

L. A. Ainger Middle School—Charlotte County

KEY THEMES:

- Understanding developmental scores - 1 Year Improvement Goals
- Climate of caring
- Innovative approaches to education
- Early recognition of high school diploma requirements
- Communication
- Student 1st approach to decision making
- Participatory leadership
- Data Targets Specific Weaknesses/Strengths
- Powerful Dedicated Leadership
- Aligned Curriculum & Vertical Teaming
- School Newsletter
- Low Turnover
- Emphasis on Reading
- Clear District Objectives & Beliefs
- Embracing Social Culture

BEST PRACTICES:

- 'Read Alouds'
- Refrigerator Magnets w/Contact Numbers
- Data Interpretive Administration
- Internet Homework Hotline
- Read 180
- FCAT Explorer
- SWAT - Students Working Against Tobacco
- FEA - Future Educators of America
- AAA - Ainger Academic Achievers
- GRADE - Group Reading Assessment & Diagnostic Evaluation
- AM Tutorial
- NET - New Educator Training
- 2nd Step Character Development/Violence Prevention
- FCAT-A-CROC
- Comprehensive Health Curriculum
- SSAP - Student Support Assistance Program
- Professional Learning Committee

THE PRINCIPAL

The current Principal has been at L. A. Ainger Middle School for four (4) years. She has a Masters Degree and 25+ years of experience in the field of education, 16 of those years as a classroom teacher. This background provides her with a strong foundation for the needs and desires of the faculty she serves. The Principal is outgoing, friendly, exuberant about grade school learning, and passionate in her approach to developing and maintaining success.

Behind her mandate for achievement however, is an overriding concern to provide the resources necessary to accomplish the goals and reach the high standards expected. Her staff responds in kind and places high, yet not unattainable expectations on the students entrusted to their care.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

Principal Leadership will be described as it relates to the following standards, which are aligned with the National Standards of the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP).

Standard 1: Facilitating a Vision of Learning

The vision and mission statement of L. A. Ainger Middle is disseminated primarily through the School Improvement Plan. School staff and parents have access through Ainger's and the Charlotte County School District's website as well as faculty, student, and parent handbooks. A copy is also present in the reception area. A bi-weekly newsletter provides additional supplemental information as the SIP progresses. Further communication of the school's vision statement and mission utilizes the existing conduit of SAC and PTO.

The School Improvement Plan is developed by representatives of SAC working in conjunction with a representative committee of faculty and administrators. A unique element of this planning commission is the inclusion of local business partners. This far ranging group offers tremendous representation and specialized perspectives.

An administration that is extremely data savvy is critical to the success of L. A. Ainger. Data shapes nearly every aspect of the school - from curriculum to culture. The focal point remains an administration that leads by deciphering, interpreting, and outlining the collective data and how L. A. Ainger will react to it. This will surface as of prime importance throughout this narrative.

Obstacles to the School Improvement Plan and Mission Statement are uncovered within the wealth of information collected by the discriminating eyes and ears of the school. When gaps are located that are supported by the data, remedies are collectively assembled and the proper stopgap measures implemented.

Financial resources come largely from the District allocation, however, an increasing portion, vital to the school's programs and a marvelous indicator of faculty commitment, are grants. Teacher initiated pursuit of grants have enabled various programs and are fast becoming regular welcomed additions to the standard curriculum and contributory elements.

All monies are examined and portioned with one eye firmly resting on the needs of L. A. Ainger's youngsters. The criteria is rather basic - "*How does this (project, book, resource etc.) provide for a better, more productive environment for our students?*" If the answer is clear, the monies are allocated. In this way, the Mission Statement's goals are never lost sight of.

Evaluation and reevaluation of the impact of decisions are ongoing. The school's administration and faculty seem to be in a constant state of motion - implementing programs then assessing their impact. It is here where the term, "pulse of the school" is coined.

Standard 2: School Culture and Instructional Program

At L. A. Ainger, professional development is based exclusively on student need. Data analysis dictates the requirements of students, which, in turn, mandates the direction of professional development. The entire procedure is predictably very cyclic and is an easily recognizable thread that runs throughout successful schools - Student Assessment → Student Needs → Professional Development → Student Assessment.

In addition, staff surveys are routinely administered in order to gauge what the faculty deem is missing in their instructional programs or what additions they believe would be fruitful. This contact reinforces a teacher's sense of worth within the school as his or her voice is continually heard. Students also complete surveys and have representation on the student council which serves as a conduit for thoughts, suggestions, ideas, and criticism.

Given the scope of assessment tools at L. A. Ainger's disposal - Academic Improvement Plans, NRT, FSSS, FCAT, Read 180, and GRADE (Group Reading Assessment & Diagnostic Evaluation), and the frequency with which they are utilized, one could easily come away with the sense that monitoring of student learning is a continuous and virtually seamless process, as it is. Again, it is important to understand that L. A. Ainger's success comes from this designed stratagem- assess, analyze, modify - seasoned with the complimenting staff development.

L. A. Ainger is acutely aware of the *District Beliefs, & Strategic Objectives*. While not a day-to-day process perhaps, these documents lay out what is expected and encouraged in and from L. A. Ainger. The *Strategic Objective* for example is "*to have 100% of our students, within 6 months of graduation, employed in a job leading to a career, enlisted in a military service, or enrolled in a post-secondary education program.*" It bears noting that Charlotte County has follow-up systems in place to track the success of this objective and it is clear that L.A. Ainger plays an integral part in prepping students to meet this goal. Being aware of these goals forces L. A. Ainger to promote a style of life-long learning - one that can be quantified by the District.

Beyond the measurable programs there is an air of genuine concern that permeates the building. From the welcoming receptionist to the principal herself, students, parents, and visitors are made to feel comfortable and respected.

The social culture of L. A. Ainger Middle extends beyond its curriculum and well beyond any current State regulations. For all the complexities of education, L. A. Ainger reduces everything to the lowest possible common denominator and at Ainger that initial building block is caring. This is best examined by a review of the *Student Support & Assistance Program (SSAP)*. This element of L.A. Ainger, staffed by a faculty member who garners the utmost respect from students and staff, provides individualized academic and behavioral plans for young people in need. The *SSAP* determines who the student is, what his or her needs are, and follows up. This wider view of the student's areas of concern provides for a very vital emotional connection to education and to Ainger. It is interesting to note that in its infancy, The *SSA* Program had only 2 parents remotely interested (though Ainger staff recognized its validity). One year later, the program is bursting at the seams with over 2 dozen parents requesting their youngsters be placed in the highly successful program.

Any stumbling blocks at L. A. Ainger are behind them. Issues arise and are dealt with by an incredibly active administration and highly capable staff. As one tours the halls of the school and peruses its data you are struck by the fact that this is a school running on all cylinders. It has been fine-tuned and is performing. That is not to say, L. A. Ainger is static.

Changes come and go, but experience and resourceful people have set this program in motion, have gained momentum, and now stand with sleeves rolled up ready to address new challenges.

Standard 3: Management

All decisions at Ainger are based on student needs, determined by data. Once again, this is a mantle worn by all successful programs. Potential problems are identified early and dealt with as laid out in the preceding section. Grade level committees assemble and discuss curriculum as well as individual students. In fact, each student's FCAT scores are reviewed individually. This time intensive approach (Ainger has over 1,000 students) insures each student's needs are accurately addressed and that program placement is appropriate.

The enterprising work of the faculty is paramount to the financial successes that feed the programs of L. A. Ainger. Teachers have written and received grants from several organizations including the Venice Foundation as well as a \$30,000 staff development grant. This type of initiative is standard fare at Ainger and is yet another factor in the school's success.

A Professional Learning Committee exists. It is comprised of the department chairpersons and monitors curriculum. Teachers' plans are examined routinely to insure that instruction maintains the continuity necessary for success vertically and horizontally through the program.

The grounds are well maintained by a support staff that carries the same sense of pride and ownership maintained by the instructional staff. Additionally, an on-site sheriff's deputy insures safety.

Personal information in the form of records etc., is secured in a private area of the front administration office and all parent conferences are held in the strictest confidence. This latter fact comes to us from both administrators and parents. Each maintains a sense of confidence in the other.

Standard 4: Collaboration with Families and Communities

Utilization of resources located within the community is limited, with a few notable exceptions. As mentioned prior, the school and the community recognized the benefit of having a sheriff's deputy on-site. Far from solely having a negative connotation, the deputy's presence and interaction with students does a great deal to further the cause of positive police relations.

Another vital element of community involvement is the interaction of the local Boys & Girls Clubs. These groups collectively provide a *Power Hour* program daily wherein youngsters can receive tutoring from upper level students and staff. Participation is remarkably high for such an after-school program and has become an important part of the academic success at Ainger.

The school sponsors a Community Awareness Night on a yearly basis wherein over 20 local businesses and organizations come to learn more about Ainger and Ainger more about them. Through this event and the networking which follows, Ainger hopes to integrate more community involvement into the school's programs. This notion is enhanced by the fact that the administration within the school has remained intact, providing a solid base from which to build.

Standard 5: Acting with Integrity, Fairness, and in an Ethical Manner

The Principal leads the way in this arena. She does so by meeting with each student who currently rests at Level 1 or 2 (FCAT standard). By doing so, she is able to instill in the youngsters, and also staff, that her goal is not simply "passing the FCAT". The true goal is to obtain one year of growth over the course of one year. This invaluable premise is foundation to L. A. Ainger's many successes and speaks volumes regarding the ethics of the people who make up the school.

Another practical application comes in the area of early identification of students who are at-risk - academically, socially, and/or emotionally. Once again, data plays an important role in these determinations, however, teacher input from classic inaction with the student in question, is the key component. By having safety nets in place (i.e. SSAP), students come to grasp the value they hold for the school at large and, by association if nothing else, themselves. By modeling caring and compassion, the administration, teachers, and staff at L. A. Ainger demonstrate to every member of the school community that diversity, and not merely in an ethnic sense, is something to be embraced.

Student surveys assist Ainger administration and faculty in staying abreast of what values are being supported and which require bolstering by special function and/or recognition.

Standard 6: The Political, Social, Economic, Legal, and Cultural Context

The principal's office is clearly the hub of L. A. Ainger's communication wheel. Each element of the school runs through her office. This centralization of communication is vital to communicative success. As an administrator, the principal is open, revealing, and sharing with all input she encounters. And still, another vital element comprises this helm of communication - opinions and strategies are seldom, if ever, dictated by administration. It is a street. As before, ideas are free-flowing and result in consensus agreement that, by Ainger's own admission, exceeds the thought process of a single individual.

There exists an open dialogue with the community partners mentioned in preceding sections, but it remains an area of opportunity for Ainger. In and through the school's Community Awareness Nights, Ainger is striving to make the inroads necessary for community commitment. Decision making that does occur outside the strict confines of the school proper, such as the SAC and PTO, are welcomed and addressed respectfully, often revealing perspectives heretofore unrecognized and thereby tremendously appreciated.

DATA, DECISION MAKING & DESIGN

The processes that are outlined in this heading are, at Ainger, exactly as laid out. That is, data is collected throughout the year, with a keen eye always fixed on the students' needs. Data is collected via the many forms previously referenced including, but not limited to State mandated testing. Each assessment tool, from FCAT to in-class vocabulary tests, measure a specific set of performance statistics.

Armed with virtual reams of information, department chairs, teachers, and administration (recalling the principal's meeting with all Level 1 and 2 performers) collect to digest the information and reach a consensus regarding the next logical step in laying out the student's educational roadmap. Comparative score analysis demonstrates weaknesses, in individuals or the curriculum as a whole. In either instance the appropriate stopgap measures can be implemented in short order. Faculty up training in the form of how best to interpret the data in hand is accomplished by the principal and/or outside service professionals or District mentors.

As stated previously, student proficiency does not necessarily mean all youngsters perform at Level 3 or higher. Though this is the ultimate goal, the slogan, "One year's growth over 1 year", is deemed a success.

Total access to any form of assessment data is at the hand of teachers. Due to the technology in their classrooms, faculty can readily garner any testing information and the resulting determination and impact on a student's placement. This is especially important in the midst of a parent conference. The parent can see in black and white, or full color percentiles, where their child stands in relation to other students or, more importantly, where he or she stands in relation to him or herself during the preceding term or year.

For faculty, the instant access to such a myriad of data also affords them, not unlike the students themselves, to see where they, as teachers, have exceeded school and District goals, or perhaps where they have come up short. Again, information is knowledge and affords them the luxury of making adjustment to style, delivery, and content in order to achieve the desired outcome.

On the larger stage, data is collected, from L. A. Ainger and other schools in the county, and reviewed by District and school administration in order to select long-range programs to fill gaps made apparent by current testing. In addition to curriculum adjustment, personnel development and its relationship to L. A. Ainger's *School Improvement Plan* depend heavily on the information derived from on going assessment. The cyclic procedure demonstrated earlier on as it relates to students holds true for teachers as well.

After reviewing collected data, faculty group to plan intervention strategies. As mentioned, broad scale curriculum adjustments are accomplished if the data presents such a wide scope of need, but as referenced in an earlier section, Ainger appears to have weathered the storms of radical change and now is sailing along at full speed on a predetermined, success ending course.

On a smaller scale, if a specific classroom comes up wanting, teachers at grade level meet with administration to prepare and review Adequate Yearly Progress on youngsters' lessons to fill the knowledge gaps. In addition, a great deal of informal communication occurs to ascertain the direction and success of the adjustment. Boiled down further still, this procedure continues to hold when the data suggests intervention is required for a specific student and not the entire classroom. The most significant variant at this level is the involvement of the child's parent.

Ongoing evaluation continues across the curriculum, however, teachers and administration both are quick to point out that given the confines of the middle school clientele a progressive plan underlies the curriculum as a whole. That is - skills are introduced at Grade 6, honed at Grade 7, and culminate at Grade 8. An example of this is Ainger's approach to Reading. Technical reading is encouraged. Fictional reading, though important for exposure and vocabulary, has been diminished. Vertical and horizontal teaming within the school has pushed the emphasis to reading for information. This approach and the subsequent testing assess understanding and not simply content.

FAMILY/COMMUNITY

A *Parent Handbook* and a *Student Handbook* are just the beginning of the communication required to be successful in this section of the study. From the Mission Statement of the school to dress code and student conduct, each piece of information, vital in its own way to success, is transmitted to parents and students in hard copy and on-line for easy access. Student progression toward the expectation is well documented and communicated via letter, phone calls, and one-on-one parent conferences. Apart from direct contact with their child's teacher, student's families are well represented on the SAC with >72% being parents.

This high representation of involvement affords parents a voice for change. Once again, however, a review of available data and the interview process suggests that L. A. Ainger is well down the correct track. And yet, due to their unique perspective, parental suggestions and contributions are entertained, welcomed, and implemented without hesitation when applicable.

Student progress is communicated to parents via 8 week standardized reports and 4 week interim reports. Once again, early intervention is the by-word at Ainger. Should a student demonstrate he or she is struggling, action is put in place in the form of reassignment or tutoring along with the parent's knowledge and approval.

Transitioning new students and their families into the climate and culture of L. A. Ainger is eased by a comprehensive 6th Grade Orientation CD that details and chronicles the first day. But as with most programs and procedures at L. A. Ainger Middle, it is the people that make the difference. Parents are especially cognizant of the contribution the staff makes to insure the success of students - from the teachers who take the time to send home weekly progress notes on children to administrators who always make time for parental conferences. These parent-teacher/administrator conferences play an integral part in the communication cycle.

While uniform conferences are laid out at predetermined junctures throughout the year, additional conferences, formal and otherwise, are available at a moment's notice. Parents report that irrespective of circumstance, faculty and administration alike are more than willing to meet at the parent's convenience to discuss a student.

Parents and community members play a major role in the Safe & Drug Free School committee, which was instrumental in obtaining sheriff coverage throughout the school day. The culmination of this committee is the Comprehensive Health Curriculum, bridging school and community resources together in order to empower Ainger's students with the ability to make well informed decisions. It is worthy of note that this program is serving as a national model.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

L. A. Ainger Middle School opened in 1984. Buildings are in good repair throughout and hide their age by an active maintenance program. There are information technology stations throughout the individual classrooms culminating in a moderately stocked computer learning center. Student movement through the complex is organized and orderly with ample supervision compliments of active administration, staff, support personnel, and volunteer parents. This was especially true at end-of-day dismissal.

By L.A. Ainger's staff's own admission, acknowledged by the Charlotte County School District, the county has a marked proclivity toward drug use among students. To combat this issue, Ainger has a full-time sheriff's deputy assigned to the school. He or she provides the high degree of visibility incumbent on such a posting, but also serves to encourage positive police and community relations, beginning at the early age of Ainger's 6th grade students.

School Demographics

L. A. Ainger Middle School is located in Charlotte County School District - a county that supports a population of 148,678 of which 21,283 were enrolled within the county's public schools for the year 2001-2002. Within the Charlotte District there are 11 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 3 high schools. In addition, there are 8 additional special centers, including an Adult School, a Vocational School, and 3 Department of Juvenile Justice Schools. L. A. Ainger's figures demonstrate a total enrollment for the 2003-2004 period of 1,097.

Ethnic breakdowns are as follows: 96% White, 1% Black; 1% Hispanic; <1% Asian; <1% Am. Indian; 1% Multi-racial.

Average class size is 24.1. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 39.4%. The gifted student rate is 8% and those with disabilities are reported at 21.1%. Percentages of in and out of school suspensions are reported as 0%. Student population stability (from FDOE Ed. Info & Accountability Services) contends that 95.4% of students enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. For L. A. Ainger this figure runs slightly higher at 96.8% over the same period. Percentage of LEP Students stands at 0%.

Goals

Goal 3 - Student Performance

A blanket statement can be pronounced wherein L. A. Ainger Middle School routinely and without exception exceeded both its District's and State's averages. An example of such is carried forth within the results of the FCAT SSS Mathematics Scores for Grade 8. In this category, L. A. Ainger eclipsed the State average by 33 points - scoring 338 and thoroughly entrenching this group in the Level 3 Achievement Score Range. Overall, Reading and Math scores from Grades 6 thru 8 exceeded the State average by the mean score of 22.3 points.

Relative to FCAT NRT, similar results are noted. Mathematics and Reading scores combined for Grades 6 thru 8 produced a mean average of 12.5 percentage points above the State average. Based solely on school accountability grading, L. A. Ainger Middle scored a combined 472 points on the FCAT Reading, Math, and Writing portions of the test, handily exceeding the State mandate of 410 points required for classification as an 'A' school.

There are 2 administrators and 56 instructors at L. A. Ainger Middle School. Average years of teacher experience runs slightly below the State average at 12.4, however several staff members have in excess of 20 years experience at Ainger. Turnover is extremely low, <2% annually. Teachers with advanced degrees comprise a high 48% of the operating staff compared to 31.5% Statewide. School Grade for 2003-2004 = A