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The Parent Academy: Family Engagement in Miami-Dade County Public Schools

On a Monday afternoon in October 2009, Assistant Superintendent Iraida Mendez-Cartaya, who oversaw Intergovernmental Affairs, Grants Administration, and Community Services in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS), reviewed the most recent report from the director of The Parent Academy. In the past year, under the guidance of a new superintendent, Alberto Carvalho, the Academy had made substantial changes in its structure in order to focus more intensively on the lowest-performing schools in the district. The next day, the principals from those schools were scheduled to meet with the superintendent and his cabinet. Mendez-Cartaya hoped to provide them with a clear picture of the resources they could expect from the district for the next year, including the Parent Academy.

The Parent Academy (TPA) was widely seen as one of the district's most successful programs. TPA, developed to increase family engagement, had provided workshops, lectures and other events to over 100,000 parents since its debut in 2005. Many MDCPS staff believed that TPA was in part responsible for the turnaround of several low-performing schools, and one of its first investors described it as "a staggeringly successful initiative."

Despite its apparent success, however, TPA faced many challenges. The data collection system used to monitor the program's impact was inefficient and incomplete. In addition, TPA was funded entirely with private money. The program's primary funding source, a grant from the Knight Foundation, would expire in September 2011, and the national economic downturn of 2008 made competition for other private funds especially fierce. The credit crisis, stock market crash, and fall in home prices had hit Florida particularly hard, and in SY09, MDCPS weathered budget cuts of over \$300 million¹.

As Mendez-Cartaya reviewed the report, she realized it would be increasingly difficult to manage all of the current TPA projects while also expanding and improving the quality of the program. For TPA to survive as an integral part of MDCPS, difficult decisions would have to be made about the

¹ SY is a PELP convention that denotes "school year." For example, SY09 refers to the 2008–2009 school year.

Professor Karen Mapp and Research Associate Elisha Brookover prepared this case. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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best way to deploy its resources. As the program evolved, what changes would not only improve the quality of the program, but also make it sustainable?

Background and Context

In 2009, MDCPS served over 345,000 students in 415 schools. Though it was the fourth-largest school district in the United States, enrollment had declined by nearly 25,000 students in the last 5 years. Covering nearly 2,000 square miles, MDCPS included a diverse set of neighborhoods such as Little Havana, Little Haiti, gated communities, and beachfront condominiums.² As one board member explained, “When people think about Miami, they think about the city, but that’s an almost insignificant portion of the school district. Actually, farming is one of the top industries in our county.” Across the district, students’ experiences outside of school varied widely. One longtime district employee described the contrasts: “East of I-95 it’s beautiful. You look out and you see high rises and the glistening water. Just west of I-95 it is a very different world, where you struggle to find evidence of places where children live and grow happily and prosper.”

Across MDCPS, 63% of students received free or reduced-price lunches (see **Exhibit 1**). Hispanic students made up 63% of the population, 26% of students were African-American, and 9% were White (non-Hispanic). In a county where 68% of residents spoke a language other than English at home, 15% of MDCPS students were identified as English Language Learners.³

In 2004, test results had revealed several areas of concern. Just 42% of students district-wide met the state standard for proficiency in reading, and 47% met the standard in math.⁴ In addition, the achievement gaps between Hispanic and African-American students and their white counterparts were consistently in the double digits, as was the gap between students from low-income and high-income families (see **Exhibit 2**). The graduation rate for the class of 2004 was 57%, and over 50 schools throughout the district received either a D or an F in the Florida Department of Education school grading system.⁵ In July 2004, the MDCPS school board hired Rudy Crew, previously the chancellor of New York City Public Schools, to take over the superintendent’s seat.

Family Engagement in Miami

By 2004, MDCPS had a long history of attending to family and parent engagement. As early as 1973, a district office was dedicated to parent volunteer recruitment and training. As the community evolved, so did the Office of Family and Community Involvement. “In the early 1980s, we realized there were so many parents starting to work, we needed opportunities for them to be able to contribute,” explained Linda Brown, a retired MDCPS employee who worked in the office at the

² U.S. Census Bureau: State and County Quickfacts, “Miami-Dade County, Florida,” U.S. Census Bureau website, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12/12086.html>, accessed March 2010.

³ Compiled from U.S. Census Bureau: State and County Quickfacts, “Miami-Dade County, Florida” and company documents.

⁴ School Data Direct, “Miami-Dade County Public Schools,” School Data Direct website, <http://www.schooldatadirect.org>, accessed December 2009.

⁵ Florida Department of Education, “School Accountability Reports: Florida School Grades,” Florida Department of Education website, <http://schoolgrades.fldoe.org/default.asp>, accessed March 2010.

time. The district began offering evening trainings on ways to help students at home, counted at-home support as volunteer hours, and created awards for schools with high parental engagement.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in MDCPS was one of the largest in the nation, boasting roughly 58,000 members by 2004. Each year, the PTA organized a Family Involvement Day to welcome parents and families to the school, explain how the district was structured, and offer tips and strategies on how to help their children succeed academically.

When Crew surveyed the programs in place when he arrived, he felt there were pockets of good parent engagement in MDCPS, but, as he explained to Brown in September 2004, “they are not across the board, and they are not equitable.” Crew had been considering for several years the initiatives and work districts did in relating to parents. “All made certain assumptions,” he explained:

Number one, the assumption was that we were providers to parents, in that we provide them a place to put their children in school, and we provide a curriculum. We then operate with the parents, and they supply us with their children. In a straight business equation, this means that I’m at best a distributor and they are my supplier, but that’s kind of an odd relationship – because who is it that is creating demand here? It started to hit me that in affluent communities parents do operate with demand, sometimes even with entitlement.

Miami, he believed, could become “a district that was helping to develop demand in parents, rather than just responding to the supplier/distributor relationship we have now.” As more “Demand Parents” began to speak up on behalf of their children, Crew predicted, schools would have no choice but to respond and improve.

The Origins of the Parent Academy (2004-2005)

The Vision

Crew observed that the parents he called Demand Parents understood the system, and they believed it was their responsibility to make schools provide what their child needed. “They’re operating off of what they believe they are entitled to as a consumer, and they say ‘I want my child in a gifted program’ or ‘I want a school to be clean.’ So what would it take for us to flip this and make parents in urban communities demand-side parents?”

Crew believed the majority of so-called Supply Parents were simply uninformed and therefore shut out of the system. “They’re not all struggling feebly to climb America’s ladder,” he explained. “They are mightily, mightily using all the resources they have to stay current in their child’s life and their child’s education. The problem is they don’t have enough resources, and that’s a different problem than they don’t want to, or they don’t have the will, or the capacity, or all that other bullsh—people talk about.” To become Demand Parents, he realized, parents in Miami would need access to new knowledge, to the information that is assumed in affluent communities.

By August 2004, Crew already had a vision for supporting the development of Demand Parents in MDCPS. “I started thinking, how do you get parents access to the knowledge they need to be on the demand side? Well, you build a university, a knowledge center that they have access to.” Crew wanted to create a program that offered parents training in three areas:

- understanding schools and guiding their children’s education
- increasing their own capacity, by extension supporting their children

- employability and certification, to increase parents' employability options

Classes were to be offered in the three major languages spoken in Miami-Dade County: English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

Crew also insisted that this program could not be entirely school-based. "For too long, we have asked them to come to us," he said. "We need to go to them. This program is not a campus and it is not a place – this needs to be in the community. Wherever parents are, that's where we need to be."

One immediate challenge was how to pay for such a program. Crew knew that in order for this program to have support from the school board, funds that could be used to support classrooms must not be used for this initiative. To address this concern, Crew repeatedly emphasized that "not a dime of this can come from public money." All funding needed to come from private sources.

In September 2004, Crew authorized Alberto Carvalho, then an associate superintendent, and his team, headed by Linda Brown, then the district director of Family and Community Involvement, to make this vision a reality. "I told Linda to think about all these places where parents are interacting with their children: nutrition, religion, safety, education, finance, issues of sexuality," said Crew. "All of these became intellectual fodder for a menu of demand side access and knowledge generation for parents." Crew gave the team a deadline, too: what eventually came to be called The Parent Academy (TPA) would open in August 2005.

The Parent Academy Planning Committee

In November 2004, at Carvalho's direction, Brown convened a meeting of the newly-formed Parent Academy Planning Committee. "We held it at United Way, because we wanted a neutral site," explained Brown. The full committee consisted of over 100 interested individuals, 60% of whom were not employees of the school system, and 38% of whom had never had children in MDCPS. "It was an amoeba to manage, for sure," said Brown. "But it was so important to have all those stakeholders."

The planning committee had six subcommittees, each dedicated to planning one aspect of TPA (see **Exhibit 3**). Each was chaired by a parent, with a central office staff member as an assistant chair. The full committee met a few times over the course of the year, but the executive team, consisting of Brown and subcommittee representatives, met weekly. When the full committee met, the organizers insisted that the parent chairs report on their committees' work, rather than the school staff. Brown recalled: "I remember one woman had a hard time with English, and she really didn't want to report out, but in the end, she was incredible. It really jazzed me because you could tell we were hitting a nerve with this Parent Academy idea. You could tell from the people, the excitement."

Some concerns over the planning process lingered, however. Carvalho explained: "TPA had a core group of supporters, but the majority of these supporters were the usual suspects, and I always have an issue with that." Still, he strongly supported the mission. "It's not just teaching parents what's good for them," he said. "It's giving parents an opportunity to learn how to ask the right questions, which empowers them in demanding equitable, high quality service from the school system. It actually creates pressure on the school system, because in our capitalistic society, demand moves mountains."

The Planning Committee in Action

In order to gain an understanding of the community's existing needs and resources, the planning committee coordinated a survey of roughly 75 communities throughout the district. Brown

explained: “We went all the way down by the Keys to the Haitian immigrant communities. We interviewed the business community, executive parents, we went to Little Havana. And we asked everyone: what are your needs, what are your issues, what facilities do you have that you might be willing to share, what kinds of training would you like to see created for parents?”

Everyone on the planning committee, in addition to their subcommittee work, helped do the surveys. “They went out into their communities,” recalled Brown. “We were physically there. We didn’t *send* surveys, we *went*.” Along with committee members, district staff were enlisted to provide support. “We asked for a lot of help from the bilingual office and the Haitian outreach specialists,” explained Brown. “This was in addition to everything – we were still running the office, and life was going on. Time was not set aside for us to do this. Luckily, we had this new superintendent who was quite clear, from top to bottom: ‘this will be done, and you will assist as needed.’”

The executive planning team sat down to review the completed surveys in February 2005. “We put everything from the surveys on index cards,” remembered Brown. “Facilities were one color, curriculum was another color – everything was grouped. The conference table was full of cards. And out of that grew our themes, and the meat of The Parent Academy.”

In May 2005, the MDCPS school board reviewed the 75-page report from the Planning Committee. One board member voiced concern: “We had so many needs in our existing schools; I needed to know why we would want to launch another program. When a superintendent announces a new program, every principal in every school has got to look up from what they’re doing and kowtow to him and his new program. So I had real concerns about distractions and allocation of resources.” Despite these objections, the board voted to approve the initiative, and plans for The Parent Academy moved forward.

Building External Support

Partnerships

Crew knew TPA would risk being seen as “taking money away from classrooms,” so from the outset, external funding was crucial. He called members of the Miami business community even before he arrived in Miami in 2004, including Adrienne Arsht. Arsht, the chairman of TotalBank, was noted for her networking skill and was described by many residents as one of the most influential women in Miami. She was also known for her dedication to civic causes, and Crew quickly identified her as a potentially powerful ally. Although not a parent, Arsht immediately supported his cause. “Rudy said the Academy was his most important project,” she explained. “When you hear him speak, and his ideas, you just want to follow him. He is so charismatic and knowledgeable about educating children, and it was clear this was an important idea.”

Brown described Arsht’s support as critical: “She provided one of the initial donations, she spoke to the school board on our behalf, and she opened doors for us in the business community.” Soon, says Arsht, “I became the face of the Parent Academy, and the go-to person in the business community for Rudy’s projects. I was the first person to support the Parent Academy for quite awhile. This isn’t a community where people embrace civic initiatives and take action very quickly.”

In 2005, the Knight Foundation awarded MDCPS a preliminary grant to develop TPA. According to one of the grant managers, “What the foundation saw as interesting was that this was the Holy Grail of education. If you could get parents involved in education, you could bring about change faster than anything else. When the foundation made its first investment in TPA, we were thinking, OK, let’s try it out for a bit. Let’s see if it works.”

In addition to monetary investments, a number of partners offered services and additional support. Carvalho explained: "All the workforce development and adult courses became Parent Academy courses. I'm always a believer that the table of need is big enough for everybody to have a seat at it, but let's all sit at the *same* table." Many institutions, including Miami-Dade College, Florida International University, and Nova Southeastern University, already offered parent support programs. TPA worked to form partnerships with these groups, as well as with Florida Memorial University, a historically African-American college with an established continuing education program for working adults. "Some people were threatened a little bit," recalled one planning committee member. "People had to come to the table and understand what we were going for, that we weren't taking away people's jobs."

Corporate partners also offered a range of services and products. AOL agreed to provide technological support, as well as one year of free internet access to participating parents. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt hired a public relations firm to develop a parallel initiative, called Reading In Progress, to extend TPA's reach and focus on literacy. The program established public community reading corners and set up events where celebrities encouraged reading. "Once the awareness for literacy was there," explained a senior vice president at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, "then we could channel people back to TPA, where there were structured workshops for parents."

The Parent Academy in Action (2005 – 2008)

TPA began in August 2005 with four goals:

- To educate parents on how to become "active partners" by providing them with resources that will enhance their ability to assist in their child's achievement and success
- To strengthen the family unit through various courses, workshops, and conferences
- To unite families, schools and communities toward the common goal of educational achievement for our children
- To inform parents of their rights, responsibilities and the educational opportunities available to them

Crew believed that if the program was to take root, it had to be done on a large scale and make a name for itself quickly. Rather than piloting the initiative, TPA opened county-wide in August 2005, with a rollout plan that set benchmarks for expansion over the first three years of operations.

Crew appointed Sandy Moise to be the Dean of TPA under the leadership of Carvalho and Brown. Moise had been in the district since 1990, starting out as a teacher and ultimately becoming Assistant Principal of the Year in 2000. In addition, she had chaired the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Miami program, the only school system employee ever to serve in that role.

At the start-of-the-school-year principals' meeting, Crew announced that TPA would be a reality. According to one audience member, "He basically said, 'get on the train, or the train's leaving without you.' And a lot of principals were very nervous." Other principals were simply cautious. One recalled: "As principals, we've been there, done that, and with every regime comes something new, so we were skeptical. We figured 'we'll wait and see.'"

Crew found that once the initiative was announced, there was a lot of excitement. He remembered:

There were an awful lot of schools who said, 'I want to be able to have a Parent Academy,' but they were doing it mostly because this was the newest car, and everyone wants the new model. They didn't understand that it was about creating a different kind of demand in their schools. If they had really thought about it, in many cases they wouldn't have wanted it, because they were perfectly comfortable with the old relationships they had with parents.

Components

TPA offered three tiers of activities: *core courses* to help parents help their children succeed in school, *growth courses* to help parents increase their personal capacity, and *certification courses* to help parents advance professionally (see **Exhibit 4**). Classes took a variety of forms, from one-time-only events to multi-session courses, and in the first year alone, they were held at over 125 different sites across the county. TPA worked with one grassroots community organization to hold classes in barbershops, an established and popular meeting place in the Haitian refugee communities. The Lunch and Learn series held brown bag events so working parents could attend in their place of business, during their lunch breaks. Other programs included read-alouds at bookstores and presentations at parks. Presenters were recruited from across the community. Carvalho explained: "We had bankers teaching the mortgage series and the financial literacy classes. Law enforcement officials taught safety and security."

Several early events were designed to establish TPA's reputation in the community. "We realized we really needed to have some high visibility," explained Brown. "We needed to brand this quickly to get the word out." Events such as the Lecture Series featured prominent speakers who could share important information while also drawing media attention. In addition, said Brown, "Our Haitian staff in Communications would always talk about TPA when they did their radio show. The bilingual outreach office helped tremendously." TPA staff even wrote a sermon for faith-based leaders to use in order to reach the community from the pulpit.

The marketing campaign was widely viewed as being very effective. Carvalho recalled, "I knew that if I created an early catalyst for demand, then it's one of those movements that's like an avalanche – you can't roll it back." In the TPA office, evidence of the program's successful branding was inescapable. "Parent Academy is the number people called, because they knew the name," said one staffer. "The phone number was everywhere, and TPA became a sort of clearinghouse for people contacting the district for any reason."

Still, the reality of TPA did not match the vision for quite some time. "It was not 'build it and they will come,'" remembered Moise. "Because initially, they didn't come. For several months we would have zero, one, two parents showing up. I started to realize that parents truly did not recognize their role in helping their children succeed academically, so it was almost a whole marketing effort, teaching parents the rationale behind *why* we're having the Parent Academy."

Family Learning Events

In 2006, Family Learning Events were added to TPA's roster of activities. In these events, entire families were invited to participate in an activity and an educational program. One event, held at the schools, promoted literacy and included a free dinner. "For that first Family Reading Night, we had over 6,000 people in attendance. That was a real turnaround," recalled Moise. "It was a huge district-wide coordinated effort. We worked with Food and Nutrition to provide dinner and Public Relations to promote the event, and we worked with Curriculum Instruction because I felt very strongly that what we were teaching parents had to match what children were learning in school."

Other Family Learning Events were held at local attractions such as the Fairchild Tropical Gardens, Jungle Island animal park, and the Children’s Science Museum. “We would pick a place in the community that traditionally many families may not have the financial ability to visit, and we would get a corporate sponsor to cover the costs,” explained Brown. “Because once you can get a parent across the threshold, you’re bound to get them back. You just have to get them across the threshold.”

TPA event planners were surprised by the response. Brown remembered: “Thousands of people attended the event at Jungle Island. People were jumping across the causeway to get over there! We realized OK, this is definitely something parents want.” One TPA staff member explained: “Most of the time when we have families come to events, they’re not fun, and we’re telling them what’s wrong with them. This was different.” Education was still the focus, though. “We always did a mini-lesson – it would be fun, it would be easy – and then there were tables and booths there for all the resources available to parents in our community, and TPA would be right there at the front. It was absolutely critical to our branding.” In the first year, Family Learning Events accounted for over half of the overall number of participants in TPA.

Moise felt these programs were crucial to helping parents see themselves as valuable partners:

As part of the mini-workshop, we would always encourage parents. We’d thank them for coming, and tell them how much they’re helping their child succeed academically just by being there and being part of their lives. It was a way of sending a message. Once parents started to feel better about themselves and their role, then I think they started to seek out more workshops. They felt like they were successful, so then they wanted to learn more ways to help their children.

Technology

From the beginning, the goal of taking TPA out into the community seemed to point toward developing online courses. “We looked at a company that creates online courses, but it was just too expensive,” said Brown. “So we established a partnership with a local university, and they hired a professor to write the online TPA classes. Unfortunately, between lost contracts and changes in personnel, and debates about who was going to pay for what, it never happened.” After three years of negotiations, the relationship with the university was strained, so “we had to back off of the online piece for awhile,” remembered Brown.

One successful technology innovation in MDCPS was the Parent Portal, an online site where parents could log in to see up-to-date information about their students’ progress. “Now I can see how my daughter is doing on a daily basis,” explained one parent. “And it allows me to communicate with her teachers. Before I might have known the three teachers that called me with a problem, but I didn’t know all seven or eight. When I told my daughter I could find out her grades on the internet, she was just astonished.”

Continued Support

As the initial Knight Foundation grant drew to a close, the district requested additional funding to continue expanding the program. According to the grant manager, “The numbers were proving TPA was having an impact,” so in 2007, the foundation awarded MDCPS a \$1.8 million grant over three years to continue supporting TPA. The grant included a number of deliverables, including the following:

- 50 TPA classes must be reviewed and aligned with state learning standards for students

- TPA must scale up, increasing the unduplicated number of participating parents by 15% each year
- TPA must create additional access by developing online classes.

The Knight Foundation national program director sat on the board for TPA and explained: “We tried to make sure that the academy had accountability. We didn’t want money just going into the system and being lost, or a slush fund for the issue of the day.” At the same time, the foundation tried to remain flexible. “We realize that in the business of innovation, sometimes you change direction. What’s knowable at the beginning of a grant is often very different once you get into it a year or two,” he said.

Measuring the Impact

Changes in Staff Attitudes

As TPA took hold in the district, Crew noted one success in particular:

One milestone for me was that I started to see more principals talking positively about parents and viewing them as intellectual partners. Everybody loves the old message, “it takes a village to raise a child,” but people don’t always see the village members as equals. Principals were warming to the idea that parents really could be equal partners in the education of their children, and in the school. They talked more openly about it; it was a very different lens.

Moise agreed that changing staff attitudes was a significant challenge. “They have the degrees and they have the certifications, so they know what’s best for educating children, right? That’s the common mentality for school site personnel. TPA added professional development about how to create parent-friendly schools, to help school personnel understand what roles parents have in student learning and outcomes.” This approach had positive results. “By the second year, parents weren’t calling TPA to complain about school-level issues,” said Moise. “That was an indicator of success, because we were able to reach schools and make them more parent-friendly.”

Changes in Families

Families’ feedback on TPA’s impact was also encouraging. “I used to be more passive with my son’s education, and now I’m more active,” said one parent of a high school student. “Before, I didn’t know if he was going to make it, but now it’s like a 180. Seeing me at school, I think that pushes him.”

Another described how TPA affected her relationships with her daughter and with school staff: “For 11 years, I’ve always sided with my daughter if a teacher called and gave a negative report. Rather than finding a way to improve her behavior, or to rectify the problem, I always challenged that teacher. But TPA helped me to be a better parent, a communicator with my daughter and the teacher. Now, instead of throwing a rock and challenging those teachers, I’ve made my daughter the best she can be.”

Several parents cited a sense of community and support as a valuable outcome of TPA. “Parent Academy is like a release, saying that you’re not alone,” said one parent. “It’s brought everybody together to share their experiences, and their ideas to help each other. It helps us all connect.”

Another parent agreed: “When we talk about kids at home, family problems – well, then you realize everybody goes through the same phases, the same problems.”

One middle school principal noted that TPA’s Parent Portal training had changed how parents interacted with the school. “We get a lot more calls from parents now asking – well, not asking – really demanding: ‘why aren’t the grades up to date in the Parent Portal?’ We never got calls like that before, but they’re more informed now, and it really increases the expectations on the school.” By 2009, the Parent Portal had become so popular that the district shifted responsibility for it to schools. One principal explained: “They said any technical issues with the portal had to be handled at the school site. The district used to have some kind of help desk for the parents, but it really became too much to handle centrally – which is a good thing.”

Tracking the Numbers

When TPA was launched, principals were expected to promote and support TPA in their schools. Anne Thompson, who became director of TPA in 2008, explained: “There were specific metrics as part of their evaluation, and one of them was the Parent Academy.” Brown believed evaluations were critical to TPA’s success: “From the school site on up to the superintendent, each one of us had numbers that we had to achieve, and that was definitely a factor in the acceptance of TPA.”

In order to gauge its impact, TPA made a commitment to evaluate the program after each of its first three years. The first evaluation found that the program was more successful than the planning committee had anticipated. Nearly 20,000 people attended TPA events in the first year, roughly twice the projected number (see **Exhibit 5**). In addition, TPA hosted over 600 events, nearly five times the expected number.

Some saw those numbers as misleading. “At first, even when the district touted TPA’s success, we were not seeing success here in the inner city,” recalled one principal. “It was probably easier in other neighborhoods, but we were not seeing it here.” By 2009, however, she felt TPA was gaining ground: “They’ve gotten it together as to what works and what parents want, and their workshops are so engaging. In the last year or so, I think TPA broke down barriers, and got parents communicating and talking to each other.”

One board member was unconvinced by the numbers. When she visited schools in her area, she found that “the turnout followed the exact same patterns it always had, and principals had to engage in devices that were a bit cynical to get their numbers.” What was documented on paper as a TPA course was not necessarily what the district envisioned. The board member explained: “The schools would do student shows, and they would combine that with a Parent Academy class. Somebody stood up for 15 minutes before the show and talked about giving kids breakfast before the state tests, while the families are all talking and nodding and waiting for the show. That’s not necessarily a successful TPA class, but it goes down in the statistics.”

District leaders worried that the numbers possibly masked TPA’s real impact and areas for improvement. Though the district had attendance numbers for events, there was no way to filter the numbers to see whether they represented a broad range of families, or simply the same set of parents attending a variety of events. The Knight Foundation addressed this issue in the deliverables linked to the 2007 grant: “We expect approximately 42,500 unduplicated parents participating by 2010,” explained one foundation director.

By 2007, it was clear TPA needed a new tracking system. “We had a very outdated record keeping system,” said Brown. “It was literally sign-in sheets that were sent to us, and we had a person sitting here who input them.” Another staff member agreed: “They’re handwritten, and so to

identify them, and then link that guardian to a particular child – that’s quite cumbersome.” Brown remembered: “We were months and months behind, because you’re talking about tens of thousands of parents participating. We were trying to get an online system set up.”

Brown also had concerns about what the data could effectively show: “We needed to tie participation to the student ID, because we can’t do any comparison of test scores or impact without that.” Lisa Thurber, district director of Community Services, agreed: “I’m not into quantity. I’d rather see real quality, really targeted programs. We’ve done great at reaching a broad base, but now I think we can do a much better job of tracking who are the parents, where are they coming from, and what pockets of the community are we missing?”

A New Leader Narrows the Focus (2008 – 2010)

Changing Leadership

Over the course of SY08, tensions began to mount in MDCPS. Since Crew had been hired in 2004, the realities of budget cuts and declining enrollment had grown. Over two years, the district overspent the \$5.5 billion annual budget by over \$100 million, while enrollment had dropped by over 10,000 students.⁶ In September 2008, the board bought out the remainder of Crew’s contract and appointed former Associate Superintendent Carvalho to lead the district.

Many were uncertain what Crew’s leaving would mean for TPA. One corporate partner observed: “For companies like us to take TPA seriously, Dr. Crew’s role as the visionary and leader was crucial. Often, superintendents get a great idea up and running, and then they’re gone, and quietly the initiative you partnered with begins to die a slow death.” Others were more confident. “Mr. Carvalho firmly believes that schools do not operate in a vacuum,” said one Knight Foundation grant manager. “When he oversaw TPA, it was clear that’s something he believed in and still does.”

Carvalho appointed Mendez-Cartaya to his former position overseeing legislative affairs, grants administration and community services, and Thurber as district director of the Office of Community Services. The position of dean of TPA was eliminated, and TPA was combined with the Office of Parental Involvement under Thompson’s direction. The reorganization of MDCPS under Carvalho led to questions within the district. “It was perceived as Crew’s initiative,” said one staff member. “There were a lot of questions. The principals were looking, wondering if this was another example of ‘this too shall pass.’”

For his part, Carvalho was convinced that TPA was in the district to stay. “We built enough noise in the community about this product that naysayers have become irrelevant,” he explained. Mendez-Cartaya agreed: “Certain programs become a part of the culture, and there are parents out there that are now demand parents.” Some MDCPS employees noted that these newly-engaged parents, who saw TPA as valuable, were unlikely to allow the program to fade. Carvalho did anticipate some changes, however. “I can’t let people rest too long,” he explained. “We can’t let the buzz subside. As important as the initiative has been, I don’t want it to go stale, and in my mind it already is.”

Under Carvalho, MDCPS established a new strategic framework for the district in which student achievement was supported by four pillars: education; school/district leadership; financial efficiency

⁶ Catherine Gewertz, “Miami Board Buys Out Leader’s Contract,” *Education Week*, September 17, 2008, via Factiva, accessed August 2009.

and stability; and student, parent and community engagement. One strategy for engaging students and families was a new piece of TPA known as the Success Academy.

The Success Academy

In SY09, MDCPS launched the Success Academy, a set of supports targeting the lowest-performing schools in the district, called Differentiated Accountability (DA) schools. The Success Academy featured intensive Saturday tutorial programs for students who did not meet state test benchmarks, and included a financial incentive, breakfast, and transportation for each participating student. In addition, TPA ran a parallel workshop program for parents of these highest-need students.

Corporate partners watched closely. By 2009, MDCPS had moved to an individualized evaluation instrument for principals, rather than a standardized scorecard, which meant principals could decide whether parent engagement and TPA were appropriate job targets. This change made some partners anxious. "To some extent, the laser-like focus on TPA has somewhat dissipated," said one Houghton Mifflin Harcourt employee. "The big question mark is whether or not this new superintendent has the accountability measures Dr. Crew had. We know he is pursuing his own initiative, focusing on chronically low-performing schools. We have made a good-faith contribution to that effort, and hopefully it'll be enough to persuade Mr. Carvalho to keep TPA going."

Success Academy Outcomes

Of the nine DA schools that implemented Success Academy programs in SY09, seven improved by at least one letter grade on the Florida Department of Education rating scale (see **Exhibit 6**). The principal of one DA school credited TPA for part of his school's improvement: "In our high school, which has about 1600 students, we had a pretty regular group of about 40 parents coming to the Saturday sessions" he said, "and those kids are the ones typically doing better on the tests."

Another DA principal agreed, explaining, "This has been TPA's best year so far, because they've gotten it together as to what works, what parents want, and what they can offer that will entice parents to be involved. They've reached a point where they can only broaden and get better." As one principal put it, "Good schools have always done these things for parents, but now it's formalized. With TPA, now there's a process to it, and the district provides resources for us."

Despite the successes, some district employees were concerned that the Success Academy might not be reaching everyone. "There are a few parents we still have to work on," said one principal. "You know, some of them just have that attitude of 'We leave it to you all,' or 'You all don't need me.'" Another principal expressed concerns that family engagement was not successfully reaching all ethnic and racial groups. She explained: "Even though the majority of our students are African-American, when you look at the parents who are at events, it's mostly Hispanic families."

Others, although they attributed recent achievement boosts to TPA, were wary about the program's future. "I believe TPA helped to move us forward," explained one principal. "You just don't let yourself think about the longevity. I don't even want to think about them losing their funding, but with the scarcity of funds, we're kind of apprehensive."

Looking Ahead

Thompson felt that, in moving forward, identifying the core of TPA was important. "I want to know that when I retire, I leave TPA with a clear vision and that it's sustainable. At least so far, TPA

has been run on whatever money came our way," she said. "The bigger challenge will be to say, where is the funding to keep it going? If it's in the form of grants, then tracking the data is essential."

Carvalho agreed that the district needed a better picture of outcomes. "It seemed that the important thing was showing up. 'Did you sign the sign-in sheet?' To me that's totally irrelevant. It doesn't help kids," he said. Though there was widespread agreement throughout TPA about the need for better data tracking, there was still no such system in place by SY10. Thompson explained: "An online registration system would be a long-term goal. We looked at it, but we really didn't have money to buy it this year, and it's a challenge without a little more technical expertise than we have right now."

The quality of TPA would also be central to its ongoing success. TPA staff continued to develop and realign the core curriculum with state standards, and in SY10, the Success Academy expanded to 35 schools. "I feel it is much more impactful this way," explained Thompson. "We do still promote our full range of programs to our schools, but we're also implementing our own vision." Several principals valued the support they received from TPA in working with families. "I can just pick up the phone and say 'I need this,'" said one principal. "And they'll figure out how to get it."

Carvalho felt that technological outreach, to both students and parents, was crucial. "These kids' reality is that they are wired for communication in ways that, because we were not born into it, we're not. But by rejecting it, we are rejecting all these tools for potential learning." Thompson agreed: "It's the same with young parents. Reaching out with technology is where we need to go."

Carvalho expected that "the new reinvention of TPA is going to rely more heavily on a virtual interaction with parents," and in SY10, in collaboration with a nonprofit organization, TPA began developing online parent courses with the hopes of beta-testing within the year. Thurber envisioned a virtual library of TPA courses and frameworks. "We'll never have enough staff to fully engage a district this large," she explained. "But with online templates we could empower anybody to become a facilitator in whatever venue is appropriate."

Shifting Partnerships

Partnerships were at the forefront of Mendez-Cartaya's mind as she looked ahead. Over time, the Family Learning Events, which had helped forge a number of key partnerships in TPA's early years, became overwhelming. "I had some concerns," said Brown. "They sort of took over our lives. TPA needed to get back to its roots, and we struggled with not losing sight of the classes." One of the original planning committee members agreed: "Sometimes you think, 'I see it's really well attended, but what is the goal of it now?'"

By SY10, Family Learning Events had become less frequent. "For awhile, TPA was getting a lot of money from individual donations, but now there are new initiatives, and there isn't as much money to rent the Children's Museum for the evening and invite everybody," explained one staff member. Still, some saw Family Learning Events as important. One staff member explained: "We're building a lot of partnerships through these. Our corporate sponsors are in front of thousands of potential customers, and our internal partners, like Curriculum and Instruction, work with the museums, so there's a lot of great learning going on."

Internal partnerships were also changing. A former president of the MDCPS PTA who helped develop TPA reflected: "A lot of people feel that TPA is not what we understood it would be. We thought it would be a team effort, because we're the PTA and Title 1, so we can bring you the feedback you need. But it became this program where the dean ran everything." Carvalho saw it differently. "We knew TPA really had traction when the traditional PTA got a little edgy about it," he

said. "I think it forced the PTA to improve its game, because the reality was some of the highest-need schools in our district *had* no PTA."

Within the district, reorganization and downsizing had shifted some internal partnerships. "Most of the TPA staff is funded by the TPA Knight grant, but the Office of Parental Involvement and TPA are blurring," explained Thompson. "Now staff members can respond to a need from either program, which is a plus." One principal agreed: "Before, we had different offices that probably had the same goals, working in silos. Now it's clear that TPA is the way to get parent activities to your school – regardless of what avenue or department is involved, whether it's bilingual education or Title 1. That has really streamlined everything."

Shrinking Resources

By SY10, downsizing at the district office was affecting resources and support for all programs, including TPA. "Since I've been superintendent," said Carvalho, "we have dealt with probably the most draconian reduction to education funding that, as a state, we've seen. I've had to reduce our budget by over \$300 million, while observing our core principles of protecting the classroom at all costs and building capacity to improve student achievement. We have not sacrificed one single teacher." Under pressure from the state, however, the central office had been streamlined. "We had a Haitian Parent Involvement Specialist," said one district employee, "which unfortunately, we don't have now – and that's nuts in this community." Recognizing this, TPA created a dedicated position for Haitian outreach to work with parents, students and schools.

Questions of funding also weighed heavily on Mendez-Cartaya. The grant from the Knight Foundation, set to expire in September of 2011, provided approximately 75% of the annual \$800,000 TPA budget. Though the Knight Foundation was interested in maintaining a relationship with MDCPS, it was unlikely the district could expect another large grant specifically for TPA. "It has nothing to do with the merits of the program; it's just a general policy," explained one Knight Foundation representative. "The foundation has a philosophy of not sustaining programs like this over a long period."

As Mendez-Cartaya made notes for the cabinet meeting with the DA principals, she tried to imagine what TPA would look like in a year. How could TPA measure its impact more effectively? With funding and staffing in decline, what aspects of TPA were non-negotiable, and which could be modified? Was building an online presence the key to lasting success, or would larger events like Family Learning Events build more sustainable support?

Exhibit 1 MDCPS Demographic Data 2004 - 2009

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Number of schools	347	356	367	378	392	415
Total enrollment	369,578	365,784	361,550	353,283	347,774	345,150
<i>Percent of Students by Race/Ethnicity</i>						
White non-Hispanic	10%	10%	10%	9%	9%	9%
Black non-Hispanic	29%	28%	28%	27%	26%	26%
Hispanic	59%	60%	60%	61%	62%	63%
<i>Primary Home Language</i>						
Spanish	54%	54%	54%	54%	55%	54%
Haitian Creole	6%	6%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Other non-English	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
<i>Program Enrollment</i>						
Special Education (including gifted)	17%	17%	16%	16%	16%	16%
English for Speakers of Other Languages	15%	15%	14%	15%	15%	15%
Free/reduced price lunch (eligible)	63%	64%	61%	61%	59%	63%

Source: Casewriter, based on data from Miami-Dade County Public Schools, "Statistical Highlights" Miami-Dade County Public Schools website, <http://drs.dadeschools.net/StatisticalHighlights/SH.asp>

Exhibit 2 MDCPS Student Outcomes (2004-2008)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Students Scoring Proficient or Higher (percent)					
Elementary Schools					
<i>Reading (total)</i>	57%	64%	66%	64%	65%
White	77%	82%	83%	82%	83%
African-American	45%	52%	55%	52%	51%
Hispanic	58%	65%	69%	66%	67%
<i>Math (total)</i>	55%	61%	63%	64%	67%
White	73%	77%	80%	80%	83%
African-American	39%	47%	48%	49%	53%
Hispanic	57%	64%	66%	67%	69%
Middle Schools					
<i>Reading (total)</i>	39%	40%	51%	52%	55%
White	64%	63%	73%	72%	75%
African-American	24%	26%	36%	37%	42%
Hispanic	41%	42%	54%	53%	57%
<i>Math (total)</i>	41%	44%	49%	51%	55%
White	64%	67%	72%	72%	75%
African-American	24%	28%	33%	35%	38%
Hispanic	44%	47%	53%	53%	58%
High Schools					
<i>Reading (total)</i>	24%	26%	29%	30%	35%
White	48%	49%	53%	52%	59%
African-American	12%	13%	16%	16%	19%
Hispanic	24%	28%	32%	33%	37%
<i>Math (total)</i>	47%	51%	54%	53%	60%
White	72%	74%	76%	76%	81%
African-American	30%	33%	37%	37%	43%
Hispanic	48%	54%	57%	58%	63%
Graduation rate	59%	59%	63%	65%	69%
School Grades (percent of schools at each level)					
A	39%	47%	54%	42%	49%
B	16%	15%	19%	13%	16%
C	28%	25%	21%	27%	24%
D	13%	10%	4%	10%	8%
F	4%	3%	2%	8%	3%

Source: Casewriter, based on data from Broad Prize District Data Reports website <http://www.broadprize.org/resources/reports2009.html>; Florida Department of Education Office of Education Information and Accountability Services website, <http://www.fldoe.org/eias/eiaspubs/>; Miami Dade County Public Schools Assessment, Research and Data Analysis website <http://oada.dadeschools.net/SchoolPerformanceGrades/schoolgrades.asp>, all accessed April 13, 2010.

Exhibit 3 The Parent Academy Planning Committee

The planning committee is composed of approximately 100 dedicated leaders of parental involvement.

- 74% are female; 26% are male
- Average age is 50.9 years
- 62% are either current parents or have had children in the school system
- 55% are multilingual; languages spoken are English, Spanish, French, Haitian-Creole, and Portuguese
- 60% are not employees of the school system
- Professional occupations include students, teachers, volunteers, retired professionals, realtors, school administrators, college administrators, media relations professionals, businesspeople, and a registered parliamentarian.

Ethnicity:

- 43% Hispanic
- 31% White
- 18% Black
- 4% Multiracial
- 4% Other

Subcommittees

Lead team – comprised of co-chairs of the subcommittees. The Lead team’s role was to help lead the effort and be sure all subcommittees were engaged, working effectively and accomplishing goals.

Coursework – focused on meeting the needs and interests of the parents and the community, laying the groundwork for parents to be involved in their children’s education.

Higher Education, Facilities, & Childcare – Worked closely with colleges, universities and communities in developing cooperative agreements and other possible avenues for course delivery. Identified facilities throughout the county where courses could be offered, researched guidelines and procedures for different course offerings (including registration and accreditation), and identified childcare options.

Development – identified and contacted potential donors, grants, and foundations that fund parent education. Cultivated and solicited potential donors using materials and a sponsor benefits package developed with the marketing committee.

Marketing – Assigned a liaison to each subcommittee to ensure TPA was customer-focused in every aspect. Also established TPA brand by identifying target audiences, defining messages, determining marketing strategies, and creating a marketing action plan.

Stakeholders – Point of entry for all people interested in participating in TPA. Maintained a directory of everyone involved in the planning stages, and provided information to the community on the progress, needs and opportunities available at TPA through presentations and quarterly newsletters.

Source: Compiled from school district documents.

Exhibit 4 TPA Course Framework, as Outlined in the Planning Committee Proposal (2005)*Tier 1: Core Courses*

These represent classes on how parents can help their children succeed in school. These classes would include but are not limited to basic orientations to the school system and its operations, subject area classes, homework help, guidance and behavioral discipline, how to work with students with special needs, how to prepare your child for school, how to prepare homes for learning, how to access information and how to have a good parent/teacher conference.

Tier 2: Growth Courses

These represent courses for parents for their own growth and self-awareness as parents and individuals, including their capacity for meaningful involvement in their children's education. These would include but not be limited to such classes on family budgeting, public speaking, family discipline, how to prepare a resume, employability skills, writing and effective communications, how to effectively deal with adolescence issues, anger management and how to communicate effectively with your child's school.

Tier 3: Certification Courses

These courses will be offered for parents who wish to enter the workforce, change field or advance professionally. These could include opportunities to earn office employee certification, paraprofessional certification, vocational certification and a GED, plus opportunities to gain general business or entrepreneurial skills.

Source: School district documents.

Exhibit 5 Projected vs. Actual Events Conducted in the First Year of the Parent Academy (SY06)

Course Offerings	Number of Events				Number of Participants			
	Projected	Fall	Actual Spring	Total	Projected	Fall	Actual Spring	Total
Core	80	86	92	178	-	2842	2463	5305
Growth	50	1003	109	212	-	1272	1454	2726
Certification	0	76	125	201	-	1174	1520	2694
Fam. Lrning Events	-	-	47	47	-	-	8722	8722
TOTAL	130	265	373	638	10000	5288	14159	19447

Source: School district documents.

Exhibit 5a Survey of Participants: Demographic Characteristics of TPA Participants (Spring 2006)

	Participant Survey		District
	# of respondents	%	%
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	122	70%	-
Male	52	30%	-
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Black	44	25%	27%
Hispanic	109	62%	60%
White	5	3%	10%
Other	19	11%	3%
<i>Language Spoken at Home</i>			
English	81	43%	39%
Spanish	115	61%	53%
Creole	23	12%	5%
Other	9	5%	3%

Source: School district documents.

Exhibit 6 School Grades for Schools that Implemented the Success Academy in SY09

School	SY06	SY07	SY08	SY09
Holmes Elementary	C	D	F	C
Liberty City Elementary	C	C	F	A
Homestead Senior High	D	F	F	D
Miami Carol City Senior High	D	F	F	D
Miami Central Senior High	F	F	F	D
Miami Edison Senior High	F	D	F	F
Miami Norland Senior High	D	F	F	D
North Miami Senior High	D	F	F	D
Corporate Academy South	N/A	N/A	F	N/A

Source: School district documents.