

Avalon Middle School—Santa Rosa County

KEY THEMES:

- “Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape.” Like a good coach who makes adjustments at half time or immediately, the principal is willing to change programs that work well, for programs that work better.
- Teachers, teach, teach, teach; Students, learn, learn, learn. Students, parents and teachers all shared this simple statement of their roles.
- Common purpose. Teachers are not territorial in that math teachers teach reading and everyone does whatever is necessary to serve students. The goal of student achievement at the highest possible level is one that overrides any sense of territory among the stakeholders.
- A participatory leadership style keeps the principal involved throughout all aspects of the school. A sincerity of interest in teachers and students keeps their success and enthusiasm high.
- Data analysis from the origin of students entering the school, targets, needs and goals.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Essential Questions are clearly posted in classrooms and examined in major themes.
- Bloom’s Taxonomy is given to teachers in a condensed flip chart with goal as FCAT level 3 for all students. Students understand higher order thinking functions.
- Sunshine State Standards are clearly listed in objectives of teacher lesson plans.
- Individual Educational Plans are prescribed for each student based on testing data.
- Directed reading is the primary approach to teaching students to read, although whole-language and other methods are employed based on student needs.
- A two- hour block schedule was developed with a daily 20-minute reading component. Teachers and administrators were surprised to find that such basic reading materials such as fairy-tales were not commonly part of middle school students’ background.
- Libraries were purchased and placed in every classroom. Students may enjoy reading materials after they have completed homework within each subject.
- Technology is used in almost every classroom but principal is quick to point out that it does not replace the teacher as the most important source of curriculum delivery.
- Students become active learners by encouraging presentations, including Power-Point presentations.
- Students who need remediation have a center in each classroom, which is used to work on academic areas that need improvement. These programs are referred to as intensive English and intensive math.
- All teachers understand the 6 elements of writing and work on writing as well as reading. Two elements are emphasized in each grade.
- Problem solving techniques are emphasized. Students are encouraged to “think out loud”.
- *Connections* is a text that is praised for providing learning strategies.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal has completed four years at Avalon Middle School including a total of twenty-seven years of experience and a Masters Degree in Elementary Education. The Principal takes great pride in her work and is a life-long learner. The faculty respects their leader and it is mutual admiration. Parents also credit the principal with welcoming them into the school.

The principal’s leadership style is one of mentoring. New approaches and ideas are used to update the faculty on methods that work. Every effort is made to provide time for teachers to learn what they need to know in order to be most effective. The principal constantly looks for better ways of doing things and encourages teachers to bring their ideas to the discussion table. Faculty understands the need to be receptive to ideas brought by the principal and the district. Teachers respect the decision made and trust that the principal understands their concerns.

Parents also feel included in the decisions of the school. They continually mentioned the welcoming atmosphere prevalent at Avalon. The assistant principal also demonstrates great pride in the school. Although his leadership style differs from the principal, they make a complimentary, effective team. A reoccurring theme was the continuity in the leadership at the district level. The superintendent in Santa Rosa is an elected position but parents, teachers and administrators agreed that their superintendents were “much more professional than political”.

Everyone praised Mr. Russell, a recently retired superintendent for caring, hands-on leadership for 25 years. He is credited for putting the formula for success into the district overall. The current superintendent is also very well respected and seen as a caring and charismatic leader.

Personnel

The principal selects teachers from a pool that is recruited by the district. Teachers in other schools in and outside the district often wish to transfer into Avalon. Flexibility is mentioned by the faculty and the principal when asked which characteristic is most essential to success as a teacher. The principal is fond of saying, "Blessed are those who are flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape."

This quality was essential when the schedule was reworked to implement a two-hour block and the "read 180 days" program. Creativity and finding ways to make programs work for students has been a large part of the success the school has enjoyed. "Teachers, teach, teach, teach, and students, learn, learn, learn" is another saying commonly understood by faculty, students, and parents.

The union contract is an issue that administrators must consider, but faculty feels that the principal is a colleague and has their best interest in mind. The principal understands the contract and provides working conditions therein as a minimum source of professional courtesy. Turnover is not a significant problem at Avalon Middle School. Teachers are having success through hard work and good leadership and seem to enjoy their situations.

Climate and Culture

The climate of the school is that of a group of professionals working toward a common purpose. Everyone is trying to help all students achieve. Ideas are welcome from everyone at the school. Whatever needs to be done to improve can and will be done. Although "Quality" improvement plans were not specifically mentioned, Avalon could be an ideal model for this process. Everyone is aware of the role they play (teach, teach, teach / learn, learn, learn) but there is an overriding sense of equality in the pursuit of higher achievement.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

Department heads have input on how resources are spent within the school. Faculty members have input with department heads. Arts in Education provide limited sources beyond the state allocation and a few business partners also contribute. The faculty wrote a grant for scholastic in-service. They brought in the International Reading Association to learn the skills of curriculum mapping. The faculty voted on which components they wanted to learn more about.

Students are presented award ribbons for academic and artistic achievement. A "Royal Knights" awards program is a significant event at the school. A committee of teachers, parents and administrators divided the FCAT money. Faculty was given a small bonus and a choice of which books they would like to buy for their classroom. The PTA developed a project to landscape the school.

Allocations were made for student interventions through the intensive math and intensive reading programs (reading 180 days). Teachers are paid a stipend for tutoring after school. The schedule provides planning periods and opportunity to meet as a department, as a means of providing time to fulfill professional responsibilities. Arts in Education provide extra resources that are used beyond the basic state allocation. Business partners also contribute to enhance various programs.

Technology

There is significant use of technology throughout the school. An Orchard software program is used in the Read 180 Days program. An interactive computer math (CCC) program is also available to students. Teachers are asked to bring innovative programs to the attention of the administration and creative fund raising is employed in order to provide the materials. Students are taught to make Power-Point presentations.

Information Management

Teachers design an Individual Academic Plan and have constant access to the needs of individual students. Teachers have been taught to analyze test data extensively. The guidance department and administration have access to student data and provide copies of information to teachers as needed. FCAT scores, A.P. scores, I.B. scores are all readily available. Use of

this data is encouraged and often required. Student assessment data is used to remediate students and to plan more effective teaching strategies for areas that were shown as weaknesses. Teachers and parents have access to the school improvement plan. Access is achieved upon request.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Professional Development

The faculty has a great deal of input in the determination of which professional development programs they will attend. The district is given credit for providing resources that would not be available through local school dollars. The Director of Middle Schools, was mentioned as a significant help in providing professional development. Veteran teachers provide a positive support base for new teachers. The Chairman of the School Improvement Team understands his role well based on his own experience in business administration. He stated that he knows his role is advisory rather than governing. Parents also praised the school for the welcoming atmosphere provided by the principal. The School Improvement Team receives no specific formal training; however the principal and chairperson periodically define the role of the committee prior to meetings.

Instruction

Instruction at the school is delivered in a professional, methodical and caring way. Teachers are taught to individualize instruction. Curriculum mapping was implemented a few years ago through the district office and is at the center of the instructional approach. Test data is studied to determine where a student is in reading, math and in progression of the Sunshine State Standards. Then a progression chart is mapped out to bridge the gap between where students are and where they should be. Essential questions are placed on the board. A condensed chart of Bloom's Taxonomy is given to teachers and they are expected to teach at the higher intellectual levels. The goal is to move all students to a minimum of level 3.

Avalon Middle School 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 and test scores 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. Teachers are given extensive instruction in test data analysis.

Communication

The school underwent a boundary change that made communication difficult for some time. Two rival schools were brought together from different feeder plans. The community did not readily accept the change and were critical of the school that was in the middle of the controversy. The concern from one community was that standards were, in effect, being lowered and the other community felt that the standards were unreasonably high. One night at a fateful board meeting the principal listened to complaints from the two factions until finally, the principal got up and said, "Just come and walk the school with me". A number of parents took up the invitation and were convinced of the need for cooperation and unity. This direct approach is typical leadership style that serves the community well.

The principal makes every effort to communicate with teachers individually, through department head meetings, faculty meetings and by e-mail. The principal walks around the building frequently visiting classrooms for formal and informal evaluation. Parents are met in small groups and in large groups. A web site also provides constantly updated information regarding the school. Parents might even call the principal to inquire if a new teacher has not posted lesson plans on the web page. Teachers communicate with parents through conferencing, mid-term reports and the web site.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

The principal and faculty demonstrated extensive knowledge regarding test data and said that they gear the curriculum to student needs as reflected in the data. The faculty undertakes an extensive review of cumulative records of each student. An AIP (academic improvement plan) is written for each student in the school who scored a level 1 or 2 on the reading portion of the FCAT. These students are closely monitored and remediate at a special reading center that has been created for this purpose.

Cultural sensitivity is encouraged within each academic discipline and especially in social studies and English. Literature, which includes the holocaust, Native Americans and African Americans, is specifically assigned throughout all grades. Respect for every child is encouraged by the faculty and by each student. Two different open house programs are held for parents to get to know the school and to get to know the teachers. The School Advisory is represented with an election of parents from each grade level. Then, after the fact, people are appointed to affect a racial and a gender balance. Community leaders are also encouraged to attend these meetings.

The SAC deals with matters related to budget and policy while the PTO helps to organize parental activities and raise funds. A group of student aides provide tours of the building for new students and parents. Guidance provides a classroom buddy for each new student. These students are responsible for informal orientation socially and academically. The SAC team also encourages students to attend their meetings to provide them with the perspective of the real customers. Student leaders are rotated on and off of SAC so their time will be budgeted for their course work. Parents and teachers feel included in the decision-making process by the principal and also feel the district provides the autonomy for school based leadership. There is an orientation for rising classes and for new families to the school. Handbooks are provided for each student and family.

A Scholastic Reading Inventory is administered to all students at the beginning and the end of each school year. DRPs (Degrees of Reading Power) are also given to students and levels are constantly monitored. Teacher-made tests are developed in each department by the department and by individual teachers. Curriculum maps, essential questions and Bloom's Taxonomy are all tools to ensure that assessments measure higher-order thinking skills. Faculty is trained in rubrics, sunshine state standards, essential questions and Blooms. Essential questions are posted in classroom. They are also well versed in FLAIR a Florida literacy assessment project. If ESOL or ESE students need more time on the FCAT they are pulled and tested in smaller groups based on their IEP.

The math department met extensively in order to map skills that overlap across grades. The English department divided writing into six essential elements. Each grade works in depth on two of the elements. These methods are to insure consistent curriculum across grades and academic subjects. Teachers are held accountable for achievement goals but students are also taught to monitor their own progress.

Each student is aware of his/her own Degree of Reading Power and works to achieve a higher level. Placement tests are administered to determine which textbooks students should be using. FCAT results are examined on an individual student basis. Level three is the minimum level the school wants to achieve for each student. Daily and weekly planners are a means of helping parents monitor their student's progress. Goals are placed on the board and recorded in planners. Parents initial the planner to document that they have had an opportunity to read it. Teachers are evaluated according to test results and effectiveness in dealing with students.

The district office designs a behavior management plan with input from teachers. At the school level a more specific behavior is produced by the guidance department, the assistant principal the resource officer and the principal. Parents have input on the plan through the SAC committee.

Professional development is provided to teachers for purposes of understanding expectations and delivery methods. Budget decisions are primarily made by the district and, secondarily by the principal. However, the principal and faculty felt that the district was thoughtful and sensitive to the needs of the school within the limitations of state resources.

The faculty described the leadership of the principal as, "awesome, involved, supportive, thorough, careful, communicative—the buck stops at their office—the principal takes the heat for us."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Avalon Middle School is located in a rural town, Milton, in Santa Rosa County, Florida. Although the population of the county is rapidly growing, they expressed pride in the continuity of traditional values and leadership provided by the school district. Many of the parents and teachers interviewed seemed to have come to Santa Rosa to work in or have their children attend the schools in this district. "Escaping the big city" (Pensacola) was also a reoccurring theme. Avalon Middle School has an enrollment of 735 students.



Ethnic/Racial %

Caucasian	91
African American	4
Hispanic	2
Asian	2
Native American	1

0% of the student body is classified as LEP, 34% are on free/reduced lunch, 6% are gifted, and 18% are classified as having specific learning disabilities. The Florida school report grade for the school was an "A". The average class size at Avalon Middle School is 23 students. The suspension rate is listed as 4.5%. 30% of the members of the faculty have advanced degrees. The faculty averages 10 years of experience.