboard for the morning math class because the number of homeless kids at the shelter keeps growing.

The Bridge is one of many social-service centers throughout Miami-Dade enlisted by the school district to offer an education to kids outside their neighborhood school. Armed with \$4.5 million and a growing call for reforming alternative education -- an array of specialized programs for kids who are considered "at-risk" of dropping out -- the district plans to streamline those services under an initiative called "Highways to Success." While overall enrollment districtwide has declined, yearly referrals to alternative programs have remained constant over the last three years -- about 2,070 students.

Past programs have failed to monitor the progress of students in alternative education and transition them back into traditional schools, said district officials -- something Highways will do.

The program hopes to decrease the number of referrals by offering intervention for troubled students at their home schools and expanding services at alternative sites to boost graduation rates. The reform calls for either "finding a seat" for troubled students or "creating one."

"We can't take a wait-and-see approach," said Steve Gallon, district head of alternative education for the past two years. "We're in crisis stage."

EARLY INTERVENTION

Last year, there were 20,000 students who fit the district's "at-risk" profile. Kids who fit the profile include those who are struggling academically, chronically truant or have been suspended several times.

By identifying those kids before serious incidents occur, officials believe they can outline educational plans within the school suitable to their needs. For the kids enrolled in the various alternative ed programs -

- some homeless or pregnant, others incarcerated -- the stakes couldn't be higher, officials say. Each one of them is five times more likely to drop out than their counterparts in "regular" school, Gallon said.

By the time many end up in shelters or locked in detention cells, they're often several grade levels behind. But educators have to be focused on breaking down "barriers of distrust" before they can even focus on textbooks, Gallon said.

At the Bridge, which serves kids ages 10 to 18, that task is daunting.

"We get kids at all hours of the night," said executive director Stephanie Solovei. "They come in with a myriad of problems."

A winding blue and yellow cobblestone walkway leads to the spacious wooden house where the staff works quickly to perform academic assessments of each child. Some, brought in by social services case-workers, are found sleeping along sidewalks or stranded on street corners. A few of the girls, as young as 13, are no strangers to prostitution. Most fade in and out of foster homes.

The average stay at the Bridge is 30 days, but can last up to eight months.

"Finding a suitable home for our kids can be difficult," said assistant director Joan Shaw Davis.

School days begin around 6 a.m. with morning chores, followed by classes that end at 2:30 p.m. Students then attend counseling sessions on topics ranging from pregnancy to HIV/AIDS.

SAFE HAVEN

But dinnertime may be the most important hour at the Bridge, 2810 NW South River Dr. It's when the staff gains insight into each students' lives as they share their most intimate -- or frightening -- experiences. The cafeteria has become a haven of sorts. "It's a special place for us," Solovei said. "We really get to connect with the kids."

Gallon believes such bonds will inevitably decide if Highways can put these teens, caught at the crossroads, back on the road to success.

"Programs don't save kids," he said. "Relationships do."