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ABSTRACT

Central EXPRESS (Exceptional People Renewing Education for Students and Schools) is a collaborative partnership for systemic educational reform targeted to 14,000 students, over 700 teachers and other professionals, and 11 schools in one Miami, Florida, high school feeder district. It provides services, resources, and activities at multiple points in the pre-K to postsecondary continuum. The effort is assets-based and designed to build capacity within the student, professional, and parent community using a comprehensive, holistic approach. Project activities support standards-based performance for students. The initiative's main goals are to improve student performance in reading, math, science, writing, social studies, and technology infusion. One of the means of achieving that goal is providing professional development for teachers. Professional development activities include an instructional leadership cadre, a new teacher induction program, national conferences, a Master's degree in urban education, a Peace Corps fellows program, focus group interview training, school leaders' retreats, and a professional travel fund. Funds are also available to principals for site-specific staff development. While all of the schools still have low ratings, all but the high school are making gains on the statewide assessment test. (SM)

Collaborating to Close the Achievement Gap

Robert Vos

February 2002

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Collaborating to Close the Achievement Gap

Robert Vos

Central EXPRESS (Exceptional People Renewing Education for Students and Schools) is a collaborative partnership for systemic educational reform targeted to 14,000 students, more than 700 teachers, and other professionals, and eleven schools in the Miami Central Senior High School feeder pattern in Miami, Florida. *Central EXPRESS* provides services, resources and activities at multiple points in the pre-K through post-secondary continuum. The effort is assets-based and designed to build capacity within the student, professional and parent community, using a comprehensive, holistic approach. Project activities support standards-based performance for students. The main goals of the initiative are to improve student performance in reading, math, science, writing, social studies and technology infusion.

Who is involved?

Central EXPRESS is an extended urban partnership comprised of more than 30 education, business, charitable, government and community agencies. Urban partners include four major colleges/universities, five major national foundations, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, United Teachers of Dade, ten community-based organizations, eleven schools, and a leadership team of 150 educators.

Who funds the initiative?

The initiative was launched in 1998 with a major grant from The Ford Foundation, followed by AmeriCorps funding (for elementary school tutors) from the Florida Commission on Community Service. Additional funding for specific components has been provided by the AT&T Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Peacock Foundation, Dade Community Foundation, and North Shore Medical Foundation. Major additional grant funding was awarded in 1999 by the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, Washington Mutual Bank, and the U.S. Department of Education. More than \$2 million in donor support has been secured. Grants support coordinated delivery and specific project activities in *Central EXPRESS'* three pathways to student achievement: direct student services, professional development of teachers/administrators, and parent community involvement. Each collaborator in the *Central EXPRESS* urban partnership contributes in-kind support.

Who's in charge?

Central EXPRESS is governed collaboratively by stakeholders who are embodied and represented by the *Central EXPRESS* Steering Committee. Three proposal partners (Greater Miami Urban Education Pact at Florida International University, The Education Fund, and the University of Miami) play major roles in seeking funding and developing additional services for *Central EXPRESS*. General coordination and staff support for the initiative is provided by the Greater Miami Urban Education Pact, a partnership program in the College of Education, Florida International University. The Pact Executive Director acts as chairperson of the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee meets monthly to monitor program policy and fiscal operations; shepherd growth and development; assess ongoing needs; and ensure progress toward objectives. Each proposal partner seeks Steering Committee input and respects the collaborative mission while acting as autonomous institutions to fiscally manage and implement their grants. *Central EXPRESS* programs and policies are integrated with reform priorities of the school District and the teachers' union.

History of the Miami Central Feeder Pattern Initiative

Miami Central feeder pattern schools (eight elementary schools, two middle schools and Miami Central Senior High School) have a long history of cohesive action. In 1989, Miami Central was one of six feeder patterns in the Dade County District to pilot the concept of the feeder pattern as a unit. In the early 90's the Central Feeder Pattern worked in a partnership with the College of Education at FIU on a Global Awareness project that resulted in a K-12 curriculum in global awareness and an annual Global Extravaganza that showcased accomplishments from each school. In the mid-90's cohesive professional development initiatives promoted school-to-school exchange of best practices and high expectations for teachers and students.

In 1997, when funding became available for a community of schools to pursue intensive school reform, the Central Feeder Pattern was already committed to working as a unit. School and region leaders embraced the concept of a feeder pattern project that would focus on student achievement and address the many needs of the schools and the community. The proposal partners - The Greater Miami Urban Education Pact at FIU, the Education Fund, and the University of Miami - were tapped by the Ford Foundation to submit a proposal in a national competition for feeder pattern funding. After a year of planning and assessment activities, funded by the Ford Foundation, *Central EXPRESS*

was born and a proposal was submitted in May, 1998, in partnership with school, region and district representatives of Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the Educational and Professional Issues Division of the United Teachers of Dade.

Central EXPRESS was awarded an implementation grant in August of 1998 by the Ford Foundation through its national Collaborating for Educational Reform Initiative. At the same time, the Education Fund secured funding from the Florida Commission on Community Service, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Peacock Foundation to support deployment of 25 AmeriCorps tutors to *Central EXPRESS* elementary schools. This component formed the base of a third pathway to improved performance: direct services to students. In May 1999, the proposal partners through the University of Miami secured additional funding from The Southeast Florida Annenberg Challenge to enhance all three pathways. In August 1999, the Pact at FIU received notification of a major GEAR UP award from the U.S. Department of Education to provide direct services in tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and enrichment to sixth grade cohorts in the Central Feeder Pattern middle schools. Since November, 1999 GEAR UP EXPRESS has delivered 11,000 hours of tutoring (both paid and volunteer), provided funding to keep the media centers open for two additional hours after school for enrichment and homework help, recruited and trained College Coaches who will mentor students, provided a part-time nurse in each school, provided social work interns to make home visits, developed a summer program to be delivered on the Miami Dade Community College Medical Center Campus and Barry University, provided professional development in math and reading for teachers, and is developing a cohesive cohort of teachers and students that is paralleled by none. Through its relationship to The Pact, the Education Fund also received funding to establish Parent Resource Centers at each of the eleven Central Feeder Pattern schools.

The Central Feeder Pattern initiative, begun with a commitment to connection and communication, has seen its vision mature in 1999-2000 with the aid of Community partnerships. Funding streams of over \$2.5 million have been assembled to provide coordinated services in support of teachers, students and parents, complementing current District curriculum initiatives, performance goals and strategies for professional renewal.

Central EXPRESS

Are we making a difference through staff development?

The ultimate aim of Central EXPRESS is to improve the academic performance of the 14,000 students in the Central Feeder Pattern. One of the means to achieve that goal is to provide professional development for teachers in the eleven schools, the rationale being that, the more able the teachers, the more likely students are to succeed. Student success is reported in other documents--the end of the year reports, periodic reports to funding agencies, quarterly accounts to principals. The purposes of this paper are to describe briefly the professional development activities conducted through the first two years of the implementation of Central EXPRESS and to report, in teachers' own words, the impact that those activities had on them. Also included are a list of the professionals who facilitated the activities and photographs that capture moments of professional development during the second year of implementation, 1999-2000

- ↪ **The Instructional Leadership Cadre.** Comprised of assistant principals and teacher leaders from each school, the cadre met in quarterly Saturday sessions to develop their capacity as leaders and to strengthen the academic program and its delivery, both within and across grades. The team from each school included assistant principals; teachers of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies; a guidance counselor; the library media specialist; a specialist in instructional technology; and a specialist in parent/community outreach.
- ↪ **The New Teacher Induction Program.** This component offered four seminars, or round tables, to help new teachers adjust to teaching in general and teaching in the Central Feeder Pattern in particular. In the second year of the project, it also provided on-campus support from new teacher coordinators, who served as mentors to the newcomers.
- ↪ **National conferences sponsored by the Ford Foundation.** Selected teachers joined the teams from Central EXPRESS who attended a symposium on teacher induction and retention in Miami and conferences on school reform in Rochester, Newark, New York City, and Costa Mesa, California.
- ↪ **For Our Children in Urban Schools (FOCUS).** This program, already in progress at Florida International University when Central

EXPRESS began, became one of the components of Central EXPRESS through the partnership. It placed interns from FIU in Central Feeder Pattern schools.

↪ **Master's Degree in Urban Education at FIU.** Another program brought to Central EXPRESS by the partnership with FIU, the Master's Degree in Urban Education offered teachers in the Central Feeder Pattern the opportunity to earn their master's degree at a greatly reduced fee.

↪ **The Peace Corps Fellows Program.** Also administered by FIU through an agreement with the school district, the Peace Corps Fellows Program placed Peace Corps fellows in the secondary schools of the feeder pattern and supported them as they earned advanced degrees and learned to teach in urban schools.

↪ **The Mathematics and Science Resource Teachers (MSRT) advanced degree program at University of Miami.** The MSRT program was fully funded by Central EXPRESS to develop teacher leaders in mathematics and science.

↪ **Writing EXPRESS.** The ambitious writing component of the project, directed from the University of Miami and initially funded by the South Florida Annenberg Challenge, included a symposium of writing teachers in 1998-1999; a writing assessment for third, seventh, and ninth graders in the spring of 1999-2000; a scoring session in which teacher leaders scored the nearly 3,000 papers; a Writing Assessment Academy at UM August; and follow-up support at the schools.

↪ **Writing Inservice of Miami Central Senior High School and Broadmoor Elementary School.** These series of seminars for the teachers supplemented the other staff development in writing.

↪ **Focus Group Interview Training.** As part of the planning done for the Annenberg grant, 25 school leaders participated in a one-day session of focus group interview training. After the training, leaders used their skill to conduct focus group interviews with parents, students, and teachers on the topic of students' academic performance.

↪ **School Leaders' Retreats.** Annual two-day retreats, or colloquia, were held in Key Largo for teams of leaders from the eleven schools. Teams included principals, assistant principals, teacher

leaders, and parents. In addition, another one-day retreat was conducted for principals in Miami Beach.

➤ **National Teacher Policy Institute.** The Education Fund is one of the lead partners in Central EXPRESS. Because of its alliance with the National Teacher Policy Institute, two teachers from the feeder pattern were able to attend the NTPI summer institute in Snowbird, Utah, in the summer of 1999.

➤ **Professional Travel Fund.** Teachers could apply to Central EXPRESS for funds to cover professional travel within the state of Florida. If approved, the recipient had to agree to share whatever was learned with colleagues in the feeder pattern.

In addition to the activities listed above, Central EXPRESS made funds available to principals that they could use for site-specific staff development.

➤ **Central EXPRESS Staff Development.** It should be noted that Central Express activities are aligned with professional development activities of the school district. Project leaders have been cautious not to duplicate or conflict with training provided by the district, but rather to complement and supplement district activities. The use of district curriculum leaders and teacher trainers in Central EXPRESS activities has contributed significantly to the collaboration of the project and the school system. Also, it should also be noted that the Central EXPRESS activities target specific groups of teachers--e.g., teacher leaders, new teachers, new teacher coordinators. Limited funding and time for training of individual classroom teachers and on the dissemination of skills and concepts by the school leaders trained in project activities.

The best teaching practices emphasized in all of the Central EXPRESS professional development activities include the following: reciprocal teaching, guided reading, problem-solving, use of writing as both a means of learning and a way of reporting what students know, use of data (students' test scores, results of diagnostic instruments, etc.) To plan instruction, collaboration among teachers and library media specialist, integration of information skills into instruction, integration of technology into instruction, pacing of instruction that insures students have been exposed to what they need to know before they are tested on it, coordination of curriculum among teachers in the same grade, coordination of curriculum among teachers of different grades emphasis on the need for regular attendance, emphasis on increasing parent involvement, emphasis on the relationship of classroom activities to

careers or further schooling, and emphasis on the need for completing school.

What results are we seeing?

- While all schools are still rated "D", all but the high school are making gains on the statewide assessment test. Of the thirty-three measures, 26 were reported as gains of which twelve met the target.
 - Seven of the eleven schools reported gains in Reading scores.
 - Nine of the eleven schools reported gains in mathematics scores.
- Ten of the eleven schools reported gains in the writing scores. All schools, except the high school, met the benchmark of 92% daily attendance.
- Schools report a 7% increase in PTSA membership over last year.
- 100 teachers participated in a year-long Leadership Cadre with positive impact on the teacher and school (anecdotal data only)
- Seventeen pool substitute teachers were trained in classroom management and teaching strategies in six days of workshops, the first ever for substitutes.

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