

## Wahneta Elementary School—Polk County

### KEY THEMES:

- Administration maintains the pulse of the school
- Devoted faculty and staff
- Recognition of academic achievement
- Bilingual communication PLUS
- Migrant Services
- School = Safety
- Imaginative embracing culture
- Community partnerships (Four Lakes Retirement Home, State Farm Insurance, Garden Club, Hand-n-Hand, Inc., Winter Haven Hospital)

### BEST PRACTICES:

- School Planning Team
- School Improvement Plan
- Active & Ongoing Needs Assessment
- District wide Summer School
- School uniform
- Clear and concise school mission
- Decision Making - Consensus Supported by Data
- Student Agendas
- Widespread Tutoring
- Leapfrog
- Earobics
- Compass Lab
- Accelerated Reader
- Math Centers
- Study Blocks for core areas - Reading, Math, & Writing
- Educating staff - understand reactions from students at the poverty line
- Communication, communication, and communication

### THE PRINCIPAL

The current Principal has only been at Wahneta about 6 months, but has over 10 years of school administration experience. He possesses multiple advanced degrees. When the opening for Wahneta's principal position came open, the Principal sought it out actively, knowing full well the challenges of working with students who do not have the home education options many other young people enjoy. His pitch for the position contained the comment, "These children deserve people who care." That statement succinctly sums up Wahneta Elementary School and its success.

### 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

Communication of the vision and mission of Wahneta Elementary is provided primarily via the School Improvement Plan. All staff and parents have access through the school and Polk District website as well as staff, student, and parent handbooks. Additional information is provided to parents and community sponsors by a monthly Wahneta newsletter that outlines and documents the movement toward and obtaining of goals outlined in the School Improvement Plan. The SAC and PTO also help in communicating critical information. Lastly, Parental Workshops are conducted on-site by a highly involved and motivated staff.

A planning team develops the School Improvement Plan, as well as the umbrella school Mission and Vision Statements. The team is comprised of the Principal, an assistant principal, two classroom teachers, a paraprofessional and several parents. This broad stroke approach to a vital framework for the school provides a well-supported foundation for success. Progress toward the attainment of these goals is communicated through the aforementioned newsletter, parent and staff meetings, as well as grade level committees that assemble bi-weekly.

Wahnetta's Mission Statement is a practical, dynamic document. The hiring process and instructional focus is filtered through the lens of Wahnetta's Mission Statement, insuring that the needs of the student remain at the forefront. Assessment of data and its relationship to learning align with the Mission Statement. To insure the Mission Statement remains the school's focus, progress reports, starting at the 4<sup>th</sup> week of school are developed and shared with all parties. It is abundantly clear that the curriculum, goals and the strategies for reaching the mission and goals, are propelled by data analysis.

The students of Wahnetta Elementary are from an extremely challenged socio-economic stratum (92.3% FRL). A huge percentage of the students (32.5%) speak English as their 2<sup>nd</sup> language. Tutoring classes for English are offered before, during, and after school. Technology, in the form of Leapfrog and Earobics, assist in teaching those students who do not currently have a mastery of the English language. The barrier language challenge demonstrates how Wahnetta's administration sets itself apart by mandating bi-lingual copy for all materials sent home with students.

Title 1 monies supplement the bulk of the services rendered within Wahnetta. However, local Migrant Services, and community liaisons also have considerable financial input. Personnel resources support Wahnetta's Vision & Mission Statements by focusing strictly on skill development in the primary concentrations of reading and math.

In addition to the 4-week student progress reports, grade level planning sessions and all reading instructional groups are monitored every 4 weeks and students are moved up or down to the most appropriate reading level group. DIBELS Assessments for diagnostic screening are conducted every 8 weeks to insure students are in the proper skill placement.

## **Standard 2: School Culture and Instructional Program**

As in all areas of design at Wahnetta, professional development begins and ends with student need. Extensive data analysis dictates the needs of students, which, in turn, mandates the direction of professional development. The entire procedure is very cyclic - Student Assessment → Student Needs → Professional Development → Student Assessment. This procedure is indicative of Wahnetta as a school, a culture, and as a representative reflection of administration.

Throughout this cycle Wahnetta discovers reasons to celebrate their successes. They entire school body comes together every 8 weeks to bestow academic achievement awards to students and recognize staff that has made special contributions. More often is the practice of recognizing a student Citizen of the Month and a Teacher of the Month. During a recent round of awards, three members of the faculty were recognized as Nationally Board Certified Teachers. As a side note, all instructional staff is working toward Tech I Certification for Computers.

As has been noted, language is the largest challenge at Wahnetta. This barrier is identified through assorted standardized assessments. To address this issue, Wahnetta schedules block time for core study areas - reading, math, and writing.

Wahnetta Elementary is classified by the State of Florida as 63% Hispanic. Administration report the true percentage to be 80% - the difference accounted for by the transient nature of the population and the timing of the Florida School Indicators Report. Wahnetta employs a wealth of ESOL teachers, tutors, and technology geared to English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language.

Despite the intense test of language as a barrier to learning, Wahnetta Elementary manages to sparkle like a diamond in a neighborhood of roughest coal. The administration and faculty work in unison to expose their students to worlds beyond the migrant fields of their parents in a manner that is both respectful yet challenging. This exposure often takes the form of critical thinking exercises embedded within a rigorous curriculum. This combination promotes life long learning within an arena of high expectation - in spite of, or despite what may appear as an insurmountable obstacle - language.

The measuring of student needs takes on many faces. These assessors range from Reading First, *Trophies Program*, Culyer IRIs, MET 8, Gates McGinite, SAT 10, FCAT and FSSS. Given the scope of assessment tools and the frequency with which they are utilized, one can easily come away with the sense that monitoring of student learning is a continuous and virtually seamless process. Again, Wahnetta's success comes from this designed stratagem - assess, analyze, modify - seasoned with the complimenting staff development.

**Standard 3: Management**

Wahneta's administration and faculty repeatedly come back to a simple philosophy - "Our students are unique, our delivery must be unique." As a result, one finds a prevalent, "Whatever it takes," attitude toward education. Decisions are based on student needs, determined by the aforementioned plethora of ongoing assessment.

Potential learning problems are identified early and dealt with as previously described however; grade level committees assemble and discuss individual students as well as curriculum. It is in these intimate settings that root cause analysis is often conducted on an informal basis and a plan of action developed. Students who are struggling in any number of areas are discussed in great detail and factors apart from test scores are brought to the surface, be it time or basics like food and clothing. This genuine sense of care and concern and the action that follows, is what truly sets Wahneta Elementary apart from similar schools.

To fund and support the actions the school wishes to employ, they reach out to their local business and community partners. By cultivating relationships within the business community, Wahneta assembles resources such as clothing, food, school supplies, and holiday gifts. More importantly perhaps, the community supplies human resources in the form of tutors and mentors, all on a voluntary basis.

Administration maintains a systemized monitoring program of classrooms. Teachers' plans are examined routinely to insure that instruction maintains the continuity necessary for success vertically and horizontally through the curriculum.

The notion of accountability extends itself to practical physical security of individuals as well as security of information. The school is monitored by staff at all times as well as numerous parent and community resource volunteers. 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.

**Standard 4: Collaboration with Families and Communities**

Parental workshops are designed to increase parents' ability to simply parent or to have a greater influence on their child's schoolwork. PTO and SAC are ongoing, but Wahneta also utilizes a Volunteer Breakfast to entice parents and community leaders into the school and expose them to the Wahneta style - that sense of caring and concern to do whatever it takes to enable a child to be successful. On the reverse, school administrators attend civic functions to reciprocate support as they themselves continue to solicit backing for the school's many programs and needs.

As a delightful example of this symbiotic relationship, a local retirement center (Four Lakes) collects and provides clothing - shoes, sneakers, and uniforms, for the students. The students then conduct school performances off-site for the entertainment of their senior benefactors. Additional community resource groups, such as Hand-N-Hand, Inc. (a non-profit county-wide agency), also provides school uniforms. The local State Farm Insurance Agency supports the school with substitutes as required. Local media (Winter Haven News Chief) is employed with the publishing of a student artist of the month as well as the more traditional academic honor rolls and coverage of the school's many extra-curricular activities. Within the confines of the Polk County School District, Wahneta recruits high school students to serve as translators at the many Parent Workshops and conferences.

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

Administration sets the tone in this area, as with so many others. They encourage self-reflection in the faculty as they do themselves. On an individual level the principals treat faculty with respect and sensitivity. By modeling caring and compassion, the administration demonstrates to the school community and the community at large that diversity is something to be embraced and celebrated.

Recognition follows closely. From an improvement in academics, grand or small, to donations from local businesses, Wahneta recognizes accomplishment and effort. Administration makes a conscious effort to praise every stakeholder in a child's education. It may take the form of "free advertising" on the school sign for community contributors or simply pointing out via the school newsletter, *Smoke Signals* the academic accomplishments of an individual student.

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

Communication is vital in an environment as diverse as Wahneta's. In order to remain successful Wahneta's administration is very in tune with the population it services. A perfect example is the front desk and welcoming area of the school where every piece of literature is bi-lingual. Each person who works in this area, besides being capable, conscientious, and friendly, is also bi-lingual. Numerous impromptu counseling sessions conducted in Spanish by these front line staffers was observed to be invaluable.

In a more structured sense are the SAC, PTO, Parent Workshops, etc. that are conducted with translators. This standard fare line of communication are augmented and/or preceded by District level meetings to review both progress and establish goals for the future.

### **DATA, DECISION MAKING & DESIGN**

Each evaluative tool is scrutinized and substantive information drawn out which will dictate that particular child's course of study within grade level. On a secondary level, faculty reviews the resulting data to determine growth and improvement. This portion of the deciphering permits staff a through understanding of who requires additional attention and/or remedial work.

Comparative score analysis demonstrates weaknesses in individuals, as referenced, or the curriculum as a whole. In either instance, armed with this knowledge, the appropriate stopgap measures can be implemented in short order. Parents are also brought into the loop at this stage and advised as to the progress of their child or the remediation necessary.

Faculty up-training, at the hands of in-service professionals or mentors, occurs on an as needed basis as assessment tools dictate and become available.

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. Information is knowledge and provides the necessary information to make adjustment to style, delivery, and content in order to achieve the desired outcome.

District wide data is collected from Wahneta and other schools and used by District staff to select long-range programs and fill any gaps. In addition to curriculum adjustment, personnel development and changes also depends on the information derived from ongoing assessment.

### **FAMILY/COMMUNITY**

This section can easily be summed up in the word - Communication. From the Mission Statement to the dress code and student conduct, each piece of information, vital in its own way to success, is transmitted in bi-lingual fashion. Student expectations are passed along to family through newsletters, conferences, and prepared standards of conduct. Student progression toward the expectation is well documented and communicated via letters, phone calls, and one-on-one meetings. These communication forms are designed to be two-way and parental input is sought out and respected.

Apart from direct contact with their child's teacher, parents are represented on the SAC and feel their collective voice is heard and voice their opinion and concerns in the formulation and maintenance of the School Improvement Plan.

Transitioning new students into the climate and culture of Wahneta is eased by the warmth of the staff. There are formal programs, such as Migrant Services, whose value is immense as they work to encourage and pave the way for families whose migratory employment might spell disaster for their children's education. But as with most programs and procedures at Wahneta Elementary, 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 parent conferences.

As has been stated so often, communication is key at Wahneta. Parents embrace the Student Agendas in order to stay abreast of their child's progress and the teacher's expectations. Yet, beyond the hard copy of the Student Agenda is the attitude of the staff. Parents, who may have language and education limitation themselves, find helpful, friendly faces inside Wahneta. This welcoming invitation extends itself to the classroom where parents are encouraged to attend and assist.

Vital information is transmitted to parents through the listed Student Agendas, newsletters, impromptu flyers, and the schools marquee. Any immediate information concerning a child's health or well being is relayed to the parent by phone or personal contact if necessary.

Parent-teacher conferences play an integral part of 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.

The daunting task of transitioning students into elementary school and from elementary to middle school is eased for all concerned parties by introductory conference nights. On these very special occasions, as children and their families make huge strides in their educational pursuits, faculty, staff, and administration embrace students and parents alike and introduce them to the warm environment that will become their school home for the next several years. Parents recount that these first tentative steps set the tone of what was to come and, for many, several years later, they have yet to be disappointed.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Wahneta Elementary is a functional 45-year-old building with few amenities. It is clean, orderly and well maintained. The grounds are typical Florida fare, but far from lush or manicured. The school's overall environment is warm, friendly, and welcoming. This is of paramount importance, as Wahneta is often the most orderly, clean, and safe place a student may find him or herself in on any given day. This sets the stage for many interesting components that comprise the school and its programs, not the least of which is that the breakfast and lunch provided is for some children, their only meals of the day.

The geographic area from which the school draws its students also produces a very high crime rate. Much, if not all of this, is kept at bay from the school grounds proper - to the credit of parents, staff, and alumni, but the heavy propensity for crime in the immediate area is a factor worthy of note. At the principal's direction and prompting, staff has been given school bus tours of the homes and neighborhoods where the attending children live. The eye opening experience, concerning the level of poverty, has proved a tremendous aid to administration, faculty and in turn, the students themselves.

The single most striking dynamic of Wahneta is the type of employment undertaken by approximately one-third of its students' families - they are agricultural migrant workers. The necessity for extended travel of working parents and the fact that most of the parents speak Spanish only, present unique obstacles for both Wahneta staff and students.

Parents who cannot read or understand English are common and a percentage cannot read Spanish, so presenting bilingual material or newsletters may fall short. Additionally, a dialect new to the area, has surfaced. This version of Spanish, imported with migrant workers from the mountainous regions of Mexico, is complex to the point that simple Spanish translation, so common at Wahneta, becomes nearly useless. And so challenges continue.

## **School Demographics**

Wahneta Elementary School is located in Polk County School District, a county that boasts a population of approximately 500,000 of which nearly 85,000 were enrolled in the county's public schools for the year 2002-2003. The Polk County School District is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in Florida and the 37<sup>th</sup> largest nationwide. The District is by far the largest employer in the county with >10,000 employees.

Within the Polk County School District there are 66 elementary schools, 18 middle/junior high schools, and 16 senior high schools. In addition, there are 54 special centers - which are made up of charter schools, vocational/technical centers, adult schools, and alternative services. Wahneta Elementary figures demonstrate a total enrollment for the 2003-2004 school year of 572 plus 19 in a pre-K program. Ethnic/racial/gender breakdowns for all students/all year are as follows: 34% White; 2% Black; 63% Hispanic; <1% Multi-racial.

Average class size K-5 is 22.9. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 92.3% - clearly demonstrating that Wahneta is located in one of the more economically stressed neighborhoods in the State. This is an important fact to retain as their success is outlined. The gifted student rate is .5% and those with disabilities are reported at 6.7%. Percentages of in and out of school suspensions are 1.6% and 1.5% respectively. Student population stability percentages contend that 95% of students enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. For Wahneta, this figure runs higher - at 95.9% over the same period - still another remarkable figure. LEP stands at 35.5%.

Wahneta employs 2 administrators, 34 instructors and 29 individuals classified as support staff (the comparatively high number of 'support staff' is inflated by a number individuals whose proper classification would fall under 'paraprofessionals' and whose job descriptions more closely parallel 'instructors'). Teachers with advanced degrees comprise 12.9% of the staff. Average years of teacher experience are at 13.5 with several at 20+ and a surprising number at 30+. Turnover for the 2002-2003 year was high, approximately 10%.

**Goals****Goal 1 - *Readiness to Start School***

111 kindergarten students were evaluated and 90 met the State's expectation for readiness. The percentage translates to 81.1% - 2.7 percentage points lower than the District average and 2.9 percentage points lower than the State average.

**Goal 3 - *Student Performance***

Reading and Mathematics scores from Grades 3 thru 5 fell short of both the District and State averages with the lone exception of *Reading Grade 4*, which narrowly exceeded the District average and equaled the State average of 299.

Relative to FCAT NRT, similar results are noted. Mathematics and Reading scores for Grades 3 thru 5 again were below, often markedly so, both the District and State percentile rankings with the sole exception of *Mathematics Grade 3*, which bettered the District average by a single point.

Based solely on school accountability grading for 2003, Wahneta Elementary scored a combined 415 points on the FCAT Reading, Math, and Writing High Standards & Gains portions of the test, exceeding the State mandate of 410 points required for classification as an 'A' school. This equals the grade of 2002 and far surpasses the 2001 grade of 'C'. However, the over score of 415 is 10 points lower than the preceding year. While worthy of note, it cannot be construed as a trend at this point. School Grade for 2003-2004 = A