

FAST 2011 EDUCATION ACTION COMMITTEE REPORT

THE PROBLEM: During our house meetings last fall, many parents, grandparents, tutors, and mentors shared frustrations about the lack of quality education in some of our public schools. Many pastors and church school teachers shared stories about their elementary and middle school students, and teenagers having a difficult time reading the Bible or Sunday school lessons. Many others were angry about the district's low graduation rates – and, in particular, the lingering achievement gap between black and white students. The state of Florida's National Governor's Association (NGA) report shows that the 2010 graduation rate for black students was 63%, while in the same year 83% of white students graduated. The NGA Rate counts standard diplomas and special diplomas. In a shocking report released by the Schott Foundation for Public Education in October of last year, Pinellas County ranked second-to-last of all large school districts nation wide in graduating black males. The report showed a wide achievement gap in graduation, with only 21% of black males graduating with standard diplomas, compared with 50% of white males⁴.

RESEARCH WE HAVE DONE: We learned that, though students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, low reading scores is a major predictor.⁵ In Pinellas County 49% of 9th graders read below grade level in 2010. That is a good indicator of why graduation rates are so low. State and national experts stress that, because it is difficult to catch older students up to their reading levels, it is better to put our efforts on developing strong reading skills in early grades. According to the Florida Department of Education, the standard is that our schools have 80% of its students reading on or above grade level, at a minimum. According to FCAT scores our district reported in 2010, among the 74 elementary schools we have in our district, there are 43 elementary schools with less than 80% of its 3rd graders reading on grade level. Of those schools, 14 had less than 60% of its 3rd graders reading on grade level in 2010 (*see chart on the next page*). We also identified 6 other low-performing schools we are concerned about because many of our members have relatives who attend these schools. A high percentage of the students who attend the 20 target schools are from lower-income households, as indicated by the school's Title 1 status. Title 1 funds are extra funds awarded to schools based on the number of children who qualify to receive free or reduce-priced lunch. Though lower-income children tend to start school with vocabularies that are more limited than their peers', local, state, and national experts assert that poverty is no excuse for children not being able to read.

We need our school district to implement new strategies that will get at least 80% of 3rd graders at the 20 target elementary schools reading on grade level. Experts at Just Read, Florida! – the reading arm of the Florida Department of Education – say that the following is recommended to accelerate the skills of high-poverty readers:

1. That school use a field-tested curriculum. Field-tested means that the curriculum has been tested on a small number of students, then, based on their results, the materials get revised before they are published. Mr. Stuart Greenberg, the executive director of Just Read, Florida!, says that using field-tested curriculum is key, and doesn't leave anything to chance; and that any trained teacher using field-tested curriculum can be successful, even new teachers.
2. That schools fully implement field-tested curriculum. The key ingredients for full implementation are:
 - Before the school year begins, every teacher and para-professional needs at least 10 hours of training on the specific reading curriculum they are going to teach.
 - Opportunities at least monthly for teachers to review student data and adjust teaching plans based on that data.
 - School administrators be held to a schedule of visiting every classroom, every seven to 10 days, in order to observe, critique, and give feedback to the teacher.

THE SOLUTION: The Florida K-20 Education Code of the Florida Statutes says that all public schools districts are required to, by law, "provide a high quality education... for all Florida's students," regardless of their zip code or socio-economic status. FAST members have children, grandchildren, and other relatives who attend the 20 target schools, and we want the head of our district, Superintendent Dr. Julie Janssen, to work with us to develop a comprehensive plan that will accelerate the reading skills of students in these schools.

⁴ Statistics from 2008, Schott Foundation for Public Education.

⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education report "About the Crisis: Students" http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/students