

## **Coral Park Elementary School – Miami-Dade**

### **KEY THEMES:**

- Dedicated principal, working 12 hour days and Saturdays
- Teachers that are required to teach all of the time, and teach happily
- Technology now available in every classroom
- Curriculum that includes benchmark assessments
- Low turnover, teachers are invested in the school
- Principal's Involvement in Instruction
- Strong EESAC Committee
- Instruction Driven by Data
- Parental Support of School
- Standards Based Curriculum
- Team Planning

### **BEST PRACTICES:**

- Intense tutoring available for students who are struggling. Funded by the EESAC committee.
- Saturday school also available for low-performing students. Run completely by the principal, using her own time and efforts. Not funded or paid for by the budget, or any other sources.
- Data reported every week on student progress. Teachers administer benchmark assessments and report the student performance to the principal each week, presented in graph and/or table format.
- Principal involvement with the completion of homework. If any child does not have their homework, the teacher sends the student to the principal, who follows through with students and parents if needed to get the homework completed.
- Reading in the hallways in the morning. Every student, while waiting for the school day to begin, is required to have a book out to read.
- Teachers establish long range plans based on the standards.
- Teams meet on a weekly basis. The principal participates in the meetings on a monthly basis.
- FCAT-like assessments are given throughout the year to prepare students for the FCAT.
- Teachers are involved in the decision-making process. The administration works with the faculty in a collaborative manner.
- Teachers learn from each other through a mentoring program that includes articulation and observations of one another.

### **LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE**

#### **Leadership**

The principal has been assigned to Coral Park Elementary School for the past two years. With over 21 years in education and having completed a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership, the principal's experience includes being a teacher for eleven years, a guidance counselor for three years, and a principal at another location for five years.

The principal is extremely active in the school and works approximately twelve hours a day. Setting an example, the principal personally tutors children on Saturdays. The principal empowers the teachers to make decisions in the educational process and is active in interacting with teachers, parents, and students.

The principal expressed that a personal objective is that the teachers feel happy. This philosophy is apparent when examining personal interactions. The principal makes the staff and faculty feel very comfortable, as there is very little turnover. The principal often celebrates birthdays and, separately, buys staff small presents to remind them they are being thought about by the administration and by the principal too. Furthermore, the parents appeared to be very comfortable with their leader evident by the many parents who approached the principal in the morning with cordial greetings.

The principal looks for ways to entice children to learn and actively looks for funding sources to purchase new materials for the students. The principal even puts catchy signs up that encourage people to read or express the importance of reading.

## **Personnel**

Regarding the requirements for a successful educator at Coral Park Elementary, the principal and teachers shared similar responses. The teachers felt that the characteristics that made a teacher successful in their school were, “involvement in the job, caring for students, and willingness to go the extra mile.” The principal shared similar remarks such as needing someone who, “loves to teach and loves children.” The principal repeatedly shared that teachers must be teaching, and teaching happily! The teachers and principal also agreed that the school lent itself to minimal turnover; they agreed that basically, everyone stays.

Within the process for hiring teachers, both the teachers and principal shared how it is a top-down process, beginning at the district level, and then falling into the principal’s hands. During both interviews, the practice of hiring good interns was shared, and the teachers also described how the school advertises positions at many levels such as the newspaper or in weekly advertisements.

As far as mentoring, the school has an interesting process in place for teachers. After FCAT testing, each teacher pairs up and observes other teachers in other grade levels. They also spend time teaching in different grade levels. The principal shared some of the documentation of this process.

Finally, regarding the Union Contract, the principal shared that the school must and does follow the guidelines supplied by the Union. Meaning, specifically, by not asking them to stay longer, or work on their Saturday school days. The teachers interviewed for this study, on the other hand, shared that none of them were in the Union.

## **Setting**

Coral Park Elementary School is located in Miami Dade County. It is located in an area called Westchester. The area surrounding the school has mostly one-story homes, a few shopping centers, and some fast food restaurants.

Before school began, many parents were in the hallways. They were standing near the children or talking with the teachers. The classrooms opened to the outdoors. The corridors were clean, yet aged. The school mission statement was located on the wall in the waiting area. Personnel were walking around the office and attending to business. Some children entered the office. The office personnel spoke to some children in English and some in Spanish.

## **Climate and Culture**

Every school certainly has its own personality and atmosphere. Coral Park is unique in that once inside, the culture is easily felt, but would not have been from an outside observer. The physical building is not particularly inviting, based on the old, mint green paint peeling off of the walls. The building is old and is set close to a busy street. The main entrance is a narrow hallway extending from a small parking lot, next to the garbage area, and then into the school. However, once past this exterior, the real atmosphere of Coral Park can be felt.

Inside the school, the physical and atmospheric conditions change. Although still painted a mint-green color, the inside of the school is well groomed. There are banners hanging from the hallway ceilings. The main office is colorful, organized, and inviting. The students who are waiting in the hallway for school to begin are reading or talking quietly, both in Spanish and in English. The students all wear uniforms, which give students a very “neat” appearance.

Then, the school principal begins rounds of what is called an informal communication style. The principal knows every person’s name, stops and asks questions, and speaks in Spanish or in English. When school is starting, all of the teachers are standing in the doorways, greeting students and parents with smiles. There is a very pleasant, calm tone of the school. Not disruptive at all, but with evidence of openness and communication in the air.

An interesting view into the school’s climate and culture is granted during the principal interview. A group of students has been sent to the office to speak to the principal, because they came to school without their homework. The principal addresses each student by name, except for one student who is new, and inquires as to why they have not done their homework. Then, “collateral” from each student is collected, typically a necklace or chain. The principal informs the students that when they bring in their homework, they may have their necklace returned. Admitting it is an unusual style, the principal maintains it works: and by the end of the day, each student has earned his or her chain back.

At the conclusion of the school day, the office area had opened up, and numerous teachers and after-care workers are gathered around the principal’s desk, engaging in light-hearted conversation. Clearly, this office is deemed to have an “open-door” policy, where everyone is welcomed.

Finally, even though the parents seem disgruntled regarding some aspects within the school, they all commented on the principal and her leadership style as the variable that was making Coral Park successful. The overall culture and climate seems to have been set by the principal, and has been positively accepted by all members that make up the school community.

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

### **Resources**

The principal of the school is the primary decision-maker regarding budgetary concerns and states that class size is the number one budget priority. With the budget, the principal elects to hire as many teachers as possible. Once the principal makes the budget decisions, there is a lower chain that the budget goes through. The budget gets passed down to the EESAC committee (the School Advisory Council), and then to the teachers.

Monetary issues were a frustration presented by the principal. For example, last year the school applied to become a Title I school, which would receive extra funding for students who are assessed as a certain number of years behind in academics. Continuing, in order to become a Title I school, it requires a certain percentage of students to be qualified for “free/reduced” lunch. In a previous year, the school had missed the cut-off by only a few percentage points. The principal shared some frustration over not being “poor enough,” despite the school’s definite need for some extra assistance.

Both the teachers and principal did mention a few other sources of funding that the school has attained. The PTA of the school has raised some money in the past, and often involved teachers and parents in some decisions as to how money should be spent. The teachers shared that the marquis placed in front of the school was decided on and paid by the PTA. Additionally, the teachers and principal shared that the school had received a technology grant of \$24,000, which allowed them to network all of the computers, including those in portables, to the internet. The teachers and principal prided their school with this feature. The principal also shared that some money was available from the district in a program called “Academic Excellence,” to enrich students through chess after school. The teachers also shared how the EESAC committee had provided some money for tutoring students who were struggling academically.

What was very impressive regarding the commitment to academic goals and objectives, although not met by the current budget, was the school’s implementation of a Saturday school. For those students struggling, there is Saturday school from 8 to 12. There is no money to pay any teachers or paraprofessionals to work on these Saturdays, therefore the principal works these days and teaches those struggling students personally. Sometimes volunteers assist, but since there is no pay involved, the principal cannot expect or ask them to come.

Regarding the budget’s links to recognition and professional development, there was not much evidence of a strong link. The principal discussed how any funds from recognition come out of personal pockets, and the interviewers even witnessed the principal giving a gift to one of the after-school care workers. Sometimes, Publix will donate things for birthdays, teacher of the month, or attendance ceremonies. Regarding professional development, the school had received a small grant of \$1000 for professional development. The teachers shared the sentiment that there was not adequate funding for the area of professional development, and they often stuck to the district available workshops on-line.

### **Information Management**

Coral Park Elementary uses data to drive instruction. A lot of the FCAT data is obtained through a system called ISIS, which is an information system used in Miami Dade County Public Schools. The school also utilizes information from student records and the students’ cumulative files. Administrators and teachers have access to data.

The personnel of Coral Park Elementary use the data to determine what is taught in the classrooms. Teachers and administrators evaluate the curriculum and the teaching practices based on the data collected.

## **COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK**

### **Instruction**

Teachers and administrators develop and monitor long-range plans. From these plans, teachers prepare the instruction. A school improvement plan is developed based on the needs of the students. The school improvement plan is closely tied to the district plan, as both the school and the district both focus on reading. This plan is approved by the faculty and the EESAC committee.

The curriculum is a spiral curriculum based on the CBC (Competency Based Curriculum) of Miami Dade Public Schools and also the Sunshine State Standards. Teaching the standards that will be assessed on the FCAT is emphasized greatly at Coral Park Elementary with continuous data collection and data interpretation. Individual teachers use other resources.

Instruction is adjusted according to student needs. Students participate in guided reading and ability groups in mathematics and reading. The Accelerated Reader program is utilized to enhance reading comprehension skills. The FCAT Explorer is additionally utilized to prepare students for the FCAT.

### **Communication**

Communication was an interesting feature of this school. Following the principal walking through the hallways just as school was getting underway, the principal stopped on many occasions to speak with teachers, parents, and students. “Good morning” was said to every person encountered, sometimes spoken in English, sometimes in Spanish. The principal seemed to know everyone’s names, whether they were a parent or a student. The principal shared that this kind of informal communication is what works—personally and for this school. The parents and teachers interviewed seemed to share this sentiment that the principal was very involved, and communicated very openly with everyone at the school.

There was one area where communication appeared disconnected. The parents shared that they had little or no knowledge of many of the issues pertinent to their children. They responded that much of the decision-making was done by the EESAC committee, and was not passed down to other parents. The parents even stated that the School Improvement Plan was only available to administration, and not at all available to parents. Conversely, teachers and the principal stated that the School Improvement Plan was available to parents and everyone else. It seems as though the parents were not receiving many of the messages and beliefs shared by the teachers and the principal.

### **Decision-making**

Decisions at Coral Park Elementary are made in a team approach. The principal is very hands-on and works closely with the teachers. Teachers are able to make decisions regarding the instruction and school practices. Together, teachers and administrators use data and feedback to determine school activities. Teachers meet as teams and meet periodically with the principal. The EESAC committee also makes several decisions and serves as the governing board for the school.

### **Parent and Community Involvement**

The level of parent involvement at this school does not appear to be very high. The principal and the parents shared that the majority of the parents at Coral Park work 9 – 5 jobs, and therefore can not be at school very often. The teachers shared that parents are involved with the school academics, through weekly communication between classroom teachers and parents.

The principal also shared one of the procedures regarding meeting with parents of students who are struggling or scoring low on the FCAT or the school-administered benchmark exams. The principal schedules meetings with parents in the afternoons for those students who are struggling. It is sometimes difficult to get parents to meet, and even more difficult when the parents are hearing year after year that their child is not succeeding.

Community involvement is another area not reflected as having a strong link. The principal and teachers shared a few anecdotes where the community sometimes attains donations of different materials, mostly for recognition. The overall feeling gleaned from the principal was that there was frustration over the lack of support for the school, from the community as well as from other funding agencies.

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

### **Accountability**

The parents expressed that they have limited knowledge of the school improvement goals of the school. They felt that they have limited participation in the decisions that are made for the school. The teachers and principal, though, felt that the parents were participants in decisions through a committee called the EESAC committee. This committee is comprised of administrators, parents, and teachers. Many of the school decisions are made through the EESAC committee.

Data is collected at Coral Park Elementary on a weekly basis. Teachers carefully monitor the students’ progress on FCAT-like assessments. Teachers make the parents and students aware of progress. The principal collects the data on a weekly basis and personally meets with students to assist with individual needs. The principal works with individual students during

school and on Saturdays to assist them in making strides. The principal expressed that the teachers and administration are accountable for student progress. The teachers concurred that they are all held accountable for achievement goals and objectives.

Team meetings are conducted regularly. One team meeting a month is held in the principal's conference room to be a part of the planning process. Teachers also articulate across grade levels. Students are grouped according to ability, yet the groups are flexible enough to allow students to progress individually.

Lastly, the district offers a variety of workshops at different times and locations to help teachers with district behavior management plans. Many teachers also opt to take graduate courses.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

### **School Demographics**

Coral Park Elementary School is located in Miami-Dade County School District in a sub-urban area of the County. Fifty-one instructional staff is employed, with 2 administrators. According to both the Florida Department of Education School Advisory County Reports, 2001-2002 and the School Indicator's Report, 2001-2002, Coral Park enrolled approximately 900 students, with the majority of the students being identified as Hispanic (90.7%). The percentages of students identified as White was 6.4%, as Black was 1.1%, Asian was listed as 1.1%, and finally Multi-racial was reported as .7%. The high percentage of Hispanic students is far higher than the percentage for Dade County, which was listed as 57.9%. The school report grade for 2001-2002 was an A. 52.9% of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The stability rate is 96.9%, with 33.1% of the students classified as LEP, and 14.6% of the students as Gifted. Average class size (K-5) is 25.2 students, with the percentage of students with disabilities at 10.3%.

### **Goals**

#### **Goal 1:**

**Readiness to Start School:** Evaluated 129 kindergarten students, with 113 meeting the State's expectation for readiness.

#### **Goal 3:**

**Student Performance:** In grade 4, tested 152 students in FCAT Writing Assessment, with a school average score of 3.7 as compared to the district average of 3.3, and a state average of 3.4. (Scores range from 1.0 (lowest) to 6.0 (highest)). FCAT Reading and Math scores were higher than district and state averages. FCAT norm-referenced test results were reported by median national percentile ranks (NPR) and were also higher than district and state percentile ranks for reading and math in grades 3-5. FCAT school accountability data in grade 4 reading, with 127 students tested, reported 76% scoring at Level 3 or above. The state percentile scoring at level 3 or above was not available. Data for grade 5 mathematics listed the number tested at 119, with 71% at the school scoring at Level 3 or above, with no state percentage available for comparison.

#### **Goal 4:**

**Learning Environment:** Reports 14 or 27.5% new instructional staff hired for the 2001-2002 school year as compared to the district average of 12.5% and the state average of 16.0%. Absentee rates were lower than the district and the state for the number of student absences of 11-20 days, and lower for students absent 21+ days or more. Leave days for teachers were slightly higher (15.4) than the district and state averages respectively (13.8, 10.2). Administrator absences were lower than the percentages listed for the district and the state.

#### **Goal 5:**

**School Safety and Environment:** Reported 9 discipline incidences overall. Five of the nine incidents listed were categorized as Vandalism.

#### **Goal 6:**

**Teachers and Staff:** Reported that 22.4 % of the staff had graduate degrees, all at the Master's Degree level.