

Paxon School for Advanced Studies—Duval County

KEY THEMES:

- Knowledge Content of Teachers
- Academic Review Committee
- Strong, Caring Leadership
- Shared Sense of Purpose
- Parent Support
- Rigorous Curriculum
- Respect for Diversity

BEST PRACTICES:

Students that are weak in reading are given two language arts classes in their first year. Reading is concentrated into these courses and into all the classes that are taken. Even mathematics teachers check comprehension of word problems. Vocabulary is also a major emphasis.

CRISS (**C**reating **I**ndependence through **S**tudent-owned **S**trategies) is the reading program that is implemented in the first and second year. Students are provided extensive insight into text structure, authors' craft and design. A rubric for evaluating classroom materials for comprehensibility and reader engagement is provided. Students are taught how to question the author as they proceed into his/her work. The program suggests that discussion is the conversation of learning. In the chapter on discussion techniques such as "Mind Streaming, Carousel Brainstorming, the Three-Minute Pause, Reciprocal Teaching Discussion Webs and Discussion Roles" are studied. Summarizing strategies and imagery are also discussed as a means of visualizing the printed text. Note taking is strongly encouraged with "conclusion support, problem-solution notes, and the history change frame" being terms that are taught. Informal writing (learning logs) as well as formal writing (reports and essays) is discussed as a means of success on essay writing and on the writing portions of standardized tests. In the chapter on vocabulary they discuss sentence synthesis and word combining as well as determining meaning from context clues. CRISS provides training workshops on beginning through advanced levels for teachers, parents and administrators. Many strategies are provided including: Venn Diagrams, Content Frames, Semantic Feature Analysis, Reciprocal Teaching, Content Frames, Power Thinking, Pattern Puzzles, Metacognition, Authentic Questions, Free-Form Mapping and Graphic Organizers. Teachers made very positive comments regarding the CRISS program emphasizing that the learning process became the responsibility of students.

Note-taking skills are taught when necessary as the school is centered around auditory learning styles. Students, who come to Paxon for the express purpose of college readiness, learn to absorb lectures of teachers and recall information for tests.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal has been at Paxon School for Academic Studies since the inception of the school seven years ago. Before Paxon, he enjoyed the success at his previous high school, Stanton School for Academic Studies. He holds a doctorate degree, is affable and caring and demonstrates a high standard for students and faculty. High expectations are communicated to all, suggesting that not making these values clear to all would be a "false kindness" to teachers and learners. There is a sense of purpose and thoughtfulness reflective in conversation that makes you feel like you might be on a college rather than a high school campus.

The school is centrally led by the principal who has a substantial support staff in academic department heads. They work as a team and allow a hard-working faculty to share in decisions. Parents too, have an opportunity to have input in decisions.

Personnel

The district provides a pool of applicants. The principal and department heads screen teachers to determine who would be the best fit for the school. Department heads stated that content area knowledge is the central need of teachers for success at Paxon. They are concerned that university programs are not providing the depth needed to teach at the highest levels. Or, it might be necessary for the Department of Education to provide more rigorous standards for certification in specific

disciplines. The principal has autonomy in the hiring of teachers. The faculty expressed no concern regarding contractual considerations. The principal tries to provide working conditions well within the limits of the contractual obligations.

Recruitment and Retention

New teachers to Paxon are provided with a formal mentor and many of the teachers within the department also provide helpful counsel. Turnover is at a minimum and the school is described by faculty as “a good place”. Teachers work with students who want to be at Paxon and have high goals for academic achievement. In this regard the school seems to be the picture envisioned by many people when they choose to enter the profession.

Climate & Culture

The school has high expectations of students and cares about their success. The focus is academic. While students are pre-screened by an academic committee, if any barriers to learning remain, the school goes to great lengths to remediate and move forward. It is essential that remediation take place in the ninth grade since the rigors of the curriculum would be misery for a student who lacks the necessary skills.

The Setting

Paxon School for Academic Studies has been identified in *Newsweek* as one of the highest performing schools in the nation. It is located a few miles from downtown Jacksonville, although it does not look like an urban area, it is more like a town with a much smaller population. The setting could be described as tranquil and the structure of the building is brick. It is not a modern facility in any manner, but it is well kept and throughout the building there are many reminders of the academic mission of the school. The most striking is a mural of a “learning tree” which provides the roots of each academic discipline and a comprehensive picture of the cumulative nature of knowledge.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

The Principal primarily devises the budget of Paxon, although department heads have input. Teachers are also on the School Improvement Team with parents who ultimately sign-off on the process.

The school receives extra funding for the magnet program as well as the Excel Wing (ESE center). Care is taken to spend these funds within the programs for which they are allocated. The district and the school monitor these procedures through an accounting process.

Since budgets have become so lean within the past two years the faculty takes little pleasure in helping make financial decisions, since cutting programs has become the primary consideration. The administration makes the central decisions in consideration of the academic goals of the school.

Support

Each teacher who teaches at Paxon must be trained in Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) workshops. These are considered effective programs for the purpose of the magnet. CHRISS training in which teachers learn about collaborative learning and self-motivation was also given high praise as an effective in-service workshop.

Students are allowed to choose the manner in which they are recognized for achievement. One time they choose to have a school carnival which was widely attended. Students are recognized for academic achievement through award programs at the end of each school year.

The first year the school was given FCAT funds they were spent on school supplies. Since then they have awarded a bonus to teachers and staff.

Remedial programs are funded for the students who need help on the FCAT. These tutoring programs are provided on Saturday.

Information Management

The administration has access to technology, which provides the data necessary to schedule students and organize the budget. The faculty doesn't have (or want) a great deal of technology. Since most of the academically oriented students have auditory learning styles, the primary delivery mode is lecture and discussion.

The administration provides printed test scores and other data needed to determine student academic needs. All student records are available in guidance. The Internet is available in the media center, in a computer lab and in most classrooms.

The principal, department heads and teachers use data to evaluate student progress and growth. The principal and department heads use data to evaluate teacher performance and department goals.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Professional Development

The in-service programs provided are primarily centered on content knowledge and being capable of delivering AP and IB standards. Funds are provided to attend the training sessions of AP and IB workshops. Veteran teachers mentor new teachers to help them have success in high-level academics. Teaming is not generally done unless it is necessary to find more expertise within a subject area. Curriculum articulation is somewhat rigid in that many courses are considered prerequisites to other courses. A mural of a "learning tree" provides a graphic picture of the natural progression of courses that lead to the knowledge necessary to be a critical thinker. Student achievement is the central focus of professional development and classroom and behavior management are minimal considerations. A call to a parent to report misbehavior (or more likely, lack of effort), is the primary means of correcting problems

The School Improvement Team is provided guidelines for their roles by the administration.

The professional development faculty considers most helpful is, the training provided in AP and IB workshops. These are primarily national or regional programs. An IB workshop in San Diego and another in Lincoln, Nebraska was singled out for content. Rubrics for academic success and essay development were also mentioned as the most helpful components.

Teachers feel they have an opportunity to share in school leadership. Department heads are included in many of the philosophical and practical decisions made by administration. The faculty gave great credit to the initial summer workshop which everyone attended as the school designed the academic magnet. It was further suggested that another such workshop might be helpful to re-focus the school and to emphasize interdepartmental cooperation.

Instruction

Although principals, teachers and parents are involved in the development of a district mission and Strategic Plan, it is not of significant concern to Paxon in that the goals of the school are considered higher than those prescribed in the plan. The Sunshine State Standards are followed as a minimum, but the standards rise far in excess of these. Parents and teachers are provided the district plan as a cursory requirement, but would be generally disappointed if those goals were not surpassed. The curriculum is established by the rigorous standards necessary to pass the AP and IB tests.

Students are required to take a minimum of 4 IB or AP courses in the upper level of their studies at Paxon. This curriculum dictates a traditional teaching and learning style that is commonly understood.

Communication

Information flows freely from the principal to the faculty and staff. The faculty does a good job of informing parents of the academic status of their students. The high interest level of parents in students' success insures that they will be supportive and react favorably to any constructive criticism received from teachers. This school has a lot of parent conferences and an excellent rapport with the people they serve.

Decision Making

The principal is a dynamic and charismatic leader who is the central decision-maker of the school. Teachers are so pleased to be teaching the subject they want to teach that most decisions are fundamental. The principal does not take advantage of the "power" teachers have deferred to him. The principal has frequent meetings with the faculty council and department

heads to discuss matters of interest and areas of potential concerns. Parents are also given input in the school improvement team meetings. The fact that they have chosen for their students to be there insures a mutuality of most decisions.

Parent and Community Involvement

Parents at Paxon were interested in the school since they had to make application for admission. They participate in the School Improvement Team and the PTO. They are generally very supportive of teachers as they have high expectations of their students and want them to achieve the goals of admission to the best universities of which they are capable.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

Parents are aware that they are fortunate to be in the academic environment of Paxon School for Academic Studies. It is necessary to make application and be screened by an academic committee in order to gain admission. Throughout the application process it is stressed that parents need to be conscientious in support of the school and their students' intellectual pursuits. They are soon made aware of the standards for studying and learning. Although remediation is not a significant consideration, parents understand that tutors are available and must be used if their student is unable to keep up with the rigorous curriculum. This is primarily a consideration in the 9th grade, as students above this level must be intellectually mature in order to continue. The PTO is organized, active and supportive as is the school improvement team. Both of these organizations are available to any interested parents. All the academic teachers at the school are trained in the teaching of Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses. They also give the same exams in each math class.

The faculty was reconstructed for the purpose of creating the academic studies magnet seven years ago. At that time they had a comprehensive summer pre-planning session in which they bonded in the purpose of taking students to the highest levels.

The faculty feels that cultural sensitivity is shown by the acceptance of the "most diverse student body in the district". In addition to the 30% ratio of African-American students they are proud to teach students from India, Russia, China and many other countries.

Students and parents are socialized to the school through a recruiting program and an orientation program. The curriculum is outlined and expectations are provided at both of these meetings. There is also an open house for parents at the beginning of the school year. IB meetings are held frequently throughout the school year. There is a newsletter sent to each family quarterly. New teachers are provided a formal mentor as well as informal help from other faculty members.

The school improvement team is represented by each department in the school and there are at-large members usually appointed by the principal to insure demographic representation.

Parents are involved in the decision-making process through representation on the Paxon Parent-Teacher School Advisory. Telephone calls home are frequently made by teachers to parents.

Teacher-made tests are frequently administered. These are designed by individual teachers and departmentally. Higher order thinking skills are stressed because of the accountability on the AP and IB testing program. Teachers are taught and closely monitor the AP and IB guides.

All ESE students as mandated by state statute take the FCAT. Students are given special considerations as dictated by individual learning plans and as provided by law.

Student performance is monitored through frequent progress reports, interim reports to parents and grade reports each 9 weeks. Academic improvement plans are provided for regular as well as special-needs students. An Academic Review Committee is responsible for reviewing the records of students who apply for admission. This committee also monitors the students who are enrolled to counsel them as needed. The faculty suggested that the academic standards for admission continued to become more stringent. Teachers use telephonic and personal conferences frequently. The faculty and administration set performance goals in each discipline. The administration monitors student achievement and what faculty members did to impact achievement. AP and IB test scores provide specific data in addition to FCAT. Teachers who consistently do not achieve goals negotiate a success plan with the principal. If achievement does not improve teachers who have tenure could be offered a 1-year "buyout".

A district committee is responsible for a behavior management plan. Teachers, administrators and district personnel are included on this committee. Within the school the administration and department heads determine specific actions the school will take regarding discipline. The faculty stressed that discipline issues are at a minimum as students and parents want to be at this high performing school. The fact that parents want students to be there was also considered very significant.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Paxon School for Advanced Studies in Jacksonville was created seven years ago because, as a traditional comprehensive high school, it had a severely declining enrollment. In contrast, Stanton, the initial school for advanced studies in Duval County, had a long waiting list of potential applicants. The principal of Stanton was asked to replicate the academic program at Paxon. Since that time the enrollment of Paxon has more than doubled. The current enrollment is 1,434. The average class size is 32. 17% of the students have disabilities with a special-needs center within the school. The gifted population is 32%. The percentage of students on free/reduced lunch is 20%. 3% of the students are classified as LEP. The number of incidents of crime and violence was 12 for the current school year. The percentage of students suspended was 23%. The mobility rate was 38%. 70% of the faculty has advanced degrees with 13 years their average years of experience. The school grade was an "A".

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	57
African American	28
Hispanic	10
Asian	4
Native American	2
Multi-racial	1

The goals of Paxon High school were listed as: creating life-long learners who are caring, persevering, problem solvers, enjoyers of the arts, effective communicators, committed to excellence integrity driven, respectful of diversity, team players, proficient in technology, self-confident (without arrogance), self disciplined, pragmatic dreamers.

Goals

Goal 1:

Teachers: Will demonstrate, through their teaching, the belief that all students can learn and become critical thinkers.

Goal 2:

Educators: Will challenge and nurture students through an academically rigorous curriculum.

Goal 3:

Students: Will learn to apply knowledge and the lessons of effort, integrity, compassion and teamwork.

Goal 4:

Administrators: Will encourage and support teachers and students in their quest for knowledge and competence.

Goal 5:

Educators: Will enthusiastically work together as colleagues and collaborators.

Goal 6:

Adults and students: Will continually improve their efficiency and effectiveness of the learning community.

Goal 7:

The school community: Will cherish and respect diversity.

Goal 8:

The faculty and staff: Will function as a respectful team.

Goal 9:

Parents: Will work with the school to cultivate their child's educational success and life-long learning commitment to excellence.