

## L. A. Ainger Middle School—Charlotte County

### KEY THEMES:

- Understanding developmental scores—1 Year Improvement Goal
- Climate of caring
- Innovative approaches to education
- Early recognition of high school diploma requirements
- Communication
- Student 1<sup>st</sup> approach to decision making
- Participatory leadership
- Unique drug prevention issues

### BEST PRACTICES:

- 'Read Alouds'
- Data Targets Specific Weaknesses/Strengths
- Powerful Dedicated Leadership
- Aligned Curriculum & Vertical Teaming
- School Newsletter
- Refrigerator Magnets w/Contact Numbers
- Data Interpretive Administration
- Low Turnover
- Emphasis on Reading
- Clear District Objectives & Beliefs
- Embracing Social Culture
- Internet Homework Hotline

### LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

#### Leadership

The principal has been in the position at L. A. Ainger Middle School for three (3) years, with 25+ years of experience in the field of education and possesses a B.A. and M.S. Of special note is 16+ years of experience in the classroom as a teacher. This background provides the principal with an extremely firm foundation for the needs and desires of the faculty served. The principal is described as outgoing, friendly, exuberant about grade school learning, and passionate in the approach to developing and maintaining success.

Behind the mandate for achievement, is an overriding concern to provide the resources necessary to accomplish the goals and reach the standards expected. The staff responds in kind and places high, yet not unattainable expectations on the junior scholars entrusted to their care and likewise lays out the required resources necessary to attain the expected.

As has been made clear, the lion's share of leadership within L. A. Ainger Middle rests, at the principal's door. There certainly exists sturdy, dedicated commitment, but the strength of Ainger comes from the principal's ability to connect the staff to the data. There exists at Ainger, via the principal, the ability to translate numbers and statistics in black and white on paper, into goals. It is this unique ability to provide for and allow teachers to be comfortable with data that sets the stage for additional successes. Though not as easily quantified as a given metric, this ability and comfort level is easily recognized in interviews with staff and the credit, from teachers to district administrators, goes firmly to the principal. It is noteworthy that the District itself presents a series of programs titled, "*By The Numbers*", which assist in the interpretation and analysis of data.

In addition to skill with data, the fact that this principal brings 16 plus years of classroom experience as a teacher, affords a certain amount of credibility. But beyond experience, is the sense that the leadership style is participatory. Input comes from many directions and the administration by—words may be, "Mistakes are okay. If you learn from them, they're almost worth it." It is the pretense proposed by this thinking and acceptance that fleshes out the successes of Ainger.

Leadership is also documented by the *School Improvement Plan*, which provides everyone involved with a framework of clear, concise objectives. Needs are recognized and laid out for all to acknowledge and contribute to—in essence, permitting each individual to be a leader.

Beyond the local level however, is the District level of leadership. Prominently placed in the District's website and hard copy documents are the *District Mission* and the *District Strategic Objectives*. They are specific guides to both decision making and leadership, and it is apparent from the interviews that these beliefs are referenced continually.

### Personnel

The instructional staff at L. A. Ainger is the front line and a primary focus for the District and principal. Teachers enjoy coming to and working at L. A. Ainger Middle. This is supported not only by direct interviews, but also by documentation in the form of *Staff Surveys*. Teachers believe strongly in the processes in place and demonstrate as much by taking work home, frequently staying late, coming in early, taking part in assorted school productions—simply “doing whatever it takes” to insure success of the student.

The turnover rate for L.A. Ainger teachers is <2% annually. This affords every component that comprises L. A. Ainger - District, school, students, and parents, a tremendous measure of consistency. Indeed, the consistency of staff may be the single most, though misleadingly minimal, statistic inherent behind L. A. Ainger's success. Many teachers advise that they themselves are products of the Charlotte County School District and, because they reside in the immediate area, are constantly faced with prior students in roles of responsibility and are quick to joke to one another that they hoped they had done a good job. This is meant in the finest traditions of extended family and is another indication that the staff at L.A. Ainger is unique and maintains a positive, friendly, passionate approach to education.

*NET* or, *New Educator Training*, provides the mentoring system necessary to initiate, or rather, integrate new personnel to the concepts and practices of Ainger.

It is noteworthy to reference in this section that several former Charlotte County Teacher of the Year recipients are employed at L. A. Ainger Middle School. Equally as interesting is the fact that more than a few former winners of this honor have accepted positions at the District level, thereby insuring that the high quality and unique style of education present at Ainger permeates every level of administration within Charlotte County.

### Setting

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 is especially evident at end-of-day dismissal.

By L.A. Ainger'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. The deputy provides the high degree of visibility incumbent of such a post, and serves to encourage positive police and community relations, beginning with 6<sup>th</sup> grade students.

### Climate and Culture

The climate of L. A. Ainger Middle is one of trust - top to bottom, side to side. Students have friendly positive exchanges with teachers because of trust. The principal can allow teachers instructional freedom because of trust in judgment. They, in turn, trust the principal's direction. This continues on up through the District.

Continuing with the District's approach to the culture of Ainger and education within Charlotte County, one need only peruse the *District Mission Statement*, *District Beliefs*, & *Strategic Objectives*. These simple documents lay out what is expected and encouraged in and from the educational process. 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 the District office has follow-up systems in place to track the success of objectives. And it is clear that the middle school program plays an integral part in prepping students to meet the *District Strategic Objective*.

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

The social culture of L. A. Ainger Middle extends beyond its curriculum and beyond 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 social workers, provides individualized academic and behavioral plans for children in need. The *SSAP* determines who the child is, what his or her needs are, and follows up. This wider view of the student's areas of concern provides a vital emotional connection to education.

Lastly, teachers are encouraged to “just teach”. With the direction of the existing data, they are permitted to instruct in creative, innovative fashions. As an example—there is little direct preparation for FCAT. Rather, the FCAT is incorporated into the daily curriculum, with a single purpose in mind—to reduce stress on the students when the actual test comes due. There is a concentrated effort at Ainger to recognize the stress FCAT can place on students and the staff's response is to minimize it in all ways possible. FCAT-A-CROC, a takeoff on the television show “Crocodile Hunter”, is a comical look at progression through FCAT scores and uses humor to diffuse anxiousness. One look at Ainger's scores and you know that FCAT-A-CROC, and many other programs referenced in this report, are working.

## **BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION MAKING**

### **Resources**

Throughout all levels, there was a sense that staff had whatever resources they believed they required to complete the task of educating their students. Once again, it began at the District level where decisions are made based on data. Should the data indicate an area of concern or need for concentration, the District responds in admirable fashion.

Staff has written and received numerous grants to implement assorted and highly successful programs, not the least of which, *Read 180*, which will be addressed in an upcoming section.

The District however comes full circle with staff by matching, dollar for dollar, the amount of FCAT A+ monies returned to the school. This is both a credit to the Ainger staff, District personnel, and the District School Board.

### **Information Management**

*Grade Machine* is the program utilized by faculty to gather, manage, and report data on the progress of a particular student toward the mastery of the District Curriculum requirements. Reports drawn from this program, and others at the District level, are available to both the school and instructional staff, which, when viewed in conjunction with the course curriculum, easily demonstrate that Ainger has accounted for the Sunshine State Standards. Every child's scores, through and including District and State scores, are available and it can be readily ascertained if a student has made gains or losses. This information is available across the board to every staff member. Parents are also afforded the opportunity to view this data.

Within the school itself, L. A. Ainger's principal and department chairs, conduct an assessment and discuss FCAT declines, on a child-by-child basis, with each member of the instructional staff. This is done for two reasons: 1) to assist the teacher and student; and, 2) to observe the data for trends that may lend themselves to revision in curriculum, professional development, *The School Improvement Plan* and *District Strategic Plan*. It is this Information Management that provides many of the successful links at Ainger.

## **COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK**

### **Instruction**

Charlotte County and L. A. Ainger Middle School readily employ *Academic Improvement Plans (AIP)* for students in need. Foresight on the part of the District and school personnel established standardized programs early on that merely required slight adjustments in order to come in line with State mandates. Alignment of the curriculum continued, with an increased awareness of scope and sequencing tactics, and now provides a broad basis for the success of L.A. Ainger Middle School.

Of paramount importance at Ainger is the installation of Reading in all disciplines. There is a high degree of visibility in reference to reading in each department, but the concept employed is as subtle and old as education itself. L.A. Ainger and Charlotte County employ *Read Alouds*, which are exactly as the name implies - the teacher reads to the students—irrespective of age or ability group. The District has recognized research, which suggests that oral comprehension precedes written comprehension in many cases. Thus the ‘throwback’ approach.

Working hand-in-hand with developmental reading is *Read 180*, an intervention program for grades 4-8. *Read 180* provides a systematic assessment of reader skill then follows up with a network of software, audio books, and paperbacks, as well as the management system necessary to oversee such an expansive literacy program.

Another interesting element at Ainger is the use of *Peer Teachers*—students teach others within their own classes. This assures mastery for the 'student teacher' and increases acceptance and comprehension from the 'student learner'.

In addition, *Professional Development Plans* for the District and individual teachers provides monitoring and assessment of areas requiring improvement. This applies to staff, instructional material, data collection, and analysis.

Lastly, *GRADE : Group Reading Assessment & Diagnostic Evaluation*, a program employed by Ainger, provides exactly what the title implies and is experiencing acceptance and success across the curriculum.

### **Communication**

This is an area that encompasses a relatively straightforward agenda at L. A. Ainger Middle School. There is the standard of report cards and interim reports forwarded to parents and previous documentation has been discussed in the form of the *Parental and Staff Surveys*, which lend themselves to communication of need—perceived and actual. Continuing on with parents, Ainger produces a 6<sup>th</sup> *Grade Orientation CD* for incoming students and families which describes what to expect and expectations.

The school also publishes a weekly newsletter, *The Cougar Express*, which outlines upcoming events at the school and a message from the principal and academic teams, with specific references given to those students and staff deserving of recognition for outstanding achievement. This printed version of events is updated daily by *Cougar TV*, closed-circuit television manned by students.

Relative to the teachers and administration there is a great deal of active communication. This is especially true of teacher-to-teacher contact. Vertical teaming exists between and among all levels. As referenced in prior sections, this helps insure consistency of curriculum and heightens awareness as to what does and does not work for L. A. Ainger students. In addition, *Team Time*, is an organized daily ritual consisting of ½ hour prior to school wherein staff meet to discuss issues of the upcoming day and the status of both students and programs.

An outcropping of the Team Time theme is the articulation that exists between Ainger staff and its feeder high school. Eight grade teachers communicate with their 9<sup>th</sup> grade counterparts to insure that scope and sequence is in order. On a more personal level, the teachers exchange thoughts and strategies for the presentation of a better product—a successful 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduate, ready for the challenges of the next level.

One of the most active indicators of broad communication by all is the presence of the internet in each classroom. The internet provides a direct link from teacher-to-parent, parent-to-teacher, and teacher-to-teacher at anytime of the school day. Parents are especially pleased with the rapid response they receive when emailing virtually anyone in the District - from their student's teacher, to the principal, to members of the Board of Education.

### **Decision Making**

L. A. Ainger maintains a *School Advisory Committee (SAC)*. This group of parents and business partners conjoins with staff in decision making processes at assorted levels. They are documented within budgetary matters, but also extend into the *School Improvement Plan*.

Though a strong cross-reference naturally exists between this section and the Communication element of this report, it bears repeating that grade level meetings occur wherein issues are raised and resolved by consensus of the staff who will be expected to implement the decisions agreed upon. Continuing this notion a step further is the fact that a wide cross section of people are involved in the evaluation of programs.

Referencing again the *Staff & District Surveys*—the vast percentage of instructors believe their individual voices are heard within the confines of the decision making process. This is an important statistic when viewed in its relationship to the success of Ainger. Minus the buy-in of faculty, the best of programs and the best of intentions would have little impact.

### **Parent and Community Involvement**

An open door policy leading directly to the principal's office is obvious and apparent. Both school administration and teachers are easily accessible to parents. To be sure, the commitment to parent involvement in education is actively

pursued by the staff of L. A. Ainger. The school and District each maintain volunteer acknowledgment programs for these parents throughout the year in order to recognize their contributions.

As previously mentioned, Ainger has an active SAC. This group develops and maintains assorted fund raising projects for Ainger, but it is the community and parents at large that are more inclined to be the conduit for volunteer time and resources. This attitude is itself, a reflection of the community wherein Ainger resides.

L.A. Ainger and the District recognize the inability of working parents to attend meetings and be active in groups such as the SAC. Therefore, Ainger has designed an outreach program of sorts, which meets on Saturdays and targets the parents of students in academic need. This program helps teach parents to teach their children. It is both well attended and well received by the community. There is also a proactive 6<sup>th</sup> *Grade Orientation Program* that, in addition to addressing student needs, provides the doorway for parents to become involved with L.A. Ainger and its staff.

The local Boys & Girls Club provide a *Power Hour* daily wherein youngsters can receive tutoring from upper level students and staff. Participation is remarkably high for such a program and has become an important part of the academic success at Ainger.

A shortcoming recognized by parent, community, and school leaders rests in the referenced high substance abuse level within the county. All parties are actively working together to bring a contemporary approach and accompanying instruction to Health Education at Ainger wherein this concern is addressed.

## EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

### Accountability

The breadth of accountability at L. A. Ainger Middle School begins at the student level with the implementation and utilization of the *Student Assignment Handbook*. This handbook outlines a wide range of issues from a school map, attendance mandates, assorted rules & regulations, and a school calendar. Most importantly however, the handbook provides a single reference point for assignments, which can be reviewed with the student and/or parents.

At the District level is found a well presented and highly circulated handbook titled, *Code of Student Conduct*. Through its straightforward format it outlines the basic expectations and consequences inherent in being a student within the District - ranging from "zero tolerance" to "dress codes".

Between these two outer reaches of the spectrum, District level administration and a typical 6th grader, rests the school administration, teachers, support staff, parents, and community—each one responsible for their own niche and level of accountability.

Guidelines and expectations are clearly presented in precise *Teacher Manuals* for teachers, administrators, and staff. Parents are well informed and encouraged to participate in a number of programs geared toward students' awareness and productivity both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. They are themselves shepherded by a *Parent Guidebook* that provides many options and alternatives to employ in their child's education at Ainger.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

### 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 12 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 4 high schools. In addition, there are 2 additional special centers—a Vocational School and a Community Education Program. L. A. Ainger's figures demonstrate a total enrollment, for the 2001-2002 period, of 1,198, with an October enrollment of 1,103. Ethnic /racial/gender breakdowns for all students/all year are as follows:

Ethnic/Racial	Female	Male	%
Caucasian	574	576	96.0
African American	2	6	0.7
Hispanic	10	7	1.4
Asian	3	3	0.4
Native American	2	3	0.4
Multi-racial	8	4	1.0
<b>Female</b>	<b>599</b>		<b>50</b>
<b>Male</b>		<b>599</b>	<b>50</b>

Average class size is 24.1. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 36.4%. The gifted student rate is 7.9%, LEP are at .1% and those with disabilities are reported at 20.2%. Percentages of out of school suspensions are 5.5%. Student population stability (from FDOE Ed. Info & Accountability Services) contends that 95.1% of students enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. For L. A. Ainger this figures runs slightly higher at 95.9% over the same period.

Vital statistics of note drawn from the FDOE School Advisory Council Report include:

### 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 & Mathematics 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 471 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. The average years of teaching experience runs below the State average at 11.2, 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 45.3% of the operating staff compared to 31.5% Statewide. Teacher and Administrator leave absences are below the State averages.