

## Reasons Behind the Lack of Academic Achievement of *African American* Students



This report contains the emerging findings of a study that Dr. Ferrer conducted in Florida. The purpose of this study was to find out, from the students' perspectives, the underlying reasons for the poor academic performance and low test scores of African American students.

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The names of the school district, schools and students who participated in this study have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

Special thanks is extended to

Dr. Arnold Williams  
and  
The School District of  
Mountain View County

## Credits

### Study Concept, Design, Development, and Evaluation:

Dr. Lourdes Ferrer,

Dr. Ferrer is a consultant in issues related to implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. She specializes in studies related to the underlying reasons for lack of achievement of underserved populations. She is also a specialist in issues related to Hispanic student achievement. She is a bilingual motivational speaker and staff developer.

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January 11, 2007

Dr. Arnold Williams, Superintendent  
The School District of Mountain View County  
3340 Palmerton Blvd., C-316  
River Side, FL 33500

Dear Superintendent:

I am pleased to submit to you the *Perceptions of African American Students* study report.

This report contains the findings of the studies that were conducted at Dorado Community High School (DCHS) and South Central Community High School (SCCHS) in order to find out, from the perspective of African American students, what are the contributory grounds for the poor performance of African American high school students on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT).

This report is the result of focus groups and individual interviews that took place at DCHS and SCCHS during December 18-19, 2006. We observed, spoke with, listened to, interviewed and analyzed written response documents of forty-two African American students. The students who participated in this study were selected by the schools' administrators from the pool of students who were identified as Africans Americans and who were enrolled in *advanced, honors or AP courses*.

In spite of the participants' great level of awareness in respect to their school grade and disappointment about the gap in performance between African American students and their peers, the following positive commonalities emerged: Self-determination to surmount the perceived challenges and barriers that deter them from experiencing academic success and a desire to contribute as part of the solution in achieving the District's goal of getting all students to proficiency.

We acknowledge the efforts that you as the Superintendent, the Board, the district administration, the two schools' principals and faculties are making to improve the academic achievement of all students. It has been our privilege to serve you and your District.

Yours truly,

*Dr. Lourdes Ferrer*

# Executive Report

## *Methodology*

Dr. Arnold Williams, superintendent of The School District of Palm Beach County authorized Dr. Lourdes Ferrer to conduct a study to find out, from the perspective of African American high school students, what are the underlying reasons for their lack of academic achievement on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). This study was conducted on December 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of 2006 at Dorado Community High School (DCHS) and South Central Community High School (SCCHS). Forty-two students were selected by the school administration to participate from the pool of students:

- who are of the Black race;
- who were born and raised in the United States;
- whose parents were also born and raised in the United States; and,
- who were enrolled in any honors, advanced or AP courses.

Twenty were selected from DCHS and twenty-two from SCCHS. As part of the study, students first participated in a Power Point presentation about:

- the FCAT performance of black students on both the school and district level;
- the importance of becoming proficient in Reading and Mathematics;
- the importance of pursuing a post secondary education;
- the importance of setting and reaching goals; and,
- the meaning of “a quality life”.

The presentation was followed by a sixty-minute focus group conversation in which students presented their views about the lack of achievement among African American students. After the focus group conversation ended, students were then asked to use the computer (Word) to individually respond in writing to the following questions:

1. *Why are African America students’ scores lower than their Hispanic and White peers?*
2. *What can the school do to help African American students improve?*

Students were observed and notes were taken about their comments, questions and reactions during the presentation and the focus group conversation. Students’ written responses to the two questions were saved in portable disc storage, mildly edited for clarity and then analyzed. Nine findings emerged as common themes.

## *Limitations*

The study participants were all enrolled in advanced, honors, or AP courses from two different schools. It is recommended that the study be expanded outside of these parameters as their perceptions should may not reflect the perceptions of African American students at large.

## Executive Report—Cont.

### *What the kids say...*

The following emerged as the views of African American students regarding why African American students score lower on state tests than their Hispanic and White counterparts.

- 1. Misalignment of beliefs, perceptions and values.** The school system believes in *efficacy* — a belief that every child can learn and achieve. The students do not believe that they can achieve academically. The school believes that no child should be left behind. The students’ perception is that they have already been left behind, and people do not care, which includes people in their homes, in the community and in the school system.
- 2. Lack of vision for the future.** Participants indicated that fellow African American students do not see beyond the present. They live for the now — for immediate gratification, — to “get a mouth full of gold.” The FCAT is futuristic. High value was placed upon material things and icons of social status such as clothes and friends. While the school system values delayed gratification to achieve higher education, the participants’ perception was that immediate gratification was more important to some of their peers.
- 3. Lack of parental, school and community support.** Some asked for outreach events and the utilization of media to help change the attitude that their community has toward education. They frequently expressed that academics were unsupported by their community. They noted a lack of support from parents because parents were involved in their own issues. Another observation was that the parents themselves had not been successful academically, and without a successful academic background parents could not meet their students needs. They felt parents would exert effort to attend a school sports event that would not be exerted to attend an academic awards activity.
- 4. Negative presuppositions.** They expressed a belief that people hate them — that nobody cares about their success. They indicated that African American students do not try because of low expectations. People expect them to be good in sports but not academics.
- 5. The need to belong.** The need to belong often overshadows the need to achieve academically. They indicated that their peers will make fun and bully them if they achieve academically — make fun of them because “blacks don’t behave that way.” They indicated that there is a high social price to be paid for being an academic achiever.
- 6. Lack of motivation.** Participants saw African American students as lacking the skills to pass the FCAT. Even many who have the drive and achieve an excellent GPA, did not have hope that they would pass the FCAT and perceived it to be difficult. They believe they do not have the reading skills to perform well on the tests. They believe they have not been prepared to achieve on them.

## Executive Report—Cont.

**7. Low self-confidence or self-esteem.** Based upon past performance, self confidence was low. Participants saw themselves as part of a group that did not have the necessary components to achieve. Low self-esteem was collective — it was because of the group to which they belonged. They belonged to schools that have been graded *D* several times. Participants noted that if high achievers do not pass the FCAT, there is no hope for lower achievers to do so. These were the perceptions of participants who have personally taken the FCAT several times in their academic careers as they have progressed through elementary, middle and high school.

### *Perceptions unique to SCCHS*

**8. Substandard resources.** Students in SCCHS were convinced that the educational materials in that school are substandard. 100% of participants believe that students on the coast have updated materials and resources not available to them. They saw themselves as having a lower quality of education. They complained that the teachers are not qualified in the subject matter they are teaching and are teaching out of their field of expertise. They complained that they are trying to learn important things from substitutes. They were concerned about the impact of high turn-over of teachers.

**9. Lack of recognition for academic achievement.** This was a significant issue for them. They indicated that the system says it values education but it really values sports. Sports is what is important. They feel that academic achievement is not recognized and that there is no recognition for improvement. They indicated that academic effort is not recognized, admired, or rewarded or celebrated.

### *What kids say the school can do...*

The following emerged as suggestions from the participants regarding what the school can do to help African American students improve their performance in school. Please keep in mind that these are student-suggested solutions.

**1. Outreach Campaign – Create a Paradigm Shift.** Implement programs within the school system to reach out to parents and the community for support and involvement in the African American students' education. Saturate the environment with positive messages. Utilize the media to communicate the academic success of African Americans. Motivate parents to get involved in their children's education. Get the churches and community centers involved by providing outreach programs where students can have a caring and qualified adult to access when they need help.

**2. In-School Initiatives – Create a Paradigm Shift.** Utilize meetings with students, seminars, and motivational speakers to increase student belief that they can achieve. Help them set high standards — even the unsuccessful students. Educate students about the importance of grades and FCAT performance so that students assume responsibility for their academic careers. Help them to set goals and track their own performance from the beginning of their school career. Guide them in how to prepare themselves for college. Help them value hard work as the means to achieve a quality life –

## Executive Report—Cont.

change the mindset of students including those who are not in advanced, honors, or AP courses.

Assist students to explore different careers and make them aware of the opportunities available. Help students assist each other through opportunities as role models and peer coaches or tutors by establishing programs in which high achievers motivate and provide advice and academic assistance to other students. Establish an on-going feedback process from these students.

**3. Provide Academic Assistance.** Provide after school services including one-to-one tutorial assistance, to help students on subjects in which they lack good performance. Offer them at various times in a week so students have options in case they hold part time jobs.

**4. Create a Mentoring Program.** Establish programs that would allow students to form relationships with caring role models, who might encourage them and convince them that they can achieve, that is — mentors. Provide academic experiences that would motivate students such as a field trip to the country's capital. Facilitate guidance counselors to go beyond placing students in the right grade and courses and provide a sense of caring that is holistic.

**5. Value and Celebrate Academic Achievement.** Implement initiatives where academic achievement is celebrated at the same level as athletic success. Reward more and punish less. Reward students who are doing well and those who are improving. Create awards and incentives for achievement. Do not limit concern to the kids who are not doing well but also give credit to students who are doing well. Put your focus on students who are academically trying to advance.

**6. Hire Teachers Who Can Make a Difference.** Hire teachers who want to work in a mostly black school. Pay them more money to attract and retain highly qualified teachers who are certified in their subject area, are role models, and are eager to make a difference in the lives of African American students. Provide teachers who set high expectations and don't let the students slide, require more from students, and have a clear sense of what students need to learn—teacher who know how each lesson fits in a larger context. Have them check for readiness, teach in small increments, conduct frequent checks for understanding, and monitor progress. Teachers should have good communication skills and have a positive attitude. They should show enthusiasm for the subject, students, and teaching. Find teachers who have a desire to see students excel in life beyond the FCAT and graduation. Help teachers know how to celebrate academic success and performance improvement. Find teachers who refuse to give up on their students.

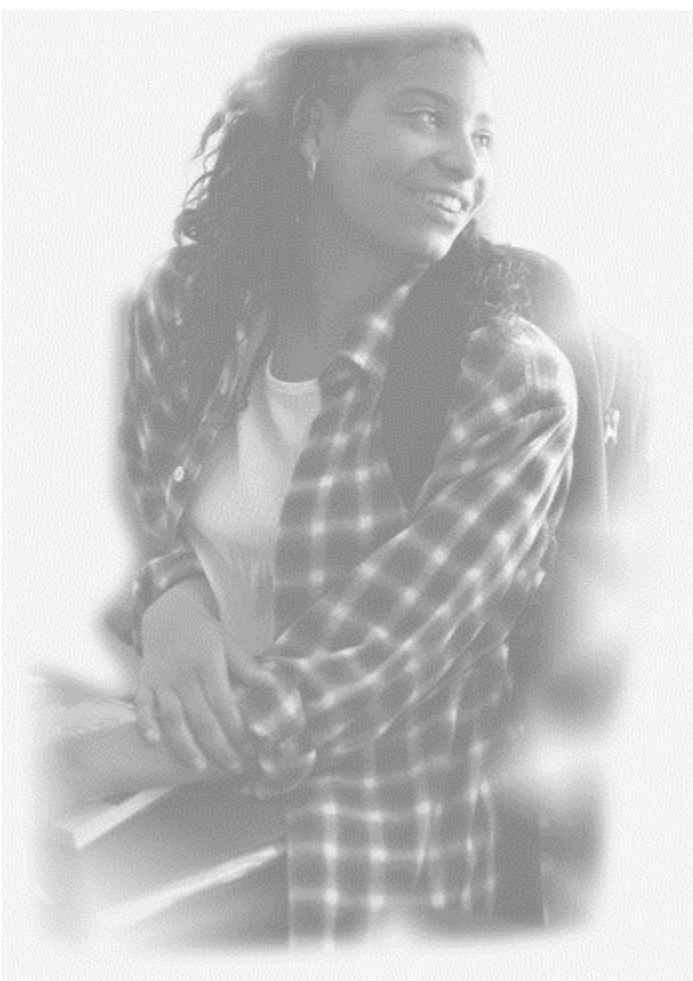
**7. A Positive School Climate.** Make the school a place someone would want to come to, because it looks good. Focus on more than test preparation. Have more extra-curricular activities and fun activities. Have updated instructional materials, technology and software and make them relevant to the students' grade level.

## Sample Quotes

**DCHS Student 001** “African Americans score lower than their counterparts because there is more of a stigma and paradigm that says African American people can’t and will not excel.”

**DCHS Student 002** “There is not enough time for them to finish the test in time because their reading level is so low.”

**DCHS Student 003** “I think that the reason why African American students’ scores are lower than their peers is because African Americans don’t care as much. Most African American students, or at least the ones I know, are scared to show that they are smart in front of their friends and want to maintain a popular/ignorant status.



Not only African Americans, but if any student don’t have a supportive relationship or a strong foundation they will not achieve. Because many African American students lack that kind of support, it is hard for them to get ahead or try to achieve something, especially when they don’t know how.”

**DCHS Student 004** “I believe that the reason behind African Americans and their scores being lower than their peers is because they lack motivation. Many African American do not have mentors to guide them on the right path. They are told that they will never amount to anything in life.... Most people want to see African Americans fail, and not succeed. Such as being illiterate and never learning to read. No one will ever care about us if we do not put forth the effort to do better for ourselves. Some students come to school to learn, they want to achieve their goals through life. There are others that come to school just to receive attention from others, such as dressing up in nice expensive clothing; it is all about their appearance.”

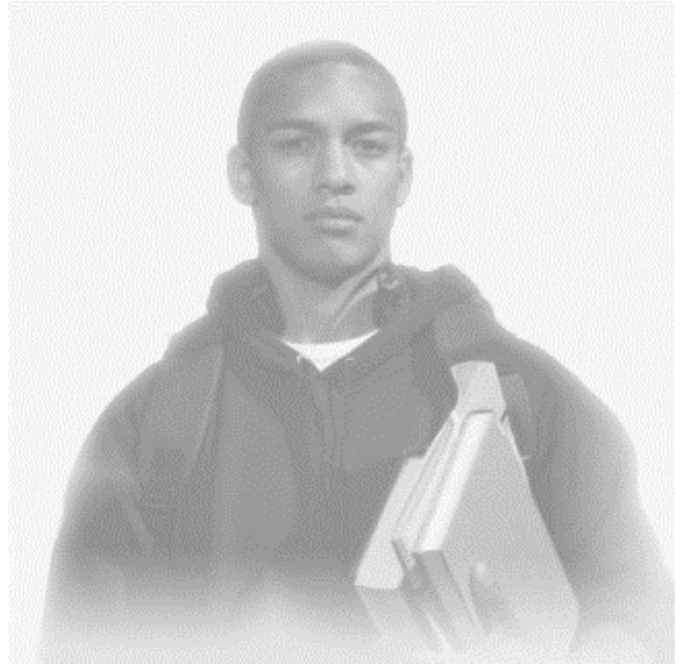
**DCHS Student 005** “African Americans students’ scores are lower than their peers because they have lack of motivation, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and no support by their parents. Many African Americans live in households where there is hard to get any kind of studying or work done. There are cases where some African American parents do not care about their child educational success or future. Some African Americans have been down graded where they feel and believe that they are a failure. Some Africans Americans do not take standard and state tests serious, where they feel it does not affect them, so they blow the test off.”



## Sample Quotes—Cont.

### **DCHS Student 006**

“I think African Americans scores are lower than others in the fact that some people may lack motivation. Other problems include that they could be lazy, or procrastinators. But some factors might be attributed from their families or their household, which can include not having a father figure or mentor around.”



**DCHS Student 007** “One reason why African American students don’t perform well in school is because they lack the support from those they need most and have low self-esteem. Probably a high percentage of their parents never finished high school themselves.”

**DCHS Student 009** “One factor that seemed to appear a lot was the idea that the finances were not there. And, that is true. No matter how hard some people try, they just can never get to the top. This lack of money can hinder what experiences the child gets. I got about 5 letters to go to Washington, D.C. but I could never go because of the fact that my parents do not have that kind of money. It did not discourage me, however, but it can discourage other kids. This leads me back to motivation. My motivation is to do well in school so I can have a quality life.”

**DCHS Student 010** “The school should take time and help African American students get their scores up instead of giving up on them and giving them the reason to think they will never score high and pass these test. And if they don’t want to be helped then the school shouldn’t waste their time on those students but spend it on the students who do want to be helped and score high.”

**DCHS Student 012** “The school should have surprise monitoring schedules. An administrator should just drop by the many classes unannounced. Because when the teacher knows when someone is coming by to monitor how they teach they tend to actually teach what the class is supposed to be about. Also, they should make the fact that there’s tutoring for certain courses be well known. Also, tutor every day of the week not just one or two days because some students have jobs also. Especially African American students because we tend to have parents with lower income.”

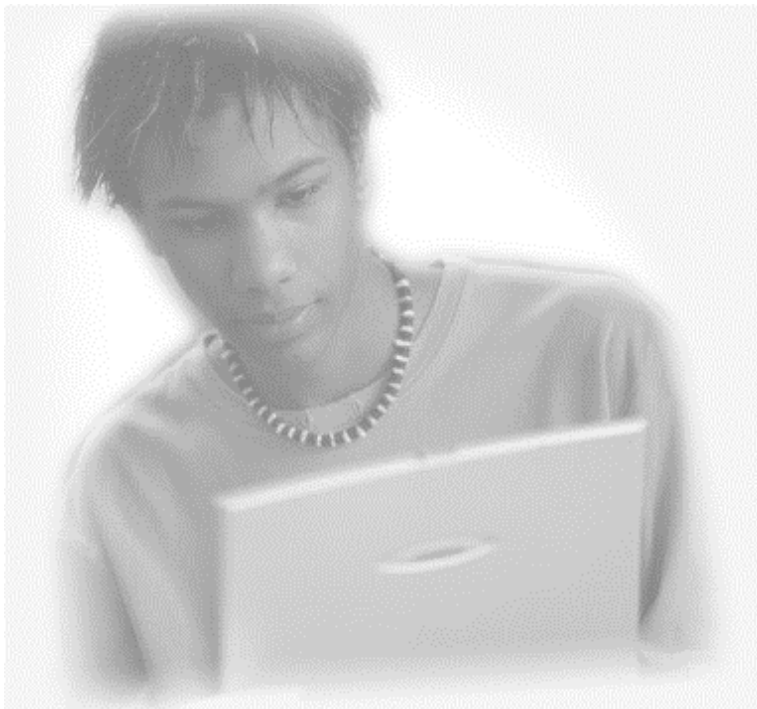
**DCHS Student 013** “I believe that blacks are more focused on the material things in life. They are more worried on how they look and who they can impress rather than what they need to do in school to better themselves for the future. Blacks also live for the moment. They don’t think about what is going to happen in the future because they are only concerned about what is going on at the very moment. I also believe that blacks have little to no support at all. We are treated like animals and delinquents; so most believe that’s what they are, so they don’t try to be anything other than that. It is easier for a white kid or even a Hispanic kid to find the motivation to do well in school.

## Sample Quotes– Cont.

It isn't so easy for blacks because most of us are born in the ghettos or the worst part of the town, and many believe that they can't amount to anything.

Teachers should be a bit more helpful and more willing to work with blacks if they need the help. Like going the extra mile to make sure they get the help they needed. But the blame really can't be put on any else than the black kids themselves. I believe it starts at home with the parents. The parents should give as much support and motivation to the child as often as possible, and the child should get somewhat of a reward every once in awhile for doing a good job on a test or getting above average grades on report cards. Also black students should try not to fall into the life that surrounds them and should not be worried about what they are wearing. The parents need to take charge and be stricter about their child's work. If they didn't finish their homework they shouldn't be aloud to go outside or talk on the phone until the work is finished.”

**DCHS Student 014** “The parents sometimes set their own kids up to fail by not teaching them at home first. If you don't learn the basics then you won't achieve. I believe that if more students have someone to give them a push into the right direction then they would achieve more. There is also the fact about teachers and how they do not care sometimes. If the teacher shows that they do not care about what the students do, then the students will go around thinking that it is alright not to care. There is also the problem about having the wrong priorities. Most blacks only care about looking good and having the best things.”



**DCHS Student 015** “Parents need to contribute more to the needs of students. Having the proper tools like a computer, proper meals, and a time set for quiet time to study can help students. Schools can start awarding students prizes to create incentive to achieve. Only an honor roll breakfast, which usually has nasty food, is not good enough. An example of a good incentive for a student who is just about to give up would be monetary awards. Like gift certificates for the student that drastically improves their grade. Not just awards for those that are already doing well, but for those who improve.”

**DCHS Student 018** “The schools should have more clubs or groups that cater to the black community and have their peers help them and show them how to be successful and not to give up.”

## Sample Quotes-Cont.

**SCCHS Student 001** “There are significant amounts of programs available that help increase ones knowledge. Us being recognized as “the under achievers”, aren’t exposed to those programs...If it is a well known fact that most African Americans have a better chance at athletics than academics, then we’re definitely going for athletics. So why come to school and better your self or expand your knowledge when you are constantly reminded that that’s not the way out for you? I personally think the FCAT is specifically made for the White students. Different ethnic groups have different ways of thinking...When other ethnic groups succeed and another doesn’t, one tends to lower the standards for the unsuccessful group. There should be more recognition for the students that achieve excellent at our school. Then maybe the lower ranking students will want the same recognition and try a little harder at achieving.”

**SCCHS Student 002** “There are many strategies the school can perform that may improve students’ performance on test. A couple of things they can start with is first of all updating school instruments, such as books and other school supplies that have been here since 1988. When we are given tests and examines they are made up of updated theories and statements, but the teachers are feeding us ancient myths. How will these old books help us perform better on test? The answer is - IT WON’T!!!!? More so the school needs more frequent recognition. At my school all the focus is on sports. The GPA to play any sport is a 2.5. The majority of the students are on academic probation and still get to play, while the students who have a 3.5 GPA or higher suffers, simply because when they ask for new Science books, they are denied because all of the school’s money is spent on sports instead of academics.”

**SCCHS Student 004** “The majority think that the FCAT for instance is not a big deal. Another reason that our scores are lower is because we still believe that the system is trying to hinder us. We feel that because we are Black, the system is against us. The main excuse that we continue to use is - “we Black don’t know anything about these things,” but the only ignorance a person has is the ignorance that they choose to have...The school could give more academic recognition. Basically give students a reason to excel, not bribery, but you know rewards.’

**SCCHS Student 005** “We are so far behind in technology that the things we need to succeed here at this school are not provided for us to make those necessary gains that we need academically. If the school district was to look past the fact that everyone is not academically able to make those gains, and don’t base our school funding on our learning



## Sample Quotes—Cont.

gains and try to help instead of hold back while allowing the financial stability that we need, we will all make those necessary gains needed. Another thing I would like to touch on is why can't our school district keep the same teachers for more than two years? Students hate to have a new teacher every other month or year... Predominately White schools never have financial problems — not saying it is racist but it is bias. ”

**SCCHS Student 006** “I feel that this question could be answered based off of the students being very apathetic about the whole situation of the FCAT, and test period. Not just the students being this way, but also the parents and teachers who don't show any sympathy towards the future of their youth.”

**SCCHS Student 007** “Our school has a problem in getting EDUCATED teachers to teach at this school, our school attains anyone who has teaching experience but not a master's degree in the subject that they are required to be in. Our school has teachers who have a degree in a specific subject but since we don't have many teachers our school let teachers teach other subjects. We have other programs at this school that are scarcely acknowledged for their success in winning prizes. We have a brain bowl team whose number one in the county, but since we are a football school and only focus on football they barely give them the congrats that they deserve.”



**SCCHS Student 009** “They don't have the support from their families. Their parents don't encourage them to succeed and are not there most of their lives...What some schools can do to help is to offer more help, give their students acknowledgement for their accomplishments. The schools need updated text books and better technology.”

**SCCHS Student 010** “The majority of African American students have the mindset that they will not achieve in what they want to do and they will never achieve the level of success that they desire, no matter how hard they try. And most students are ridiculed by their local peers for being outstanding and wanting to achieve. They call you “nerds” and “geeks”, and tell you that you're not cool. Which causes that person to feel that being smart is not the way to go and that they should spend more time focusing on boyfriends, and parties, and being cool, rather than just being themselves and achieving the level of success that they are capable of...I feel that students should receive more academic recognition. Around the school, all you hear is surrounded around football. They are recognized on the announcements, on the radios, the news-

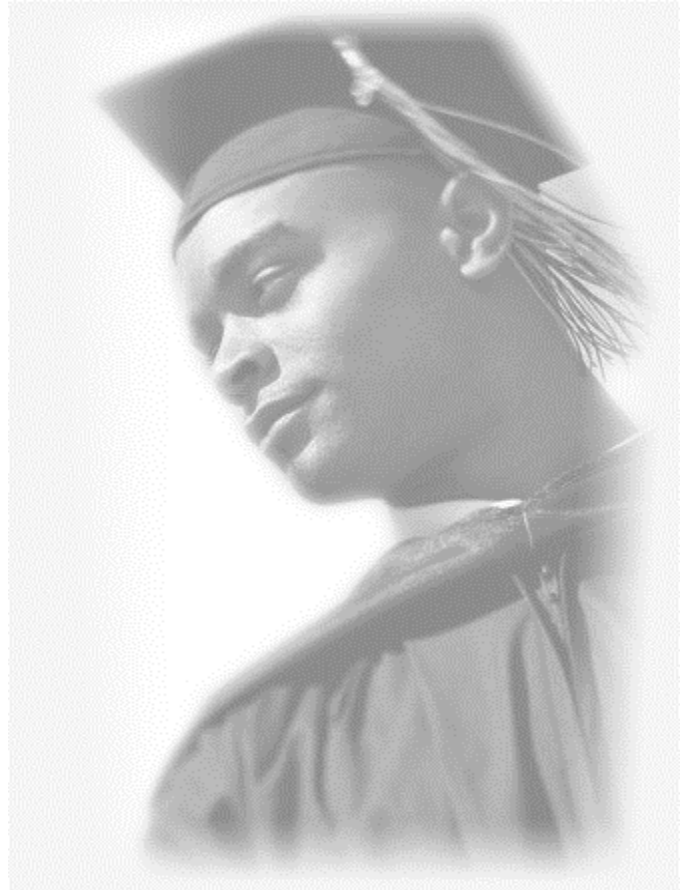
## Sample Quotes—Cont.

papers, and almost everywhere else. But you can only hear of one Honor Roll breakfast, or one Brain Bowl victory every blue moon. Students don't receive the praise they should for exceeding in academics... We still use books from the 1980's when the year is now 2006."

**SCCHS Student 011** "When preparing for the test, our school staff waits until the last final minute to cram knowledge on us that should have been taught from the beginning of the school year, as a matter of fact, the year before in terms that the entire school/school district knew that this huge very important task had to be reached."

**SCCHS Student 012** "The school administration does not put enough emphasis on the importance of the FCAT test. For example, our school starts preparing for this FCAT test two months before the actual test. Not only that; we as African Americans do not take testing or school seriously because of family problems, financial stability, and because of the lack of support...Increase the academic budget so that we can have the necessary teachers who have the passion to teach reading and math to those extra African American students who need the help. Help us to decrease the number of students in each classroom so that every student can learn. The "No Child Left Behind" system should live up to its standards and make sure that every student, no matter what their race or ethnic background is, succeed. Recognize the academic groups in the school for their accomplishments will better the African American students."

**SCCHS Student 012** "There is a lack of support within in the school district and the community. Through out South Central Community High school the student body as a whole has failed to meet Florida high school state standards. African Americans are not exposed to as many things as other cultures. For example, we may be increasing our performance ability but we are still under the state standard. Throughout our community, the community only financially supports our football team...Many African American feel that they will never amount to nothing because their parents and or their surrounding didn't accomplish too much. So they feel they will just follow this trend...If each student had the opportunity to attend at least three study sessions a week in a different subject, then that student can and will have the ability to accomplish more things in life. The community could help by offering more local support because with the support they have shown us in the past five years it says that they only care about our sports and not our education."



## A Personal Note from Dr. Ferrer..

Since I immigrated to the United States, I have been fascinated by the never ending struggle of this country to provide equitable and quality education to its increasingly diverse student population. I have been driven to learn more about this I see the huge academic proficiency gaps between students of color and their White counterparts, between English Language Learners and students who speak English as their first language, between students who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not, and between students enrolled in Regular programs and those who are enrolled in programs for students with exceptionalities.

After 30 years of working with diverse student populations in both the United States and overseas, I am convinced that getting all children to experience academic success demands the deliberate and careful creation of a school culture that is conducive to learning in each of our schools. Why? Because the culture of a school has the power to either invigorate or debilitate the vital elements of any school improvement process.

The same way that a bridge over a chasm can not be built without knowing how long it needs to be, how much weight it needs to hold, how deep the chasm is and the conditions of the terrain on the other side, a school culture of achievement cannot occur without a deep understanding of the values, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the student body, their families, the community, and the faculty and administration of the school system. Knowledge is power —especially knowledge about attitudes! Do students believe that they can learn? Is education valued by our student body? How is the state assessment viewed? These and many other questions need answers. A comprehensive understanding of the existing paradigms will empower educational leaders to develop strategies to unify variances in paradigms and create a single school culture in which all students can achieve academic success.

Dr. Lourdes Ferrer

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