ORIGINAL EDITORIAL

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HERALD WATCHDOG

Basics bumping the extras at schools

In Miami-Dade County's poorest neighborhoods, high schools offer students far fewer choices of arts, elective and advanced classes, a Herald analysis found.

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High school students at Killian Senior in Kendall could study seven foreign languages last spring, including Hebrew, Japanese, Latin and Italian.

At Booker T. Washington Senior in Overtown, their peers could study only one -- Spanish.

Students at Michael Krop Senior near Aventura had a menu of 31 different Advanced Placement classes, which can lead to college credit.

At Edison Senior in Little Haiti, there were seven.

The arts curriculum at Palmetto Senior in Pinecrest included nearly 90 different classes.

At Jackson Senior in Allapattah, there were 20.

Across Miami-Dade County, high schools in high-poverty, inner-city neighborhoods have far smaller selections of electives, arts and advanced classes than those in wealthier suburban areas, according to a Herald analysis of the nearly 18,000 courses offered last semester -- the latest data available.

The findings raise questions about the equity of education in the nation's fourth-largest school system, as well as broader issues regarding testing, education standards and the best way to prepare urban students who for years were advanced to the next grade regardless of academic performance.

Intensive-care programs in many cities around the country have concentrated on reading and mathematics by eliminating more esoteric classes that were seen as enriching but less vital.

Increasingly, though, education experts -- including new Miami-Dade Superintendent Rudy Crew -- question whether that practice robs poor and minority students of exposure to well-rounded educations that prepare students in more affluent areas for a wide range of career and college options.

''They have college prep; we have FCAT prep,'' said Edwin Baptiste, a senior at Edison, referring to the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, which has become the academic priority at many schools.

The statewide test, which determines everything from a student's graduation to the school's funding and public image, is one of the key factors in the course disparity.

Four of the district's lowest-performing schools -- Jackson, Booker T., Edison and Northwestern -- are required by School Board policy to assign low-scoring students to two daily sessions of math and reading. The controversial practice, known as double-dosing, is also used voluntarily at other low-performing schools.

Scores increased at those four schools, sometimes dramatically. The measures used to calculate school grades jumped nearly 25 percent at Edison. But the test measures only reading, writing and math. Some education experts said it gauges success too narrowly and ignores the cost of eliminating other kinds of classes.

''It denies a kid a horizon of human development,'' said William Blanton, a professor at the University of Miami's School of Education. ``Things that you can see in front of you create a trajectory for your future.''

In schools and districts that have tried other ways to boost test scores, double-dosing is seen as a last-ditch effort to ensure that students meet basic academic requirements and earn diplomas.

`NECESSARY EVILS'

''With our students, it's one of those necessary evils,'' said Samuel Johnson, principal at Miami Central Senior, an F-rated school where 60 percent of sophomores failed last year's reading FCAT. ``We have to provide them with every opportunity possible to earn that high school diploma.''

As a result, arts and elective courses have been pushed to the margins. Lower enrollment at many inner-city schools is part of the problem -- a school with 1,000 students usually cannot offer as many electives as one with 3,000.

But even when schools have comparable numbers of students, the inner-city ones offered far fewer choices than their suburban counterparts. Central High, for example, offered 104 different courses in the arts and core curriculum last spring, while Palmetto, with roughly the same enrollment, offered 222.

''They're going to kill us with this double-dosing,'' said Anthony Seraphin, a senior at Edison. ``When you take a double dose of drugs, what happens?''

The Florida Board of Education has embraced double-dosing by approving district-written plans that mandate it, but state education officials insist that it is only a triage measure.

''If you've got a really serious injury, you've got to stop the bleeding before you treat the wound,'' said Jim Warford, state chancellor for K-12 education.

Low-income students, especially, might have no exposure to fields such as psychology, economics and stagecraft if they are not exposed to it in school, said Crew, who said he intends to return arts and electives to all high schools over the next few years.

''We've dumbed down the notion of being smart,'' Crew said. Americans ``are particularly ambivalent about whether poor children, children of color and children whose first language is not English can be smart at a 21st century level.''

CHANGES PLANNED

The district will continue to use double-dosing in some situations, Crew said, but will find other ways to expand arts and electives.

The D- and F-graded schools in the School Improvement Zone -- an intensive-care program that Crew designed this year -- will have extended days, opening time for an additional class.

Across the county, high school teachers will receive additional training to incorporate reading, writing and math skills into more exotic classes.

A music class might study the mathematical underpinnings of rhythm and time in music, for example, and social studies classes could require more essay writing.

''You've got to go beyond double-dosing into incorporating that rigorous academics into the hands-on application: career academies, arts, music, history,'' Warford said.

Crew also plans to put some limits on principals' authority to choose which classes are offered.

Principals have had almost unfettered authority to choose which state-approved courses to offer. The district's central administration and six regional superintendents have done little more than rubber-stamp a principal's plan.

The decisions are supposed to be based on student interest and staff qualifications, but internal school politics often played a major role.

A zealous English chair might have campaigned for a wide assortment of options at one school while an apathetic counterpart in social studies did little to move beyond the basic options.

''Under previous administrations, we started talking to the principals and department chairs about it,'' said Lourdes Rovira, assistant superintendent for curriculum development and instructional support. ``There was no enforcement, no directive from the superintendent saying you shall do this or not do that.''

CREW: CHANGE COMING

That, Crew said, is going to change.

Regional superintendents will be more involved in drafting schedules, he said, and will require coordination between high schools and the middle schools that feed students to them. If French is offered at a middle school, for example, advanced French classes should be available at the neighborhood high school.

''I expect that within 36 months, this [disparity] is going to flatten out,'' Crew said.

That disparity is even larger for accelerated classes and its explanations more complicated.

Eligibility is part of the problem. Honors classes are open to anyone, but gifted classes are restricted to students who have passed a battery of district tests.

For a variety of reasons -- lower parent demand for testing, the quality of the neighborhood's elementary and middle schools, the attitudes of principals -- inner-city high schools have far fewer gifted students.

Last spring, for example, Booker T. Washington had two gifted students in a school of 1,482, and Edison had none. But at Palmetto, nearly 500 students -- 14 percent -- were classified as gifted.

''Because they are black and Haitian, nobody has expected anything from them,'' Rovira said. ``It's been pounded into those kids that they can't.''

Staffing is another factor. More experienced teachers tend to request transfers to higher-performing schools, leaving schools like Edison and Jackson with few faculty members with the expertise to teach high-end courses.

Even when inner-city schools have qualified teachers, assigning them to underenrolled Advanced Placement classes is often considered inefficient because only a small number of students are seen as qualified for the heavy workload.

''When you pay one teacher to teach eight kids, there's an overload somewhere else,'' said Gloria Evans, principal at Booker T. Washington from 1999 until last summer, who nonetheless kept advanced classes with as few as five students.

Advanced Placement classes are also open to all, but they are designed as college-level courses with massive reading loads. A number of suburban schools have embraced them as part of the culture, but they are still intimidating and foreign at places like Edison and Central.

'We try to encourage them to take the AP courses, but their mind-set is `Why take a harder course if I can take a middle-of-the-road course and get an A?' '' said Johnson, who offered 10 different Advanced Placement courses last spring. ``They feel it's not worth the extra work.''

On the contrary, numerous recent studies identified vast benefits for even marginal students who enroll in the most challenging courses.

According to a 1999 study by the U.S. Department of Education, students who took advanced classes were more likely to graduate from college -- regardless of whether they actually passed an Advanced Placement exam.

''If you expect very little, then you get very little,'' Crew said.

By offering extra pay and training for teachers in the School Improvement Zone, he hopes to attract more of the veteran teachers who are qualified to teach advanced classes.

In many ways, Crew said the disparity has been incubating for years, a result of an outdated idea of what high school should be.

The modern version of high school, developed largely after World War II, was designed to prepare society's brightest children. Others were screened out to the agricultural, manufacturing and public-service jobs that never required a diploma, said Warford, the Florida K-12 official.

"The problem with our high schools is not that they aren't what they used to be," Warford said. ``The problem with our high schools is that they are exactly what they used to be and the world has changed."

Campus culture, however, has not changed as quickly. The attitude that poor urban children cannot be expected to excel lingers at many schools, Warford said.

"You just put your finger on the 1,200-pound gorilla standing in the corner," Warford said. ``That's why it's absolutely essential that we invest in training our principals and our teachers. If we're going to change the culture, that's the only way we're going to do it."

The situation has been exacerbated because, after so many consecutive years of D and F grades from the state, some schools were infused with a defeatist attitude that presumed that a more robust course catalog would be wasted on their students.

"I've been told I'm wasting my talent here, that these kids aren't worth it," said Dannielle Boyer, who teaches honors American government, one of the few honors classes offered at Edison. ``I have to change people's minds."

RESPONSE

Published in the Miami Herald, 1/1/05:

School disparities

Your Dec. 26 article *Basics bumping the extras at schools* about the disparity of course offerings among public schools shed much-needed light on educational inequality and the real victims of school-choice opponents.

Low-income students lose. Their schools offer the smallest selection of elective courses and little preparation for higher learning. Wealthier families can move to neighborhoods with better schools or enroll their students in private schools, but

low-income families have no way to ensure quality education for their children. The barrier to educational achievement is not ambition or work ethic; it is income.

Scholarships for students whose needs are not met by public schools put choice back in the hands of families and prevent status from limiting achievement. Families should choose the best educational setting for their children, regardless of how much they earn. To restrict options based on income is unfair and un-American. Choice should not just be a privilege for the wealthy.

KERRI VAUGHAN, Miami