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Praised for learning gains, Miami-Dade school district is finalist for national prize

By MATTHEW I. PINZUR

A prominent education think tank has chosen Miami-Dade as one of the five most-improved urban school districts in the country and named it as a finalist for its annual award.

The Broad Foundation, which began giving the award in 2002, cited the strong improvement of Miami-Dade's poor, black and Hispanic students on math tests, the narrowing achievement gap and the overall high scores of Hispanic students over the last four years.

The other finalists are Boston, New York City, Bridgeport, Conn. and Jersey City, N.J.

The winner, to be announced Sept. 20 in New York, will receive \$500,000 to fund college scholarships for its high-school students. The other finalists will receive \$125,000 scholarship funds.

It is the first time Miami-Dade has been nominated, and no Florida district has ever won.

Education experts will visit each finalist district over the next two months, interviewing administrators, School Board members, union and community leaders. They will also observe classes and conduct focus groups with principals and teachers.

The 13-member judging panel includes two Floridians -- Gov. Jeb Bush and University of Miami President Donna Shalala -- as well as numerous current and former governors and presidential cabinet secretaries.

The Broad Foundation, based on Los Angeles, considered results from 100 urban districts for this year's prize. Top factors included state standardized tests, graduation rates, scores on the SAT and ACT college-admissions exams and other national achievement data.