



# Higher Education Partnerships for Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness

## Miami-Dade County Public Schools and Florida International University

*Students experiencing homelessness during high school face unique challenges to accessing and successfully transitioning to institutes of higher learning. Educational institutions can respond with partnerships and strategies to help students succeed. Across the country, local education agencies and institutes of higher learning are building capacity to ensure every student experiencing homelessness is identified and has a full and equitable opportunity to pursue and achieve their post-secondary goals.*

### Overview

Spanning more than 2,000 square miles of rural, urban, and suburban areas, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) serves approximately 345,000 students across 392 schools in pre-K through 12th grade. Approximately 70% of students are Hispanic, 21% are African-American, and 7% are Caucasian. The fourth largest school district in the country, MDCPS identified and served more than 6,100 students—including 1,628 high school students—experiencing homelessness at some point during the 2015-2016 school year, including students who were: in shelters or transitional housing; doubled-up because of loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; staying in hotels or motels due to lack of alternate, adequate accommodations; or unsheltered. Of the more than 6,100 students identified, 247 were unaccompanied.

Local strategies to strengthen identification and engagement of students experiencing homelessness continue to demonstrate a growing need to address family and youth homelessness in Miami-Dade. Like many school districts across the country, MDCPS has seen the impact of dramatically increasing rental costs, which are having an adverse effect on working families. Using population data from the Free and Reduced Lunch program, local school officials estimate there are close to 14,000 school-age children and youth experiencing some form of homelessness throughout the MDCPS district, the majority of whom are part of families who are doubled-up or sharing housing with others due to loss of housing or economic hardship.

### Project UP-START

At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, Project UP-START, the MDCPS McKinney-Vento program, launched an aggressive public awareness campaign targeting parents, community stakeholders, and school-based staff to disseminate information about existing services and supports, and to dispel the myths and fears many families and students have about seeking help. Focusing on Title I schools in particular, these outreach efforts are showing results: Project UP-START has already seen an increase in the number of students identified as experiencing homelessness compared to the same point in time during the previous (2015-2016) school year.

Project UP-START is an active member of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust, which directs and implements the Miami-Dade County Homeless Plan. Project UP-START is leading efforts to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness, including students who are transitioning from high school to institutes of higher learning. Integral to those efforts has been the development of a 'higher education pipeline' for students at-risk of or experiencing homelessness, including to state and technical colleges, and Florida International University (FIU).

## **Fostering Panther Pride**

In order to help youth reach their higher education goals and support their long-term economic mobility, Project UP-START partnered with FIU to connect eligible students to the Fostering Panther Pride (FPP) initiative, a privately funded program launched by the university in 2013 to assist youth formerly in foster care or youth who are experiencing homelessness to successfully transition from high school. This unique partnership between MDCPS Superintendent Alberto Carvalho and FIU President Mark Rosenberg has opened doors for all students in Miami-Dade County who might be disconnected from opportunities for higher education, including youth experiencing homelessness.

## **Target Population**

Project UP-START engages unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness across the school district to assess their interest in higher education, identifies those who will potentially meet FIU admissions requirements, and assists them with financial aid and tuition exemption forms, verification, and scholarship opportunities. Students benefit from a Florida [statute](#) that allows youth experiencing homelessness and youth formerly in foster care to receive tuition exemptions at any state school.

Seniors must have been identified as experiencing homelessness or in foster care and have been accepted into and planning to attend FIU. Slightly more than one third of FPP enrollees are identified as experiencing homelessness.

Participation in Fostering Panther Pride is voluntary. Students have access to the single point of contact (SPOC), currently the FPP Program Director/Success Coach, who focuses on removing barriers to success. The SPOC facilitates connections to individualized resources and supports, including housing and job placement, as well as academic supports and mentoring opportunities throughout the school year.

## **Key Partners**

The Miami-Dade County Youth Homelessness Initiative is comprised of a robust network of community partners, including service providers and advocates, philanthropy, and schools. In addition to Project UP-START and FIU, partners in the higher education effort include the Miami-Dade College Educate Tomorrow at Single Stop, which also has a transition program to support students' successful transfer to FIU.

Project UP-START encourages high school students to learn more about and consider applying to Technical Colleges that are operated through the public school system. The Florida state tuition exemption also applies to Technical Colleges, all of which offer "Career in a Year" programs in which youth can learn a trade and secure a working wage in a shorter period of time than the typical college and university 4-year programs, providing some students with an alternate pathway after high school that may be more suited to their life and career goals.

## **Key Strategies**

The FPP program works to remove eligibility requirements and other barriers that can make it difficult for students to engage in services that support program access, retention and graduation, and employment and/or further education. This has included providing students with supports to navigate what can be complex university policies ranging from tuition exceptions and application fees to financial aid and residency classifications. The FPP provides access to basic needs, including housing resources both on- and off-campus, as well as employment, case management supports, mentoring, and guidance. In addition to access to housing scholarships for college

dormitories that provide year-round housing, community-based resources include access to emergency shelter and longer-term housing with supports.

## Lessons Learned

- Leadership and buy-in is critical.** The success of the partnership with Florida International University can be attributed in large part to the commitment and leadership of MDCPS Superintendent Alberto Carvalho and FIU President Mark Rosenberg to address the needs of disconnected youth, including those experiencing homelessness, as they transition to institutes of higher learning. Opportunities for Project UP-START to present its model to lawmakers, along with Superintendent Carvalho sharing his experiences of homelessness, have also contributed to increased awareness of and the need to support students at-risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Partnerships matter.** Take time to build relationships and understanding of the issue. While the commitment between Miami-Dade County and university officials is critical, the collaborative relationship between the McKinney-Vento liaison and the FIU SPOC ensures the ongoing success of the partnership. With the focus on successful transition from high school to higher learning, efforts have centered around creating local awareness and understanding across county schools of the kinds of resources available to unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness at FIU through the FPP program.
- State statute provides leverage to implement practice change.** The FPP program is a model program that demonstrates the impact of strong McKinney-Vento liaison and higher education relationships. [Florida statute mandates](#) *“post-secondary educational campus coaching positions”* across the *“Florida College System institutions’ and university institutions’ general support services structure to provide current and former foster care children and young adults with dedicated, on-campus support.”* Leveraging this requirement, FIU has expanded the on-campus support role to target youth experiencing homelessness. Stakeholders have acknowledged that it takes time to build collaborative and trusting partnerships between the local school district and institutes of higher learning. Across the state of Florida, local liaisons meet regularly with their district counterparts and participate in regional meetings and conference calls to strengthen their relationships with higher education partners. These strategies are helping to build awareness and understanding of the resources that are available to remove barriers and support the successful transition of disconnected youth from high school to higher education.
- Centralize efforts through a single point of contact.** Having a single point of contact (SPOC) streamlines access and increases efficiency for both students and community partners. Students have help navigating what can be a complicated process to access needed supports, while community partners have a central point of contact for receiving referrals as well as providing information regarding existing resources. Supports for students include help with financial aid forms, access to housing, and academic advising throughout the year.
- Plan for program sustainability early on.** The program is currently funded with a combination of university dollars and local and private funding. In addition to access to the SPOC, funding ensures educational and related supports for students ranging from academic guidance and mentoring to assistance with housing and connections to employment. To secure the long-term sustainability of the FPP program, FIU launched a 5-year, \$1 million fundraising campaign in 2017, reflecting the ongoing commitment of the university to support disconnected students, including those experiencing or at-risk of homelessness.

## Looking Ahead

### Results

Since the program's launch in 2013, 258 students have received services through the FPP program, including 84 students who received a tuition exemption due to verification of homeless status. To-date, 12 of those 84 students have graduated. Over the past 3+ years, enrollment of students experiencing homelessness has steadily increased. At the start of the fall 2016 semester, there were 130 students participating in the FPP program, including 40 students with verification of homeless status. Assessment of program participants has shown that students in FPP are successfully achieving their academic goals and maintaining housing stability. Longer-term assessment will help to determine the employment and career outcomes for students as they exit university and transition to the workforce and self-reliance.

### Addressing Challenges

Together, Project UP-START and FPP continue to coordinate on efforts to address challenges or barriers to students' success. This includes support for youth who may be undocumented or who lack identification for state residency, expanding access to financial aid especially for students who may be identified later in the school year after financial aid resources have been dispensed, and ensuring access to on- and off-campus housing throughout the year.

### Building Capacity

Project UP-START continues to proactively engage high school seniors who are on track to graduate and are identified as experiencing homelessness to support their transition to university. FPP continues to focus on removing barriers and providing supports for students throughout their academic career, including graduate and post-graduate studies. Given the increasing enrollment of students in FPP, the next phase of the program includes building capacity to support successful transitions from FIU to the workforce system. As young people complete their educational goals, FPP is establishing community-based partnerships to support students as they embark upon their chosen career pathways.

## Learn More

To learn more about the partnership between the Miami-Dade County Public Schools and Florida International University, contact:

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