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Dade selected as one of 5 most-improved urban school districts: Recognizing improved test scores -- especially among black, Hispanic and low-income students -- a prominent research center has chosen Miami-Dade as one

By Matthew I. Pinzur

Apr. 6--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. "We've had a more intense focus, a more coherent plan, more focused resources," said Superintendent Rudy Crew. "This is about people getting deeper in the practice of teaching."

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.

"Miami-Dade is doing what some say is impossible -- improving students' performance, regardless of their race or family income -- while at the same time closing persistent achievement gaps," said foundation founder Eli Broad in a written statement. "Other urban districts nationwide can learn a great deal from what is working in Miami-Dade."

Education experts will visit each finalist district over the next two months, interviewing administrators, School Board members and 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 -- but they have been asked to recuse themselves, said foundation spokeswoman Erica Lepping. It also includes current and former governors and presidential cabinet secretaries, as well as corporate and community leaders.

The Broad Foundation, based in Los Angeles, considered results from the nation's largest 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.

Some of Miami-Dade's successes cited by Broad dates back to 2002, when Merrett Stierheim was superintendent.

"That shows we weren't sitting on our hands," said Stierheim, who served from 2001 through 2004. "It indicates that we had put in a rather massive effort ourselves."