

Preliminary Report, Highlights: Dante B. Fascell, Miami-Dade County

High Free and Reduced Lunch 60% and Limited English Proficiency 38%

Risk-taking paid off for this school with increased student gains because they saw the risks as exciting opportunities, and thoroughly prepared to meet them.

TAKE A RISK: The Principal envisioned a break-the-mold school-empowered staff, with minimal bureaucracy, and achievement-focused. The vision was charted, waivers granted, and it opened in 1996. Budget and programmatic control when possible, was assumed by the school. It meant more flexibility, but also operating without the traditional safety nets. Fascell has a population that is 85% Hispanic, limited English, and 60% free and reduced lunch and transient. A Leadership Committee was established, and every staff sector (*made up of five National Board certified teachers*) were to develop and implement their priorities of Reading, Technology, Parent Involvement and Assessment.

Results: Grade 4, 238 students tested in FCAT Writing: school average 3.8 compared to district average of 3.3 and state of 3.4. FCAT Reading scores grades 3 & 4 and Math scores 3 & 5, higher than district and state.

Practices that Promote High Performance:

- Add-on assessment instruments: Interactive Learning On Line, used in classroom and at home
- Professional development is valued above personal reward: incentives and rewards fund development; department chair stipend funds professional development with chair duties spread out, shared (teacher decisions)
- Profiles for each student, constantly updated and available to all teachers, administration
- Student achievement goals verified by reviewing teachers' professional development plans

FUND PRIORITIES: Budget flexibility and control was one of the most significant make-it-or-break-it factors for the school. It would require a new way of strategizing expenditures narrowly aligned to priorities and responsive to merging needs and midcourse corrections. Working with the staff, the principal developed budget priorities that fueled school priorities and a long-range strategic plan: professional development, tutoring, added assessment tools, technology (300 computers), parent communication, tutoring, reading, and smaller Kindergarten class size. Wise and directed use of the existing dollars, the school reports, is an important accountability factor.

Results: School grades: 2000: A; 2001: B; 2002: A.

Practices that Promote High Performance:

- Consensus management funding decisions—all staff are professionals with worthy input
- Teacher mentoring program including teacher pair-up to observe same and different grade levels
- Monthly meeting with Principal, focused on supporting rather than directing teachers' plans and activities
- FCAT enhancement monies given to tutorial program designed to avoid mandatory retention

EMBRACE DIVERSITY: To engage parents with limited English skills and a hesitancy to be involved, the school embarked on a parent engagement program that turns individuals into part of a school family. Using the traditional parent involvement strategies, (i.e., communications in two languages, open houses, and more), the school gets the parents through the door. Once there, they quickly become part of a family/social hub because the school provides a comfort level, communicates respect and facilitates empowerment. Rather than seeing diversity as a factor to overcome, they see it as an opportunity to unite a force to support all of the students.

Results: District PTA recognition for local unit; equal ethnic representation on school improvement teams; parents skills improved through workshops; 13.4 % student absence rate compared to 18.6% district and 19% state averages.

Practices that Promote High Performance

- Outreach including surveys to all parents, highly visible and responsive teachers and guidance counselors
- Emphasis on volunteerism to promote familiarization with teachers, practices, student expectations
- Weekly monitoring reports to parents informing them of progress and involving them in improvements
- PTA focus on motivational activities to inspire achievement