

Lake Mary Elementary School—Seminole County

KEY THEMES:

- A common thread runs through Lake Mary Elementary School and also the Seminole County School District in as much as there are three levels of commitment to excellence:
 - that which is **essential** to the educational process;
 - that which is **expected** to occur; and
 - that level of commitment, which is **extended**

Should a timeline be projected backward and forward, the data collected indicates that those events or stratagems that were once considered an **extended** commitment now would be viewed as **expected**, and so on down the line. From being pre-emptive in their curriculum analysis and alignment to the proactive acknowledgement of the value of communication, Seminole County and Lake Mary Elementary in particular demonstrate what powerful leadership can accomplish. As before, the bar is set high at the outset and raised periodically—all the while assessing student and staff response and/or progress.

- There exists a strong devotion to reading as a fundamental building block for success. This is evident by the kindergarten students advancing into the AR Program at Lake Mary and the District's purchasing of new reading books for all elementary students.
- Vertical teaming is also an element of success at Lake Mary. Through the oft-held meetings, formal and otherwise, staff remains well versed in what is expected of their students and know in advance then, what is expected of them as instructors. It is a team approach where every teacher adds something to a student with the student's ultimate academic success being the goal of the entire staff.

BEST PRACTICES:

There exists leadership at all levels from District to kindergarten, but the unique mixture of glue and grease that makes Lake Mary Elementary successful is the leadership of its principal. Their active approach to administration—testing all 3rd graders and keeping track of reading scores in a daybook—signifies the principal's commitment to the staff and students of Lake Mary.

Several programs, notions, and practices stand out at Lake Mary Elementary:

- Powerful dedicated leadership
- Aligned curriculum
- Vertical teaming
- School newsletter
- Weekly notes from teachers to parents
- Parental volunteers permitted in their child's classroom
- Low turnover—consistency of staff
- Emphasis on reading at earliest levels
- District foresight—programs in anticipation of state mandates
- Telephones in classrooms—with voice mail
- 100% teacher training on Information Technology
- Embracing social culture

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The current principal has been the principal of Lake Mary Elementary for nine (9) years and maintains 35+ years of experience in education while possessing a B.A. and M.S. Of special note in this principal's long history of involvement with education is prior experience as Educational Supervisor at a school for the deaf. Outgoing, friendly, exuberant about grade school learning, yet authoritarian in her approach to developing and maintaining success, by self-admission "I set the bar high" and anticipate, fairly demands, that the staff will reach the set goal. The stratagem for success at Lake Mary

Elementary begins with this leadership. Behind the mandate for achievement however, is an overriding concern to provide the resources necessary to accomplish the goals and reach the standards expected. The staff responds in kind and places high, yet not unattainable expectations on the junior scholars entrusted to their care and likewise lays out the required resources to attain the expected.

As has been made abundantly clear, the lion's share of leadership within Lake Mary Elementary rests, at the principal's door. The principal is highly approachable, but unflinching in their quest for success for each child. Involvement is highly visible—leading by example—as witnessed again by the principal's administration of each and every 3rd grader's reading test.

Leadership is also documented by the "School Improvement Plan", which provides everyone involved with a framework of clear, concise objectives. Needs are recognized and laid out for all to acknowledge and contribute to—in essence, permitting each individual to be a leader.

Beyond the local level however, is the District level of leadership. Prominently placed on the wall above the Director of Curriculum's desk is a listing of "The Seminole County Public School District's Top Priorities". They are specific guides to both decision making, and leadership and it is apparent from the physical placement of these bywords that they are indeed referenced continually, forming the basis for leadership at the uppermost level of administration.

Personnel

The instructional staff is the front line and a primary focus for the District and principal. This is reflected in the low turnover rate. Teachers enjoy coming to and working at Lake Mary Elementary. This is supported not only by our direct interviews, but also by documentation in the form of "Staff Surveys". Teachers believe strongly in the processes in place and demonstrate as much by taking work home, frequently staying late, coming in early, meeting a parent at McDonald's for lunch to discuss their child, simply "doing whatever it takes" to insure success of the student. These tangible events are further supported by statistics that indicate that 98.3% of the staff believe that, "Doing what is best for students is the primary concern of the entire staff of this school."

The turnover rate for Lake Elementary teachers is <2% annually. This affords every component that comprises Lake Mary—District, school, students, and parents, a consistency that is without equal. This consistency becomes an active force behind many other successes that are more readily and completely documented. Indeed, the consistency of staff may be the single most, though misleadingly minimal, statistic inherent behind Lake Mary's success.

It is noteworthy to reference in this section that the Guidance Counselor of the Year for the State of Florida is employed at Lake Mary Elementary.

Setting

The Lake Mary Elementary School proper is 77 years old. The setting is idyllic, accented by a small lake and manicured landscaping. The entranceway is augmented by life-sized mural paintings of actual students (painted by a student) which add an open, airy, welcoming appeal for the first time visitor, daily educator or grade-schooler. Also prominently displayed across and above the outdoor foyer are broad banners announcing recent FCAT scoring accomplishments—which serve as trophies and incentives to both the well-versed staff and perhaps the uninitiated visitor/parent.

Buildings are in good repair throughout and hide their age by an active maintenance program that manifested itself in a rebuilding/addition of K-1 approximately a dozen years ago. Grades at the lower levels are comprised of open classrooms with common areas. Upper levels have more independent learning environments. There are information technology stations throughout the individual classrooms culminating in a moderately stocked computer learning centered in the main library. Student movement through the complex is organized and orderly with ample supervision compliments of active administration, staff, support personnel, and volunteer parents. This was especially true at end-of-day dismissal.

Climate and Culture

The ambient climate of Lake Mary Elementary is one of disciplined support. There exist a number of remedial programs for those students who are in need, but beyond the measurable programs there is an air of genuine concern, which permeates the building. From the welcoming entrance to the gentle hand and voice of the receptionist, students, parents, and visitors are made to feel welcomed and respected. There is discipline however, witnessed again by the "Student Conduct & Discipline Code" and clear consequences are present, but they do not occupy center stage. Rather they are present, but relied on only when behavior disrupts the true calling of Lake Mary's staff—to teach.

Apart from remediation there is also a strong case made for exceptional students. “The Manual for Admission & Placement of Exceptional Students” provides the guidelines for structure and meets the unique challenges incumbent on teaching gifted students.

The staff is active in procuring study aids, which reflect the diversity found within their classroom. Books are purchased which cover areas of culture, interest, and heritage that again mirror their students. This is evidenced by the litany of books located in the classrooms as well as the school’s commitment to providing education relative to Florida history in specific detail.

The social culture of Lake Mary Elementary extends beyond its curriculum and well beyond any current State regulations. Though the school deals with the desegregation of nearly 140 students, pains are taken to insure commonality of students and a broad sense of cultural acceptance. These efforts are documented in both its “Professional Development Plan” and “Staff Development Training”, and also a unique “Cafeteria Incentive Plan” which supports and rewards positive cultural exchange and behavior.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

At all levels, there was an apparent sense that the staff had whatever resources they believed they required to complete the task of educating their students. Once again, it began at the District level where a line item purchased reading books for all students in grades K - 5. The principal has absolute discretionary control over the expenditure of the FTE and Textbook Budgets, which totaled \$49,121.49, for the 2002-2003 school year. Parents too, as part of the School Advisory Council (SAC), have weighted influence in the allocation of nearly \$8,000.00 in School Improvement funding. The listing of school business partners is extensive.

Each classroom visited was quite literally lined with books and educational stimuli of every description. To a person, the teachers interviewed were adamant that they have always found ample financial support in the purchasing of materials directly related to better preparing their students for the next level.

Information Management

“SASI-XP, School Administrative Student Information”, assists teachers in the gathering, managing, and reporting of data centered on the progress of a particular student toward the mastery of the Seminole County Public School Curriculum requirements.

Reports are available to both the school and instructional staff, which demonstrate that they have accounted for the Sunshine State Standards. Every child’s scores, through and including County and State scores are available and it can be readily ascertained if a student has made gains or losses. This information is available to every staff member. Parents are also afforded the opportunity to view this data as Lake Mary prints out copies for the SAC group in addition to leaving a copy at the front desk for any interested party.

Within the school itself, Lake Mary’s assistant principal does an assessment and discusses FCAT declines, on a child-by-child basis, with each member of the instructional staff. This is done for two reasons:

- is to assist the teacher and student
- is to observe the data for trends that may lend themselves to revision in curriculum, professional development, etc.

A shortcoming noted in this area is the perceived need for longitudinal studies that track students after leaving Lake Mary. There may be additional data in such work, which would lend itself to a correction or modification at this early stage of educational development, which might be enacted upon relatively painlessly and inexpensively. However, this is merely speculation at this juncture.

It is worthy of note in this section that 100% of the staff is well versed and comfortable with Information Technology. This had been an area of concern in prior year and has been addressed in the finest fashion by the “School Improvement Plan”.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

Seminole County, and thus Lake Mary Elementary School, had taken the initiative toward aligning their curriculum and had associated programs in place PRIOR to the implementation of FCAT and the Sunshine State Standards. The principal was an integral part of making the transition from 'home grown' standards to state mandated ones. This foresight, on behalf of the District, coupled with the drive of this particular administrator, fused with a staff that was pre-prepared by their own intervention to fall rapidly in line with both SSS and FCAT. As a result, "Academic Improvement Plans" (AIP) for students in need and "Accelerated Reader" (AR) programs merely required slight adjustments in order to come in line with previously established standardized instruction. Alignment of the curriculum continued and now provides a broad basis for the success of Lake Mary Elementary.

The "Pupil Progression Plan" is utilized as an indicator of a student's preparation for promotion to the next grade level and is reviewed and updated on a continual basis in order to calculate preparedness for promotion. This works in conjunction with both interim (4 weeks) and standard report cards (9 weeks).

In addition, "Professional Development Plans" for individual teachers provides monitoring and assessment of areas of improvement for students determined by screening processes to have a documented need.

Classroom curriculum is aligned across the board to insure continuity for administration, staff, and students alike.

Communication

This is an area that encompasses a relatively straightforward agenda at Lake Mary Elementary with one highly unique and powerful addition. Previous documentation has been discussed and entered in the form of the Parental and Staff surveys, which lend themselves to communication of need—perceived and actual. On a more personal and less anonymous note, the school publishes a weekly newsletter, *"The Flipper Flash"*, which outlines upcoming events at the school, a message from the principal, Guidance Department News, and specifically references those students and staff deserving of recognition for outstanding achievement during that given week.

This newsletter also takes great pains to announce the contribution made by the school's many business partners. This, in turn, provides pro-bono advertising for the partner directed at an accepting and appreciative clientele—parents and staff.

Beyond the weekly newsletter, and pointed again at more specifics, are the weekly notes the teachers send home on each student in their class. These documents reflect brief descriptions of positive and negative actions undertaken by the student in both behavior and academic arenas. Parents are very explicit in their appreciativeness of these teacher notes. They (the parents) feel very well informed on many levels as a result.

Relative to the teachers and administration there is active communication. This is especially true of teacher-to-teacher contact. Vertical teaming exists between and among all levels. This helps insure consistency of curriculum and heightens awareness as to what does and does not work for Lake Mary students.

Teacher-to-principal communication is not as pronounced. The principal's leadership style is geared in such a manner as to reflect solely on the needs of the students. While it is documented in other areas that the principal is highly supportive of staff requirements for resources, it is clear that the principal still maintains the final decision in the bulk of instances that have an impact on Lake Mary Elementary.

However, the single most highly developed indicator of active, indeed, proactive, communication is the presence of a telephone in each classroom. The telephones provide a direct link from teacher-to-parent and parent-to-teacher at anytime of the school day. Coupled with this extended approach to communication are such things that have long been commonplace in other businesses—email and voicemail. Parents can connect with their child's instructors with the click of a mouse and are assured of a rapid response.

Decision Making

Lake Mary Elementary, not unlike most schools within the State, maintains a "School Advisory Committee" (SAC). This group of parents and business partners conjoins with staff in the decision-making processes at assorted levels. They are documented within budgetary matters, but extend well into the "School Improvement Plan". Curriculum formation may begin at the District level, but is surrounded and supported by the local school's staff on many fronts—not limited merely to alignment.

Though a strong cross-reference naturally exists between this section and the Communication element of this report, it bears repeating that grade level meetings occur twice weekly and issues are raised and resolved by consensus of the staff that is then expected to implement the decisions agreed upon. Continuing this notion a step further is the fact that a wide cross section of people is involved in the evaluation of programs. This is documented by attendee listings at assorted district and school wide assessments.

The “Seminole County Public School District’s Top Priorities” is a rather innocuous one page document that contains three simple directives for and in student achievement:

- 1) **Excellence:** with a marked concentration on Reading
- 2) **Equity:** the emphasis being on decreasing the gap between majority & minority students
- 3) **Support:** with an emphasis on technology

The opening stanza of the record states that the “priorities will guide the District budgeting process and determine staffing and service decisions. Underlying these priorities is the District’s commitment to a safe and secure learning environment and a reliance on data collection and analysis in the decision making process.” With this publicly listed as Seminole County’s top priorities, there can be little doubt remaining as to how and why decisions are made as they are.

Referencing again the “Parent & Staff Surveys”—the bulk of instructors believe their individual voices are heard within the confines of the decision making process. However, as has been referenced, the principal is authoritarian in their approach. Though accepting of unique thought and input from staff, the principal has a strong sentiment for what works at Lake Mary Elementary. This approach lays a strong foundation of expectation and, to the credit of administration and staff, the expectation is routinely met if not exceeded.

Parent and Community Involvement

There exists a Parent Resource Room within Lake Mary Elementary wherein families can obtain a multitude of materials that foster and encourage success of their children. This material, and many other forms of teacher-originated work, is obtainable merely by request. SAC is well represented by parents with the exception of minorities, which are underrepresented by accumulated data and interviews.

An open door policy leading directly to the principal’s office is obvious and apparent. Both school administration and teachers are easily, indeed, anxiously accessible to parents. The commitment to parent involvement in education is actively pursued by the staff of Lake Mary, though they are often unrewarded statistically.

A core group of over achieving parents does exist at Lake Mary and shoulders the burden of those underrepresented. These statistics are born out of the “D V DENDS” programs, whose log documents in excess of 9,900 volunteer hours contributed by parents. The school and District each maintain acknowledging programs for these parents throughout the year.

Beyond what may be deemed simplistic tasks, parents at Lake Mary also volunteer their time and talents to work within the Math Super Stars program and Super Scientist programs.

Business partnerships abound at Lake Mary Elementary. Documentation is plentiful as well, as they are recognized in the school’s weekly newsletter and given prominent display on the school’s outdoor sign. As stated previously, these acknowledgments culminate in contributing to the businesses, which then develops into a cyclic effect from which both the school and the business partner benefit.

A primary source of additional funding for the school originates from the Lake Mary Elementary Golf Tournament—an annual fundraiser laden with donations of time, energy, goods and services—all of which come directly back to the school.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

The breadth of accountability at Lake Mary Elementary runs a wide gamut. It materializes at the District level in the form of a well-presented and highly circulated handbook titled, “Student Conduct and Discipline Code”. Through its straightforward format it outlines the basic expectations and consequences inherent in being a student within the District—ranging from “zero tolerance” to “dress codes”. Between these two outer reaches of the spectrum, District level administration and a

typical 2nd grader, rests the school administration, teachers, support staff, parents, and community—each one responsible for their own niche and level of accountability.

Guidelines and expectations are clearly presented in precise “Staff Handbooks” for teachers, administrators, and staff. A “Professional Development Plan” exists which decrees precise objectives, completion dates, and outcomes—all geared toward improving teacher performance and the overflow effect of enhancing student success. The District goes one step further by producing the SPAR (School Public Accountability Report), which decrees the quality of education as determined by BLUEPRINT 2000, a statewide effort to improve the education of every child in the State of Florida. This form outlines for the public the local schools’ ratings in a number of areas including, but not limited to the FCAT scores.

Parents are well informed and encouraged to participate in a number of programs geared toward students’ awareness and productivity both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. There are “Parental Surveys” conducted to measure many parameters of the interface between school and home and the relationship and impact of both on the student.

The expectations placed on students at Lake Mary Elementary are high. Keen competition exists in nearly each classroom where leader boards proclaim the students who have read the most books (many upwards of several dozen <12 weeks into the school year). Students are held accountable for their efforts or lack thereof. There exists a myriad of reward programs from token gifts and hats presented by the principal to gold stars and stickers awarded by classroom teachers. Based solely on statistics alone (FCAT, etc.) the students have responded in commendable fashion.

The mid-link between student achievement and District policy at Lake Mary is the principal. The Principal’s measure of liability is intense. It is best measured by her personally testing all 3rd graders in Reading. Of all the evidences uncovered at Lake Mary Elementary, none speaks more volumes relative to the success of the school, its programs, and its staff than the fact that the principal’s daybook carries the names and reading scores of each and every child. This fact is well known to teachers who are not surprised when confronted very specifically, “Sarah J. is reading slightly below average. What are we doing to help her?”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Lake Mary Elementary School is located in Seminole County School District—a county that boasts a population of 382,334 of which 58,823 were enrolled within the county’s public schools for the year 2001-2002. Within the Seminole District there are 34 elementary schools, 11 middle schools and 8 high schools. In addition, there are a total of 17 additional special centers—which are made up, in part, of charter schools and alternative services. Lake Mary’s figures demonstrate a total enrollment for the 2001-2002 period of 818, with an October enrollment of 746. Ethnic /racial breakdowns for all students/all year are as follows: Caucasian, 73.%; African American, 15.8%; Hispanic, 4.3%; Asian, 2.1%; Native American, .1%; Multi-racial, 4.8%.

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	73.0
African American	15.8
Hispanic	4.3
Asian	2.1
Native American	0.1
Multi-racial	4.8

Average class size K-5 is 23.4. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 20.9%. The gifted student rate is 7.1% and those with disabilities are reported at 17%. Percentages of in and out of school suspensions are negligible at .6% and 1.7%.

Student population stability (from FDOE Ed. Info & Accountability Services) contends that 94% of students enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. For Lake Mary this figures runs slightly higher at 95.3% over the same period.

Vital statistics of note drawn from the FDOE School Advisory Council Report include:

Goals

Goal 1:

Readiness to Start School: 127 kindergarten students were evaluated and 121 met the State's expectation for readiness. The percentage translates to 95.3%—a full 5.7 percentage points higher than the District average and a remarkable 11.3 percentage points higher than the State average.

Goal 3:

Student Performance: A blanket statement can be pronounced wherein Lake Mary Elementary routinely and without exception exceeded both its District's and State's averages. An example of such is carried forth within the results of the FCAT SSS Reading Scores for Grade 4 wherein Lake Mary eclipsed the State average by 46 points—scoring 345 and thoroughly entrenching this group in the Level 4 Achievement Score Range. Overall, Reading & Mathematics scores from Grades 3 thru 5 exceeded the State average by the mean score of 39.7 points.

Relative to FCAT NRT, similar results are noted. Mathematics and Reading scores combined for Grades 3 thru 5 produced a mean average of 21.5 percentage points above the State average.

Based solely on school accountability grading, Lake Mary Elementary scored a combined 514 points on the FCAT Reading, Math, and Writing portions of the test, handily exceeding the State mandate of 410 points required for classification as an 'A' school.

Goal 4:

Learning Environment: Reports two administrators and 41 instructors along with 12 individuals classified as support staff. Average years of teacher experience runs above the State average at 15.9 with several teachers in excess of 20 years experience. Three new teachers, and one new administrator were hired for the 2001-2002 school year.

Goal 6:

Teachers and Staff: Reported that teachers with advanced degrees comprise 38.5% of the operating staff. Teacher and Administrator sick leave absences are below the State average of 5.3 and 3.8 days respectively, however 'Temporary Duty Elsewhere' averages for Lake Mary Elementary exceed both the District and State averages for each category of personnel.