



**PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS — LEAD WITH PURPOSE.
TRANSFORM SYSTEMS. IMPACT LIVES.**

FIU
**EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP & POLICY
STUDIES (ED.D.)**

FIU's Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies is a forward-thinking program created in partnership with South Florida public school districts. Designed for current and aspiring leaders, the program blends real-world district experience with FIU's academic expertise to address the most pressing challenges in today's schools. Instead of completing a traditional solo dissertation, students work in collaborative research teams to tackle authentic problems of practice that directly benefit local schools and communities. This innovative approach provides hands-on, applied learning that strengthens district-university connections and prepares graduates to lead with confidence, collaboration and impact.

FIU
Arts, Sciences
& Education

**COHORT MODEL | COMBINED IN-PERSON & VIRTUAL COURSE MEETINGS
INTEGRATED COLLABORATIVE DISSERTATION-OF-PRACTICE**

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WHAT MAKES US UNIQUE

A UNIVERSITY–DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP DESIGNED FOR REAL IMPACT

FIU's Educational Leadership Ed.D. program is delivered through the Miami Public Education Partnership (MPEP)—a first-of-its-kind collaboration between FIU and South Florida public school districts. This partnership ensures that every course, conversation, and research experience is grounded in the real challenges and opportunities facing today's schools.

Students learn from a dual ecosystem of expertise:

- District leaders bring deep knowledge of local needs, policies, and practice.
- FIU faculty bring advanced research and scholarly expertise.

Together, we prepare leaders who are ready to create meaningful, community-rooted change.



A COLLABORATIVE DISSERTATION MODEL—UNIQUE IN THE REGION

Instead of working in isolation, students join small research teams focused on a district-identified problem of practice. Guided by FIU faculty, research teams conduct a multi-year, applied study that directly benefits local schools and communities.

This model:

- Reflects how leadership works in real systems
- Strengthens district–university partnerships
- Reduces doctoral isolation
- Produces actionable, community-centered research
- Ensures every student develops individual and collaborative research skills

Each dissertation includes a shared research foundation plus an individually authored research study, giving students the best of both worlds.

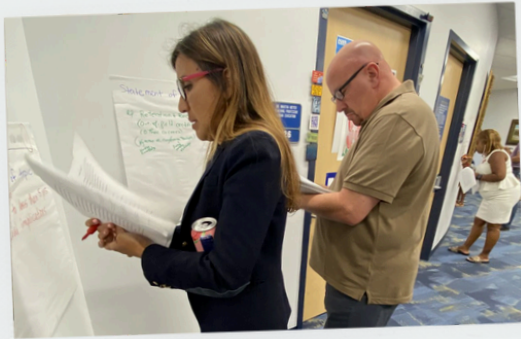


Built for Working Leaders

We understand the demands of professional life. Our program design supports full-time educators and leaders through a blend of:

- In-person cohort retreats
- Remote synchronous class meetings
- Independent and team-based research work

Students take two courses per semester, keeping them on a steady, manageable pathway toward degree completion.



Applied, Practice-Based Learning from Day One

Because research teams and topics are established before the cohort begins, coursework aligns directly with ongoing research. Students immediately apply what they learn—strengthening leadership practice and simultaneously contributing to district improvement.

A Clear Three-Year Pathway to the Doctorate

With a streamlined structure, milestone-driven supports, and team-based research, students are positioned to complete their Ed.D. in three academic years—including dissertation.

ALUMNI SNAPSHOTS

FIU



AILLETTE A. RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ
COHORT 3

**ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR | MDCPS OFFICE OF
INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS**

As Aillette enters candidacy in the EdD program, she continues to excel through her steadfast commitment to public education and advocacy for students. A proud M-DCPS alum and accomplished career educator with 20 years of impactful leadership, she brings extensive experience as a former teacher, assistant principal, principal and District Director of Family Engagement. Throughout her career, she has consistently focused on advancing student achievement, empowering families, and developing meaningful educational programs. In her current role, she serves as the district's liaison to local governments and community boards, forging strategic partnerships that promote public education, champions district priorities, and leads collaborative efforts that strengthen schools and uplift communities.

Motivated by her passion for Early Childhood Education, Aillette's dissertation explores the effects of Full-day and Half-day VPK programs on student success and kindergarten readiness.

“FIU's EdD program strengthened my leadership by advancing my understanding of policy impacts and the value of strategic partnerships in enhancing public education, while the cohort model provided a supportive, collaborative learning community.”

DR. AMARIS LEAL
COHORT 1, ALUM

TEACHING FACULTY | EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP | FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

Dr. Leal earned her Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in August of 2021, where her dissertation focused on teacher support and retention. She holds multiple advanced degrees in educational leadership and reading education.

Her career includes roles as principal, assistant principal, college advisor, professor, and classroom teacher, with a proven record of improving school performance, increasing graduation rates, and expanding advanced academic opportunities. In addition to leading schools to higher state performance rankings, she has served as a district trainer and mentor for aspiring administrators. She has developed curriculum at both K-12 and university levels. Passionate about student success, leadership development, and instructional excellence, she is recognized for building collaborative school cultures, driving data-informed results, and preparing future educators and leaders.

“The program transformed my leadership style as an administrator, it taught me to frame inquiry into research that could help support teacher and retention. It was also a catalyst in my professional growth and opened doors that I did not even realize were possible.”

ALUMNI SNAPSHOTS

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DR. CRISTINA UGALDE
COHORT 1, ALUM

**PRINCIPAL | MIAMI BEACH ADULT AND CONTINUING
EDUCATION CENTER | MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Dr. Cristina Ugalde earned her Doctorate of Education in Educational Administration from Florida International University (FIU) in August 2024. Her dissertation explored the factors that influence mid-career secondary school special education teachers to remain in the profession. She has since applied her expertise to expand her school's programs, most notably creating Project SOAR, a workforce and life-skills initiative for young adults with unique abilities (ages 22–26), which now operates with a waitlist and earned its program coordinator the 2025 Parent to Parent IMPACT Award.

In 2023, while completing her doctoral studies, Dr. Ugalde was honored as the ACE of Florida Administrator of the Year and received a proclamation from the City of North Miami Beach in recognition of her leadership, which drove a significant increase in school enrollment.

“Earning my doctorate has been one of the most rigorous challenges I have undertaken, yet one I fully embraced. While the path was not without obstacles, perseverance—not surrender—was the only option. The opportunities this achievement has created are unparalleled.”



DR. HEATHER D. TYLER
COHORT 1, ALUM

**DISTRICT DIRECTOR | OFFICE OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS |
MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Dr. Heather D. Tyler has a diverse background as an educator, to include instructional coach, lead teacher, school and district administrator. During her 24 year tenure in the U.S. Marine Corps, she was deployed globally in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, before retiring as Master Gunnery Sergeant.

Dr. Tyler earned her B.S. in Elementary Education from FIU, M.S. in Educational Technology and Ed.S. in Educational Leadership from NSU, and Ed.D. from FIU in 2022.

Dr. Tyler served as president of the Dade Association of School Administrators (DASA) from July 2023 to July 2025. She has led numerous initiatives in MDCPS including Team Leader for School Operations and Central Region Office Fiscal Review Team, Assessor Calibration Trainer, and member of joint committees with United Teachers of Dade on educational evaluation standards, Teacher and Rookie Teacher of the Year task forces, and district-level administrator interview panels.

“The program, designed for practitioners, allowed the us to focus on the unique issues/concerns of MDCPS. This focus enabled me to research and provide insights into possible resolutions to the staffing/retention needs geared towards the multicultural/multifaceted student population of MDCPS.”

ALUMNI SNAPSHOTS

FIU



DR. KRISDHAL UGARTE-TORRE
COHORT 1, ALUM

**ASSISTANT TEACHING PROFESSOR | PROGRAM DIRECTOR |
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP | FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

Dr. Ugarte-Torre earned her Doctorate of Education and Policy Studies from Florida International University (FIU) in August 2021. Her dissertation explored teachers' self-efficacy and resilience with their intent to remain in the profession. Her recognitions include FIU's CASE Graduate Academic Achievement Award in 2021, MDCPS Central Region Office AP of the Year in 2023, FI Panther Excellence in Education Honoree in 2024, and Spirit of SEHD Award in 2025.

Dr. Ugarte-Torre joined FIU's Educational Policy Studies team where she brings a wealth of practical knowledge to her teaching and mentorship. Through her work she seeks to bridge research and practice, empowering educators to thrive and make a lasting impact on their communities.

“My journey has come full circle — from earning four degrees at FIU, to serving 23 years in MDCPS, to now preparing future school leaders at the very institution that shaped me. My journey reflects a deep commitment to learning, leading, and giving back to the community that shaped my career.”



DR. MARY MICHELLE ATHERLEY
COHORT 1, ALUM

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR | OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY
ACCESS & PARTNERSHIPS | MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

After graduating from the EdD program in December 2021, Dr. Atherley applied her leadership and research skills to the life of a school site administrator until she received a promotion to the executive director role for the school district in the summer of 2023. She has analyzed district data for district wide programs, processed contracts for community-based organizations and business partners, and implemented initiatives to support over 400 schools with a focus on helping the underserved populations. In her role, Dr. Atherley continues to present to administrators districtwide via Scaled Leadership and Leader2Leader sessions. Dr. Atherley's dissertation research focused on the potential associations of racial similarity and certification pathways on teacher retention.

“Leadership is about more than decision-making—it's about using data to drive meaningful change. Whether analyzing district programs, processing community partnerships, or implementing initiatives across 400 schools, my focus remains on creating equitable outcomes for underserved populations.”

ALUMNI SNAPSHOTS



PAULO DE LA OSA
COHORT 3

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL | MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS



DR. RACHELLE SURRENCY
COHORT 2, ALUM

PRINCIPAL | MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As a proud member of Cohort 3—one of ten educators chosen district-wide for FIU's top-tier program—I have built on 29 years in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, serving as teacher, coach, mentor, sponsor, advocate, dean, grant writer, and assistant principal. While my marriage and birth of my three children are my greatest life achievements, the doctoral process @ FIU ranks among them. Having successfully defended my proposal and earned IRB and RRC approval, I am now collecting data from teachers in the district.

I am deeply thankful for my supportive committee and the dedicated faculty at FIU, each of whom has made a lasting impact on my academic and professional growth. My study of trust, agency, and teacher embeddedness has transformed my approach to leadership, helping me to understand relationships in and out of school with a more reflective and compassionate lens. I hope my work will further strengthen connections among educators district-wide and improve teacher retention.

“Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage.”
— Paulo Freire

Dr. Rachelle A. Surrency has dedicated her life to the pursuit of excellence in education. She began her journey as an English/Language Arts teacher at the secondary level, where she spent nine years fostering a love of learning in her students. For the past twenty-two years, she has served as a school-site administrator—six as an Assistant Principal and sixteen as a Principal—leading in schools across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The majority of her leadership has been in Education Transformation (ETO) schools serving underserved communities, where her commitment to equity and student success has guided her efforts to strengthen academic achievement and school culture.

“The program provided me with the opportunity to integrate new and expanded knowledge directly into my daily leadership practice. Collaborating closely with expert professors and peers in the cohort model enriched my understanding of educational policy and research-based leadership. The program truly elevated my capacity to lead with purpose, vision, and impact.”

READY TO LEAD CHANGE?

HOW TO APPLY

- Program: Educational Leadership & Policy Studies (Ed.D.) — College of Arts, Sciences & Education
- Application portal: FIU Graduate Admissions (check the program page for current deadlines & requirements).
- Where to confirm details: Department/program pages for the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies (admissions & program pages).

SCAN THE QR CODE BELOW

TO VISIT THE OFFICIAL EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP ED.D. WEB SITE AND LEARN MORE.

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ME! >>



CORE FACULTY



Dr. Courtney E. Rose
Assistant Teaching Professor
Program Director, Educational Leadership EdD
Department of Educational Policy Studies



Dr. Ethan Kolek
Clinical Associate Professor
Program Director, Higher Education Ph.D.
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