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More S. Florida students are making the grade

BY NIRVI SHAH

Pioneer Middle Principal Linda Arnold and her teachers have learned to tailor some of her teaching based on each student's specific needs.

Data from the FCAT, Florida's tests in math, reading, writing and science, make these kinds of personalized lessons possible because they show which skills a student is having trouble with, Arnold said.

"I think through the years, we've all learned to become more accountable. We use our data more," Arnold said of her Cooper City school.

That kind of shift in teaching is what has helped some big school districts across the country, including Broward, do well, despite their size and complexities. A report from the Council of the Great City Schools issued Wednesday showed that Broward is one of just a few large school districts nationwide where fourth- and eighth-graders do at least as well as the rest of the state on standardized exams in math and reading. Broward is the sixth-largest district in the country with about 270,000 students.

The council is a coalition of the 67 largest school districts in the country. One in six students in America -- about 7.4 million kids -- attend school in these 67 districts. Council Executive Director Michael Casserly noted that while fewer Miami-Dade students still pass the test than the rest of the state, the county has made a lot of progress.

"Their gains have to rank them among the fastest improving urban school districts in the country," Casserly said. Miami-Dade is the fourth-largest school district in the country with about 365,000 kids.

The Council's report cautioned that it is difficult to compare one large district with another, since there is no national test they all use. Instead, the report compares how a district does in relation to the state it is in.

But it found that combined, almost 60 percent of fourth-grade students scored at or above state standards in math in all large school districts, compared to 44 percent in 2002. Eighth-grade students went from 35 percent to 46 percent in the same period. And in general, big school systems are closing the gap in achievement among students of different races.

But most still have a long way to go.

Although Broward and Miami-Dade have improved the percentage of their students passing state exams, many students in both districts are still working below grade level.

Still, rising test scores in large districts are noteworthy, Casserly said. Their sheer size, plus a concentration of poor students, students who don't speak English, and other challenges mean big school systems have an especially tough job, he said.

In Broward, Arnold said that working closely with other middle school principals and with elementary and high schools in her part of the county help erase the feeling that the district is so large.

One factor that helps Broward is a smaller percentage of poor students than other big districts. Poverty is a significant factor in determining students' success.

In Broward, about 41 percent of students are poor, slightly less than Florida's overall average. In larger Miami-Dade, 64 percent of all students are poor.