



Panel looks for ways to help Hispanic students succeed

By Georgia East, Sun Sentinel

FORT LAUDERDALE — Although Florida has made gains in narrowing the achievement gap for Hispanic students, the nation's education system overall lacks accountability and needs significant changes, said Michelle Rhee, the controversial former Washington, D.C., schools chancellor.

"The children that are in school today will be the first generation of Americans to be less educated than their parents were," Rhee said Friday during a panel discussion on student achievement.

"We spend more than double per child than a decade ago and yet the results are not getting better."

Rhee and newly named Florida Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson were among five panelists at a forum sponsored by the West Palm Beach-based Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, held at the Hyatt Regency. About 130 people, including parents and educators, attended.

The focus was on reforms to enhance student performance and improve the graduation rate among Hispanic students. The council is a strong proponent of school choice.

Robinson said more needs to be done to prepare students for college and a career.

"I see a strong correlation between education and the economy," said Robinson, because well-educated people help create more jobs.

Despite gains, a sizeable achievement gap still exists in South Florida.

The graduation rate for white non-Hispanic students in Broward was 85 percent; for Hispanics it was 81 percent and for black students, 69 percent.

In Palm Beach County, 91 percent of white non-Hispanic students graduated, while only 80 percent of Hispanic students and 70 percent of black students did.

In Miami-Dade, the rates were 82 percent, 74 and 64 percent, respectively.

Robinson said while some cite a lack of education spending as part of the problem, more collaboration among superintendents



(Jim Rassol, Sun Sentinel / July 15, 2011) Michelle Rhee, controversial school reformer, and Gerard Robinson, new state education commissioner, were speakers at a forum on Hispanic student achievement in Fort Lauderdale.

could help and funds must be used creatively.

Both Robinson and Rhee said politics can hinder progress.

"We don't have an achievement gap problem, we have a political crap problem," said Robinson. "Until you deal with the political crap problem, you can't deal with the achievement gap problem."

State Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, said the state has made gains by realizing there is no "one-size-fits-all" model. She also said the mandatory retention of third-grade students who don't pass state exams has set the bar high.

"Everyone can learn," Flores said. "Of course there are challenges, but you can't allow adults to make excuses and find crutches for other students."