

## Ashton Elementary School—Sarasota County

### KEY THEMES:

- We Are Family—The goal for students to learn at their highest possible level is one that overrides any sense of territory among the stakeholders.
- The participatory leadership style of the principal keeps him involved throughout all aspects of the school. The sincerity of his interest in teachers and students keeps their enthusiasm peaked.
- The examination and use of data toward learning and prescribing remediation is a key element.
- Community involvement—Large group of parent volunteers and business partners.
- Maximum use of total resources. The media center and all supportive areas of school are focused on instruction.

### BEST PRACTICES:

- Balanced Literacy—The Ashton approach to reading is that one size does not fit all. Some students do well with phonics while others need whole language or directed reading. Ashton finds the specific needs of the students and provides instruction to the need.
- PODS—The building is an ideal educational facility in that all rooms center around the media center and have access to many resources for each lesson.
- Ability Reading and Math Groups—Teachers who have special expertise in math or reading pull students who need extra help. Team leaders coordinate this instruction.
- Departmental in Grades 3-5—The beginning of the transition to middle school in that teachers teach to their academic strength and students go to different teachers for specialized instruction.
- DRP—Degrees of Reading Power. Each teacher and student knows the reading level and works toward the next level.
- Principal Meetings—The principal meets with the teachers and reviews the instruction for specific students on a regular basis.

### LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

#### Leadership

The principal describes his leadership style as “participatory” while the faculty calls it, “inclusive”. The principal stated that his style of leadership reflects being involved with the teaching process without meddling. It appears obvious that the principal has struck this middle ground and is credited by the faculty and by parents. Demonstrating a sincere respect for teachers is reciprocated.

The principal of Ashton has been there for 5 years and this is his first assignment as principal. Prior to this, the principal taught for 15 years and has a Specialist Degree in Administration. The principal sets a positive tone and it is clear that the students come first. It is also evident that the principal strives to provide faculty with whatever support they need to accomplish their goals. It may also be worth noting that the principal worked in the private sector prior to entering education.

Ashton Elementary School has a great deal of pride in the success they have achieved. Yet they do not take their success for granted. While teachers demonstrate confidence in their own knowledge and methods, they also express admiration for one another and for the principal and the parents of the children. The principal also seems secure in the position and is quick to give ample credit to his faculty and staff. This supportive triangle provides a strong base for the students of the school. Although they are aware of their accomplishments, the teachers express an interest in continual improvement. They feel they have input in programs designed for students and for their own professional development. The reciprocal support of the school and the school community reinforce one another and is likely to continue to thrive in the current positive environment.

Teachers made it clear that they are there for students and want to see them maximize their potential. They work hard toward that end. However, it is a labor of love, for which they feel amply rewarded by the success the school is achieving.

#### Personnel

In the selection of personnel, the principal takes input from the teachers as the initial part of the process. Team leaders play an important role in this process. Matching the candidates to the appropriate positions helps minimize turnovers and improve the quality of teaching. It is also evident that Ashton has been very successful in the selection of their non-

instructional personnel. The district office handles recruiting of teachers. Based on our observations the district provides a quality pool of applicants.

### **Setting**

The school has a newly remodeled facility that is equipped with a state of the art music and art suite. There are three networked technology labs equipped with IBM computers. There are 350 computers in the school with multi-media stations in each room. The school is also equipped with video production and distance learning. Students can take virtual field trips to many locations via Ashton's teleconferencing studio. Classrooms have easy access to the media center.

The office setting is open and inviting. Parents and visitors are greeted by smiling faces and security is well maintained. The school is very clean and well organized.

### **Climate and Culture**

Parents feel welcome and needed in the school. Business partners are happy to volunteer. Teachers make effective use of parents as resources and welcome their participation. The principal, teachers and parents of Ashton Elementary work together in the mutual interests of students. Every effort is made to share decisions and to use one another as a resource for the common goal of teaching children at a high level.

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

### **Resources**

Students' personal needs and student achievement is at the center of decisions regarding resource distribution. The principal takes feedback from all stakeholders in making the budget allocations. The input is considered important whether it comes from the teacher leadership teams or from the SAC committee. Staff development and student recognition are not forgotten in the outcomes.

Other resources come to the school through PTO, which last year raised \$80,000 for Ashton Elementary. The PTO used a portion of the funds for staff development. A poster in the principal's conference room points out the importance of a TEAM approach and teamwork is continually practiced at Ashton. The school has in excess of 250 business partners who provide tutoring, guidance, and financial resources.

### **Information Management**

Use of information is one of the keys to the success of Ashton Elementary. They access data through a variety of sources and the data is used effectively in decision-making. A district program called ABACUS was credited as being helpful by the principal and by teachers. They have a data warehouse and a "test-tracker" using Stanford 9 data. Students are tracked to see where help is needed and where learning gains were made. Staff development is driven by what is learned from achievement data. Programs are offered to help teachers address student weaknesses more effectively.

## **COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK**

### **Instruction**

The district and the school both have a mission that is communicated to all. The district conducts forums and has open discussions to secure feedback for their strategic plan. Parents and teachers are involved in the development of the school's plan. They look at needs-assessment data to help with this. This plan is directly linked to the Sunshine State Standards.

The curriculum, the purchase of materials and supplies, and teacher training all focus on student achievement through a team approach. For example, when learning styles was identified as a common need, teachers were provided in-service in this area.

A beginning teacher program is provided at the school to help with the orientation of new teachers and to provide knowledge from more experienced teachers. While FCAT is an important part of the curriculum, the school makes every effort to go beyond instruction for this high stakes test. The teachers told us they try to go beyond knowledge to application. Ability groups are used in reading and math and homogenous grouping is provided in other subjects.

The principal stressed that they do not “teach to the middle”. They have a balanced K-5 literacy program and frequently use the reading resource library. Departmentalization is provided in grades 3-5. The accelerated reader instructional program is used. The school considers it good, not vital, while the parents consider it nearly vital.

### **Communication**

The principal makes every effort to communicate with teachers through team meetings, faculty meetings and by sending information. The principal also walks around the building and frequently visits classrooms. Meetings with parents are frequent in small groups and in large groups. A web site also provides constantly updated information regarding the school. Teachers communicate with parents through conferencing, mid-term reports and weekly grade level newsletters.

### **Decision Making**

The School Advisory Committee provides a way for parents to be actively involved in the decision making at this school. “Our SAC is a very active part of our school system”. Additionally, an annual survey is disseminated to gather input from parents about various issues at the school. The survey is used to try and determine “where our needs are, where our strengths and weaknesses are and where we need to refocus or redirect our focus for a while.”

Teachers are involved in decision making by way of various teams and/or committees. Teacher representatives go back to their teams and discuss issues and bring them back to the committees.

### **Parent and Community Involvement**

Ashton has over 250 business partners. It was evident from parents that there is a tremendous amount of community involvement and pride in this school. Communication with the community plays a significant role in their success. Parents and visitors are made to feel very comfortable here. Teachers commented “as a staff we welcome our parents into our school. I think they are received with open arms so to speak because they do volunteer in our classrooms a lot.” They sometimes even come in to have lunch with their child. “You see parents here all the time. We like it that way.”

## **EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION**

### **Accountability**

It is clear that everyone at the school understands their role and is anxious to provide for the needs of students and parents. Parents are socialized into the school from the first day of their arrival with their students. They are given a guided tour and information about the school. This is only the first of many contacts they will have with the school and its teachers. The receptionist was praised in this role by teachers and by parents.

Through an ongoing process of communication the parents know what to expect and know that they play a role in the education of their children. This includes weekly reports geared for each grade level as well as mid-term progress reports and numerous conferences. A school web site is maintained in a further attempt to provide information. The school also has numerous brochures to help inform parents regarding student study teams and guidance support programs.

Use of data by the faculty helps to monitor student progress and measure gains. In order to meet the needs of the students and insure growth toward higher standards, the teachers are involved in the latest available skills through staff development at the school, district and state level. Teachers apply the skills learned on a daily basis and their development is aided and assisted by the administration. There is a chain of accountability that reaches all levels, instructional and non-instructional.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

### **School Demographics**

Ashton Elementary is located in Sarasota County, Florida in a rapidly growing area. Dealing with rapid growth is one of their challenges. Ashton Elementary has an enrollment of approximately 1,300 students. Of this population, 88.6% are Caucasian, 4.8% are Hispanic, 1% is Black, 2.4% are Asian, 0.1% is American Indian, and 3.1% are multiracial. This population is highly stable, with 97.2% of the students that are enrolled in October are also enrolled in February. 1.4% of the student body is classified as LEP, 14% are on free/reduced lunch, 4.2% are gifted, and 15.4% are classified as having disabilities. The school report grade for the 2001-2002 school year was an “A”. The average class size at Ashton is 25.6 students.

### Ethnic/Racial %

Caucasian	88.6
African American	1.0
Hispanic	4.8
Asian	2.4
Native American	0.1
Multi-racial	3.1

#### Goals

##### Goal 1:

**Readiness to Start School:** Was evaluated by observing all kindergarten students in their classroom. 195 students were evaluated and 189 met the State's expectation for readiness.

##### Goal 3:

**Student Performance:** In grade 4, tested 208 students in FCAT writing with an average score of 3.8. The district average is 3.6 and the state average is 3.4. FCAT reading and math are considerably above the district and state mean scores at all levels.

##### Goal 4:

**Learning Environment:** 9 or 13.4% new staff were hired for 2001-2002 school year as compared to 14.7% at the district and 16% for the state. The student absentee rate was 17% in 2001-2002, which is below the district and the state figures. This figure was based on students who were absent 11 to 20 days. Teacher Absences, total days absent for all reasons, leaves and otherwise, were 12 days as compared to 10.5 for the district and 10.2 for the state. 2.5 of these days were for temporary duty elsewhere. Administrator absences for all types of leaves including sick leave, personal leave etc. was 14 days. There are 2 administrators at Ashton.

##### Goal 5:

**School Safety and Environment:** Reported only 2 incidents. The suspension rate is low with only 3-5 students per year suspended.

##### Goal 6:

**Teachers and Staff:** Reported 54.8% of the staff with advanced degrees. The faculty averages 17 years of experience.