

Darnell-Cookman Middle School—Duval County

KEY THEMES:

- High Expectations
- Never lower the bar
- Use of student achievement data to guide instruction
- Vertical team planning
- Incentives for successful students
- School-wide team scheduling to allow for common planning
- Specialized instruction for underachieving students
- Good leadership and communication
- Data driven curriculum planning

BEST PRACTICES:

The school uses a variety of strategies to make sure that students get a good education at Darnell-Cookman Middle:

- Common team planning times are provided to meet and discuss the total needs of the students with team members, special teachers and administrators.
- Providing a warm and friendly atmosphere for students makes the students feel proud of their accomplishments.
- Classroom teachers from each grade level meet with other grade level teachers to discuss strategies that will improve the vertical flow of instruction.
- Involvement of parents and the community in the education of all the students through good communication is emphasized and practiced.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal is responsible for the hiring of new teachers, though often involves team members in the selection process. The principal's ability to choose teachers that will be successful team members at Darnell-Cookman is critical to the success of the program.

Personnel at Darnell-Cookman Middle are proud of what the school has accomplished and consider team members their second family. Staff turnover is minimal and attributed to a family atmosphere where teachers believe they are able to achieve their target without lowering the bar.

The Setting

Darnell-Cookman Middle School is located in a downtown business district in Jacksonville Florida. There is very little housing in the vicinity and neighborhood students make up only six percent of the schools enrollment. The school, which first opened in 1952 is an old plant that is in need renovation. There is a lack of space for special programs and the lack of resources for technology is evident.

Climate and Culture

The school climate is one of high expectation. The bar remains high and students are given a warm friendly atmosphere in which to achieve goals. The rewards are many and the one that means the most for the students, parents, staff and administrators is the belief that everyone can achieve the target if they put their mind to it.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

Resources

The budget for Darnell-Cookman Middle is supplemented through various means. A partnership program provides mostly non-money resources from local businesses that are utilized to reward students. Parents offer support in much the same way—the giving of their time as partners. They also make available things such as furniture, paper, reward certificates, and even computers donated by their businesses or places they work.

Information Management

Monitoring of data gives the school a good snapshot of what is happening in the classroom and how goals are being met. Teachers are provided with printouts of test results at monthly team meetings with the principal. Data is analyzed on an individual student basis as well as how it pertains to the “Big Picture” of the school. Item analysis is used to drive the curriculum, making necessary changes to meet the needs of students at Darnell-Cookman Middle.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

The district and school goals are aligned with the Sunshine States Standards. Teachers emphasize teamwork and provide a rigorous program for gifted and advanced students. The goal is to prepare students to be academically successful in a college prep high school environment. Teaching FCAT skills is secondary to setting the bar for future success of these academically oriented students.

Students are offered safety nets to insure they can accomplish the goals of the school. The day has been rearranged to double up a period. Students are offered an extra period with an extra teacher assigned to the team. The block of time remains the same but the periods are shorter.

Students get an extra period of reading in the sixth grade and will be offered an extra math period in seventh grade in the 2003-04 school year. In addition, students are offered an AA program. This program features an Advisor Advise period that is non-graded and offers students advice and extra academic help.

Communication

Teachers regularly meet to discuss curriculum and programs. This is made possible by scheduling common team planning periods. Vertical progression is a key topic at the planning meetings. Skills taught at different grade levels are reviewed and visitations are made with other teams and feeder schools to insure an even flow of seamless curriculum for all students. Administration and support personnel meet on a regular basis with individual teams. The principal believes very strongly in looking at the “Data Story” so that the staff can see the “Big Picture” that drives the academic program as part of the “Grand Design.”

Parents are kept informed of their child’s progress through conferences, planners, report cards, newsletters, and frequent phone calls.

Decision Making

The administration works closely with staff. Administrators often meet with team members on an individual basis during their common planning periods. Teachers feel they are empowered and that they have a boss that supports them. Good communication between administration and staff is a key component in the team approach at Darnell-Cookman Middle.

Parent and Community Involvement

Parents are actively involved in their children’s education. They are only a phone call away and are very supportive of the program at Darnell-Cookman. Parent involvement and support is a very important ingredient that contributes to the success of the school.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

The staff at Darnell-Cookman Middle meets regularly with the principal to discuss what is called “The Grand Design”. Each student is monitored and their progress is discussed with the teams. The team members are held accountable for their teaching responsibilities and the progress of the students they teach.

Teachers believe that the advanced academic standards set the bar at a high level that all students must meet. The academic tempo is high and rigorous. Teachers agree that the bar will not be lowered; they believe that students can make

the grade through hard work in a climate that is “Kid Warm & Child Friendly”. They believe in trust and respect. Pride and recognition creates a learning climate for success at Darnell-Cookman Middle.

Students are naturally exposed to different cultural experience primarily through the student diversity established as a magnet school. They are encouraged to share their cultural differences on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

Students are selected to attend Darnell-Cookman Middle School using a lottery. Anyone is eligible to attend the school. Students are recruited through a series of feeder school programs. Darnell-Cookman places special emphasis on recruiting gifted minority students for its college preparatory magnet. This recruitment results in a waiting list of over 700 applicants. Approximately one of every three students is certified as gifted.

The school is organized into three teams for each grade level. Two teams are considered academically advanced and one of the teams in each grade level is exclusively for certified gifted students.

Incoming students and their parents are invited to attend a spring orientation to learn about the policies and expectations of the school. A student guide program offers a real insight into the school and serves as an excellent recruiting tool. Parents are very involved with the school and eagerly support the efforts of Darnell-Cookman Middle. Teachers communicate with parents on a regular basis.

Teaching teams are the heart of the school. Teachers plan and act as one to carry out the rigorous academic program under the watchful eye of the principal. Team members and respective departments welcome new teachers, exposing them to Cookman’s philosophy for success. Teachers believe a successful teacher is a passionate teacher that respects kids and never lowers expectations. They believe in rewarding students. Teachers believe in working hard and playing hard and the same applies to students. Teachers reward their students for hard work.

Students go on many field trips and participate in a variety of extra curricular programs, including sports and band. All students are required to participate in the Science Fair.

An active group of parents serve on the school improvement team. Parents are partners in education at Darnell-Cookman providing the school with many resources that the budget can’t afford.

Accommodations for ESE students are made for the FCAT. These include one-on-one testing, smaller groups, and extended time accommodations. These students are usually administered the test by their resource teacher. Extra help is given to students not ready for the rigorous curriculum offered at the school.

Teachers make good use of planners/agendas to monitor students and report their progress to parents on a regular basis. Special emphasis is given to sixth grade students to help parents understand the goals and expectations of the school. Assignments are available from the guidance department and are posted on the Internet.

Teacher accountability is insured by administration through frequent team meetings, test result analysis, and conferences with individual teachers and teams. The administration plays a very important role in supporting the teachers through direct interaction and follow up with students that need help.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Darnell-Cookman Middle is located in the Duval County School District in an urban low income neighborhood. Darnell-Cookman Middle is one of two College Preparatory Magnet Middle Schools. The school serves students from all areas of Duval County. The school employs 57 instructional staff and four administrators. Darnell-Cookman Middle has 1228 students. (29.6% African American, 4.4% Asian, 0.3% Native American, 2.4% Hispanic, 1.6% multi-racial and 61.7% Caucasian) 16.1% of Darnell-Cookman Middle students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The average class sizes are: Language Arts 30.3, Math 28.3, Science 28.3, Social Studies 29.3. Approximately 30% of the students are gifted. There are 0.03% LEP students and 3.8 % disabled students at Darnell-Cookman Middle. Darnell-Cookman Middle has a very stable student body at 95.4 %. The school has been designated as an "A" school by the Florida Department of Education for three years.

Ethnic/Racial %

Caucasian	61.7
African American	29.6
Hispanic	2.4
Asian	4.4
Native American	0.3
Multi-racial	1.6

Goals

Goal 3:

Student Performance: In grade eight, 364 students were tested on the FCAT Writing assessment, with 98% scoring 3.0 or higher on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 6.0 (highest). Darnell-Cookman Middle scored an average of 4.5 compared to the district average of 3.7 and the state average of 3.8. FCAT Reading scores showed 83% of 363 eighth grade students taking the test scoring 3 or better on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 5.0 (highest). Eighth grade FCAT Mathematics scores showed 94% of 362 students taking the test scoring 3 or better on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 5.0 (highest). FCAT norm referenced test results were reported by median national percentile and were higher than the State and the district in every category. The district was lower in every category than the state. The skewed group of students at Darnell-Cookman Middle cannot be overlooked when comparing test results with the district and the state.

Goal 4:

Learning Environment: Report 8.8% new instructional staff was hired for the 2001-02 school year as compared to the district average of 17.4%. The absentee rate was 6.0% lower than the district average for students absent 11-20 days and 11.8% lower than the district average for students absent 21 days or more. Leave days for teachers were 2.0% higher than the district average. (14.8 days for Darnell-Cookman Middle and 11.7 days for the district) Administrator absences were 6.7 days higher than the districts average for the year.

Goal 5:

School Safety Environment: Reported a total of thirty six incidents for the 2001-02 school year.

Goal 6:

Teachers and Staff: Darnell-Cookman Middle reported 35.3% of the instructional staff as holding a Masters Degree of higher.