

MEET THE NEW LEADERS

Council for Educational Change Strengthens Educational Leadership

LEADER: Estella Santiago, Dante B. Fascell, Miami-Dade County

In 1996 when Estella Santiago opened Dante B. Fascell Elementary, she envisioned a break-the-mold school with empowered staff, minimal bureaucracy, and a total achievement focus—flexibility, without the traditional safety net.

Now, in 2003, the school has reached unexpected heights. For two years running, it is an “A” school. It also earned a place on the Council’s 20 High Performing Elementary Schools. High Performance was identified by the Best Practices study of the Council’s Florida School Report, released in March.

“You have a vision of success. You know the students, staff, and parents can make it a reality,” shared Principal Santiago. *“But it takes hard work and commitment to make it happen. My staff deserves a world of credit.”*

To start, she established a Leadership Committee with every staff sector, including five National Board certified teachers, developing and implementing priorities: Reading, Technology, Parent Involvement and Assessment.

There were challenges. More than 60% of her student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch and 85% have limited English skills. Engaging parents with limited English skills (more than 85% are Hispanic) was critical. The school embarked on an aggressive parent engagement campaign. They used traditional strategies to get parents through the door. Once there, they quickly become part of a family/social hub, because the school communicates respect for parents and facilitates their empowerment. Among the benefits are improved parent skills and lower than average absenteeism.

Some other winning strategies at Dante B. Fascell:

- Add-on assessment instruments: interactive learning online, used in classroom and at home
- Professional development, using incentives and rewards to fund opportunities
- Academic profiles for each student, constantly updated and available to all teachers, administration
- Weekly monitoring reports to parents involving them in their student’s progress and success
- FCAT enhancement monies given to tutorial programs designed to avoid mandatory retention

Estella Santiago attended the Council’s July Leadership Academy. “Professional Development is critical for Principals,” she said. “With so many responsibilities, it can fall through the cracks. The Academy provided useful information, networking and resources—especially the Council’s data assessment tools. Thanks to this experience, I am revitalized and even better prepared for the new school year and its challenges.”



Risk-taking paid off for Estella Santiago because she saw the risks as exciting opportunities, a prepared to meet them.

Estella Santiago and her school were honored by Education Commissioner Jim Horne as a Council for Educational Change High Performing School.