

## **Gilchrist Elementary School—Leon County**

### **KEY THEMES:**

- Commitment to Cultural Sensitivity
- Welcome Climate of the School Community
- Principal's Strong Leadership and Monitoring of Student Performance
- Value of Parent Involvement and Volunteerism
- Professional Development Training
- Strong SAC, PTA and SIT
- Constant Open Communication

### **BEST PRACTICES:**

- Accelerated Reader (AR)
- ESOL
- Reading Mastery Program
- Guidance Counselors Teaching Values
- Spanish Emersion Workshop
- Open Court

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

#### **Leadership**

“A principal with an open door policy where parents feel they are a valued presence in the school,” is how parents describe their principal. The principal has 39 years of experience, with a Masters Degree in Administration in Elementary Education and Supervision and a background including: 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher in Miami for 4 years, opened a new elementary school in Leon County as an assistant principal, became principal at new Dorsey Park Elementary for 16 years, Director of Elementary Schools in the district office for 8 years, and principal at Gilchrist Elementary for the past 11 years.

This principal leads by example, and promotes continual learning for parents and teachers always at the cutting edge of excellence in education. Teachers frequently share leadership roles on a rotating basis; always confident their opinions are valued.

A strong instructional leader and role model, who goes above and beyond the norm of communication with parents, permeates the entire atmosphere at Gilchrist Elementary. Students enamored with learning, dedicated and hard working teachers, and parents involved in every aspect of their child's learning, demonstrate what excellence in education is all about.

#### **Personnel**

The teachers and parents report that a successful educator must have a sense of humor, be positive, concerned, experienced, dedicated, open and respectful. A real passion for kids is at the heart of the principal's key component for a successful educator at Gilchrist.

The parents report that there is very little turnover largely due to the principal who is extremely open to listening to opinions, where teachers are given flexibility in their classrooms and are treated professionally. There is a job fair and “interview day” in the spring and beginning teacher mentoring.

#### **Setting**

Gilchrist Elementary, a 34-year-old school located near I-10, is a well cared for campus. It is a single story building with several wings connecting later additions, some with amazing murals painted on their walls (student and parent created). By the main office, is a gorgeous woodcarving of a mother grizzly bear and her cub, the school's mascot. A parent has skillfully

crafted this, along with many other carvings in the school, the first indication of the tremendous amount of parent involvement seen at Gilchrist.

The front office is bustling with the start of the school day and a parent gets the student production team ready to start the morning TV broadcast on WGES, the school's news program. Gilchrist's large English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) population is evident by the many displays of different cultures on two lovely patchwork quilts, one hanging in the front office, the other in the ESOL room, bulletin boards in the halls and displays in the media center.

### **Climate and Culture**

Gilchrist demonstrates a commitment to cultural sensitivity in a variety of ways due to their large ESOL population. Many parents serve as guest speakers, often wearing their native dress, informing students of their various cultures. In a 1<sup>st</sup> grade class, a parent is teaching the students who are reading in Spanish. The school newsletter is also written in Spanish and Korean. A large book created by students, has brief descriptions of various countries complete with hand drawn pictures. This is housed in the media center for all to read. More importantly, students and their families feel they have become a part of a much bigger community through the ESOL program at Gilchrist Elementary.

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

### **Resources**

Parents and teachers are enthusiastically involved in budget decision-making through the School Advisory Council (SAC), Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and School Improvement Plan (SIP). Sources of funding beyond the state allocations are reflected in the PTA budget with a great deal of monies funneled back to the school. In addition, there is an after school and summer program that provides a percentage of additional funds.

It is reported that twelve or more teachers wrote grants last year to supplement funds in a very specific manner. The budget reflects allocation for student interventions, including enrichment and remediation, even though the Reading Masters program and an extra Guidance Counselor are not funded through the district. Tutor Train, a program run by volunteers, helps give children individual assistance with specific needs.

Professional development is tailored to meet these specific individual needs by analysis of student data and setting performance targets as part of performance assessment by both teachers and principals. Professional Development opportunities that have made a difference at Gilchrist are the Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence (FLARE), the weeklong summer Spanish Emersion workshop attended by parents and teachers alike, Steinhatchee Retreat, and the Harry K. Wong in-service on classroom management.

### **Information Management**

Teachers and principal have access to student assessment data for instructional, professional and evaluation purposes from the department of Programs and Evaluation. Because the district's system is not user friendly, the district staff does not have direct access and must use an analyst to obtain data. Gilchrist utilizes additional data in the form of Guidance notebooks, STAR tests and cumulative records. Gilchrist's entire community looks at the Attitude Survey completed by students, teachers and parents for strategic planning purposes. The principal reports SAC is very diligent in looking at the results of this survey and make changes as necessary to improve the climate of the school.

## **COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK**

### **Instruction**

There is a strong alignment between the district's mission, the goals of the SIP and the teachers Individual Professional Development Plans (IPDP). To ensure that the curriculum extends beyond required FCAT academic goals and objectives, the teachers state, "The parents help us to be sure. They expect the children at this school to perform well above the average range and they do." Through GIS, the school looked into brain research and accelerated learning strategies to help put together decisions on how they were going to teach, group students, and choose strategies for their classroom. They purchased CD players for every classroom to implement some of these strategies.

The math and reading instructional programs that contribute to Gilchrist's success are AR, Sunshine Math and the Math Experiential Based Approach (MEBA). The teachers state, "AR stimulates kids because they can read material they really like at their level. You see third graders reading sixth grade books". The parents say, "It's very comforting to me that

students are able to read as much as they want on their own, at their own level.” MEBA teaches math through the use of manipulatives, as well as the textbook.

### **Communication**

New parents and students are socialized into the school with three different Kindergarten Orientations. A letter is sent from the principal welcoming them to the school community, asking them to set goals, and informing them of what to expect at Gilchrist. The principal does this for every new kindergarten class. In addition, a letter is sent at the end of the year reminding every student in the school to do such things as set goals for the summer, write in their journals or study multiplication facts.

Based on a parent suggestion, a glossary of educational terms was created to assist them in understanding the many abbreviations used in education. A directory of all students and parents by grade level is essential to the school community say parents. A business directory is in the making. The school’s intercom announcements are a vital core of the beginning and end of each day together at Gilchrist with the constant flow of recognition, like who participated in a marathon, or has new baby brothers or sisters. Kindergartners who become independent readers in AR go on WGES and announce to the entire school their proud accomplishment. Teachers share individual student’s accomplishments in their weekly newsletters and wide use of the web via e-mails.

### **Decision Making**

Parents and teachers are involved in the decision-making process through the SAC. The principal reports that their strength has been the consistency of the people on the council over the years. Principal, teachers and parents participate in the development of a District Mission and Strategic Plan and have a representative on the District Advisory Council (DAC) who reports to SAC and PTA with their findings.

### **Parent and Community Involvement**

Kindergarten orientation, described as a carnival like atmosphere, starts off the celebration of school. Parents have available to them spirit T-shirts, sweatshirts, pencils and opportunities to sign up for scouting, volunteering, and joining the PTA. Tutor-training programs are available where the child meets with a parent or businessperson once a week with teachers and parents kept apprised of the child’s progress. Community resources are identified and allocated through the PTA, volunteer coordinators and parents called Partners for Excellence. They coordinate vision screenings; solicit businesses for donations items the school needs and handle much of the record keeping tasks burdening teachers.

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

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### **Accountability**

Gilchrist Elementary assures that all students have equal access to the knowledge and skills they need through a variety of programs such as ESOL, Exceptional Student Education (ESE), Reading Mastery, Accelerated Reading (AR) and Sunshine Math.

Creative scheduling utilizes everyone’s time wisely so every student receives the necessary instruction regardless of socio-economic, ethnicity, bilingual and ability challenges. Many assessments cover the curriculum beyond the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT); 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade STAR Tests (3 times a year), portfolios, teacher tests, screening for gifted (2<sup>nd</sup> gr.) and the 35% below their Academic Improvement Plan (AIP) that qualify for Gilchrist’s unique Reading Mastery program.

“We try to provide as many chances for students to be successful as possible.” say the teachers. Assessments measure higher-order thinking skills with the utilization of the primary grades newly adopted countywide series Open Court, school wide Sunshine Math, Reading, Social Studies and Science book tests.

Aside from consistent and continual monitoring of student’s progress through benchmark tracking, grade books, portfolios, and Writes Upon Request, Gilchrist has a principal that looks at, comments on, and signs every student’s report card. “The principal has a phenomenal handle on what every single child is doing each nine-weeks.” Student goals developed for home

and school are assessed, evaluated and posted each nine weeks. They are an important priority in the school, visible in classrooms and halls. Last summer, all key stakeholders (custodians on up) participated in a two-day retreat in Steinhatchee, FL (funded by the Gilchrist International School grant (GIS), developing and planning the school mission.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

### School Demographic Information

Gilchrist Elementary School enrolls approximately 900 students in Pre-K through 5th grades. There are 47 instructional staff and 2 administrators. The school serves 11.6% free and reduced lunch population, with a 96.1% stability rate and a 5.6% Limited English Proficient population and 9.7% Gifted. Seventy-two point five percent of the students are Caucasian, 13% African American, 8.7% Asian, 2.9% Multi-racial, and 2.9% Hispanic. The school grade is A. For 2001-2002, the average class size was 26.2 students in grades K-5. 19.7% of the students have mild, moderate or severe disabilities.

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	13.0
African American	8.7
Asian	2.9
Hispanic	2.9
Multi-racial	2.9

### Goals

#### Goal 1:

**Readiness to Start School:** 84.5% of the kindergarten students evaluated met the state's readiness criteria for 2001-2002.

#### Goal 3:

**Student Performance:** Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) data shows the percentage of students scoring at level 3 or above is 93%, 87% Gr. 3 Reading and Math; 86%, 89% Gr. 4 Reading and Math; and 90%, 86% Gr. 5 Reading and Math. Fourth grade Writing, which is graded on a 1 through 6 scale, is above district and state averages at 3.8. The median National Percentile Rank (NPR) for FCAT Reading and Math, where 50% represents the national average, is 79%, 78% in Gr. 3 Reading and Math; 83%, 86% in Gr. 4 Reading and Math; and 78%, 89% in Gr. 5 Reading and Math.

#### Goal 4:

**Learning Environment:** Reports that 85% of the instructional staff is new. Teacher absences are comparable to the district average, with an average of 8.1 days for all types of absences. Student absences are lower than the district average in both categories (less than 20 student days absent and more than 20 student days absent) at 12.3% and 2.3% respectively.

#### Goal 5:

**School Safety:** One reported incident.

#### Goal 6:

**Teachers and Staff:** 37.5% of the teachers have a Masters Degree, 2.5% a Specialist Degree, and the average years of experience is 19.