

James Plew Elementary—Okaloosa County

KEY THEMES:

- The school district effectively communicates its philosophy, policies and procedures to the community.
- The administration and faculty share high expectations for themselves and their students.
- The desire to challenge students is reflected in the school becoming a part of the International Baccalaureate program and implementing its inquiry based instructional approach.
- As a result of their travel and experiences the students and their families provide a rich cultural base for the school.
- Parents provide a supportive atmosphere and are able to work with their children.
- Parent volunteers make home visits to parents of new students to welcome them.
- Volunteers are active in many areas including a large mentoring program utilizing retirees.
- Contact between the school and home is ongoing and teachers maintain a dialog folder that follows each student throughout the grades.
- A software Grade Book System is implemented to provide parents with access to their children's grades and effort on a daily basis.
- Teachers are asked to identify personal development goals annually.
- Effort is made to use block scheduling to support the efforts of teachers to collaborate and assist one another.
- Several information and data management systems are in place to help with student monitoring (AS-100, Excel, Grade Book).

BEST PRACTICES:

- Higher level questioning and critical thinking have been emphasized since well before FCAT.
- Students maintain an agenda book beginning in kindergarten to help them develop organizational skills and to communicate with parents
- FCAT A+ monies are expended on early morning tutoring for level 1 and 2 students.
- The principal manages the budget in a way that insures that when there is change in curriculum or a new textbook adoption, the teachers always have the "new stuff" as soon as it is available.
- Students who are Specific Learning Disabled receive coordinated double reading instruction. Their basic instruction at grade level is taught in their regular education classroom and then they are resourced to an ESE class for instruction in specific reading strategies at their developmental level.
- The International Baccalaureate Program emphasizes critical thinking and discovery. Emphasis is placed on matching methodology to student needs. There is a belief that there is no magic program or one way that works for all.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal's self-description is laidback, soliciting input from the staff, open to suggestions, and willing to share leadership responsibilities. Further, the principal is open to change and feels fortunate to have many teachers who will get an idea and then just go with it. An open door policy is demonstrated by finding value in having informal coffees with the teachers, and welcoming parents to come in at any time to discuss any situation or topic. The principal has served in that capacity for 2 1/2 years, all at Plew Elementary. The principal was a high school assistant principal for six years prior to Plew and plans to retire at the end of this school year with over thirty years of experience as an educator.

Sharing a collaborative vision of what we want to accomplish was how the teachers described the school's leadership. We want to "address the standards, keep our sanity, and remain child centered". The teachers believe they are held accountable, but they are also empowered and supported in their efforts to improve student performance.

An effort is made to involve everybody in leadership. This is accomplished primarily through serving on various committees.

The principal meets with each teacher twice a year to discuss the teacher's personal goals, which must relate to student performance

Personnel

The principal is recognized for establishing a “collaborative vision” in the school. Governance of the school is distributed to multiple committees of teachers and sometimes parents and teachers. Grade-level Chairs provide guidance for many of the decisions in the school.

Grade-level chairs and teachers are involved in the hiring process. From interviews school personnel determines the best fit for an incoming teacher. Frequently, topics of discussion reveal a prospective teacher’s view on classroom and behavioral management, classroom techniques, teaching philosophy and its translation to classroom practices, and collegiality.

Hiring practices give the principal and the teachers autonomy to select personnel that best fit within the school structure and culture. The School District screens applicants, but allows for administration and teachers to choose among prospective applicants.

Mentoring is heavily emphasized at James Plew Elementary. The school has implemented a “beginning teacher program.” New teachers are guided by at least two seasoned teachers and the principal. Mentoring is also evident in strategies to “groom” excellent teachers toward administration. James Plew Elementary offers workshops and courses for those who have administrative aspirations.

At the heart of teachers’ job satisfaction at James Plew Elementary is the established sense of community reported by many. One teacher noted that a sense of community is evident in the amount of time teachers spend together in activities that build cohesiveness and collaboration. Specifically, she stated: “we do a lot of cooking and eating here at this school.” The cohesiveness and collaboration among teachers and administrators buffers the school from staff turnover. Moreover, professional development opportunities are presented to the teachers in the spirit of growth and not in a manner that signals deficiencies.

Professional development focuses on all teachers regardless of years of experience. The School District focuses on the development of new and veteran teachers, teaming at grade levels and across grade and subject areas, articulation of the curriculum, classroom management strategies and strategies to improve student academic achievement. On a regular basis, the School District avails “in-service training” about technology. Other training is determined via needs assessments.

A professional development training that has made a significant impact is the CHRIS Strategy. Also, workshops about subject matter (e.g., reading) have proven successful and motivating to teachers. Especially helpful have been programs given by faculty members from the Community College and the University of West Florida.

Setting

The school, built in 1967, is situated in a residential area not far from Eglin Air Force Base. There is a strong military presence at the school. Hallways with names such as Kindness Way and Learning Lane connect the various wings of the building. The office and classrooms are warm and inviting.

Climate and Culture

Many of the students are from military families, have traveled the world, and been exposed to varied cultures. The staff and faculty demonstrate cultural sensitivity by simply modeling respect for all.

Plew is a neighborhood school, an integral part of the community. The community shows great pride in its school. New students blend in easily with the support of an assigned buddy.

The faculty considers itself supportive, “a pretty tight knit group”. The interviewees believe that they have a strong faculty and do not want a “weak link”. Therefore a new teacher finds that the other teachers at the grade level envelop the newcomer and work to ensure his/her success. It is not unusual to find teachers working at the school on weekends. Qualities that characterize an effective teacher at Plew include, “ being knowledgeable and interested in learning, being reflective, being enthusiastic and willing to spend time and expend effort, and valuing the individual child, not just his/her FCAT score”.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

The budget is linked to the school's performance plan. Educational goals and the plans to achieve them are related to the school's budgetary strategy. Faculty, administrators and the school's advisory council work together identify the school's educational goals.

The school receives limited external funding. However, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is supportive of the teachers and the need for instructional material. Additionally, because of students' FCAT scores, the school received FCAT recognition funding. The administration uses these funds to provide bonuses for the teachers and to support programs, as the one that avails morning tutors for the students—math and reading.

Information Management

All of the school personnel have access to on-line information about the school and the School Districts performance. okaloosaschools.com avails district-wide scores to gauge the school's academic performance in comparison to other schools in the district. Additionally, data is used to monitor academic performance, as well as behavior and discipline indicators.

FCAT data allows teachers and administrators to determine, early in the year, a baseline for the child's academic performance. From the baseline data instructional plans are developed and implemented for each child. The parents are allowed and encouraged to understand the data that reflects where a child stands in academic performance. Also, the parents are encouraged to understand the rationale for educational interventions and how they are related to the academic achievement information availed to them.

The school can rightly be characterized as being data driven. The school performance plan is driven by the available data. Additionally, professional development plans for the teachers are driven by data trends. The professional development of teachers is linked to areas in which they show growth potential.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

An Instructional Strategic Plan originates from the collaboration between a representative of the Okaloosa School District and the SAC members. Familiarity with the School District's Instructional Strategic Plan is increased by the publication of information on a school website. Additionally, emails are distributed to the school community about district policies and procedures.

The School District provides workshops for those professionals who work on the School Improvement Team. The School Improvement plan accentuates accountability beyond the children's FCAT scores. What is important in the definition of instructional effectiveness is that children learn.

Instructional practices are not textbook driven. Teachers often deviate from textbooks by creating booklets, such as the one teachers' created for Social Studies. It highlights the nature of communities.

A School Performance Plan guides the instructional practices. The Sunshine State Standards are the basis for a general instructional philosophy of "moving up" in teaching efficacy for the teachers.

Communication

In Okaloosa County, there is considerable communication between the school district and individual schools. The superintendent effectively uses media including local newspapers and e-mail to share the district's mission, policies and procedures with the community. The school district is divided into zones with an assistant superintendent in charge of each. Reports on student progress are frequently provided to him. Twice a year the zone superintendent and his quality insurance team meet with each school's administrative team to review their performance plan and its implementation as well as to review student performance.

Much of the internal communication at the school both horizontally and vertically is conducted through the grade level chairpersons. They meet regularly as a group and with the teachers at their grade level as well as with the principal.

A system is in place for monitoring and communicating a student's performance from kindergarten through fifth grade. Students are assessed prior to entering kindergarten and a dialog folder is created. That folder, which includes testing results, anecdotal information, strategies that are tried, and parent conference write-ups, follows the student through the grades. Most of the teachers also send home weekly work and behavior folders for parent review and signature.

The teachers interviewed said, "We collaborate and bounce a lot of ideas off of each other. Special area teachers reinforce what is taught by the regular classroom teacher. If a teacher is experiencing difficulty of some sort we're there to help. Empowering teachers is the best way to see improvement in the schools."

Decision Making

Most decisions are based on data reflecting student performance. The principal felt that the quantity and quality of available data is significant. However, the principal stated, "learning to use it and then having the resources to address the needs, that's what we need". Also said was, "When we're looking at children, much has to be holistic, and beyond paper and pencil grades".

Important decision-making including the budget is steered through the teachers and the SAC. When opportunities to apply for the International Baccalaureate Program and to have some type of gifted program placed at the school were presented, parents on the committee volunteered to research the two areas and to report possible options back to the council and faculty.

Grade level chairpersons play a key role. They meet as a group, with their grade levels, and with the principal. They are also involved in the interviewing when teaching positions are available. The teachers indicated their belief that they have considerable input into the decisions that are made.

Parent and Community Involvement

Whenever parents register a new child at the school, a parent volunteer goes out to visit them, make them feel wanted, and encourages their involvement in school activities. The community and the parents play a very active role in many aspects of school life.

In lieu of art teachers the district sponsors a Global Art Program. Parents volunteer to help teach the program thus providing students with some art instruction. Other parents own local businesses and help with various school projects. Each year the parents are asked to complete a Climate Survey. School personnel consider this information very important. The results are closely scrutinized and areas where parents' needs are not being met are addressed.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

Teachers and administrators agree that a child's educational needs determine the degree and nature of how he/she is educated. Within solid educational strategies for all, the performance of a singular child determines how teachers are held accountable for their effectiveness as educators. Skills developed by the children are the determinants for advancement to higher levels of learning.

Sound assessment practices and adherence to Sunshine State Standards permeate the instructional philosophy at James Plew Elementary. Relevant quality materials are found in every classroom. Leveled instruction is applied when needed and management of classroom size insures that each child receives individualized attention.

Objective, continuous assessment, applied early in the year, provides the framework for individualized academic improvement plans (AIP). Also, assessments throughout the year provide continuous data to monitor the progress of each child. A teacher's statement "we can test their progress throughout the year" illustrates the schools reliance on assessment, continuous monitoring of children's progress, and decisive and swift interventions applied early.

Commitment to cultural awareness and sensitivity is shown by the school's efforts to become an International Baccalaureate Program. The program stresses the study of multiple cultures. Moreover, this program is a catalyst to the fact that many of the children's families have lived throughout the world. The school itself is a microcosm of education in cultural plurality. Books about many cultures are available in the library, the school has a Global Art Program and the teachers are ambassadors of their own cultures. As such, teachers are encouraged to speak with the children about their heritage, and cultural backgrounds and practices.

To socialize new personnel, parents, and students to the school, a variety of options are provided. For example, there is the traditional beginning of the year orientation meeting where parents are shown around the school. A special meeting is held in the spring for incoming kindergarten students and their parents. All the preschools in the area are invited to bring their students to see the school. They meet the teachers and are shown the classrooms and other areas of the school. To give parents opportunities to learn about programs they can work with, there is a volunteer orientation that is hosted by Plew. Parents are given exposure to programs that they might be interested in volunteering for like Sunshine math, art, etc. There are also the traditional parent groups including the School Advisory Council and the PTA, both of which are described as “tremendous” by both the principal of Plew and the teachers.

Regarding the socialization of new teachers, there is a mentor teacher who helps them through the first year. Additionally teachers stated, “the entire grade level really works together to make sure new teachers have the supplies they need, to inform them about the grade level expectations and leveled instruction. When a new teacher comes in, no grade level wants a “weak link” on their team, so they work strongly together with the new teacher to make sure that all teachers are strong. It doesn’t matter which class your child is put into, you know your child is going to get a good education”.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Plew Elementary School is located in Okaloosa County. Thirty-five instructional staff is employed, with one administrator. Plew Elementary enrolled approximately 700 students—88.6% Caucasian, 2.3% African American, 2.7% Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, 0.4 Native American, 3% Multi-racial. The school report grade for 2001-2002 was an A. 16.8 % of the student’s were on free and reduced lunch in 2000-2001. The stability rate is 95.7%, with 0% of students classified as LEP, and 6.4% of the students as Gifted. Average class size (K-5) is 24.8 students, with the percentage of students with disabilities classified as 11.9%.

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	88.6
African American	2.3
Hispanic	2.7
Asian	3.1
Native American	0.4
Multi-racial	3.0

Goals

Goal 1:

Readiness to Start School Goal: Evaluated 107 kindergarten students, with 103 meeting the State’s expectation for readiness.

Goal 3:

Student Performance: In grade 4, tested 118students in FCAT Writing Assessment, with a school average score of 4.0 as compared to the district average 3.4 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 (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 119 students tested, had a mean scale score of 337, compared with district and state mean scale scores of 316 and 299, respectively. Data for grade 5 Mathematics listed the

number at 129 tested, with the median national percentile rank (NPR) for the school ranking 84%, compared with 71% for the district, and 61% for the state. FCAT School Accountability Data for Writing in grade 4 (N=98) showed the school at 88% scoring 3 or higher.

Goal 4:

Learning Environment: Reports 2 or 5.7% new instructional staff hired for the 2001-02 school year as compared to the district average of 8.2% and the state average of 16%. Absentee rates were slightly lower for the number of student absences of 11-20 days (14.5% for the school, compared with 19.1% for the state), as well as for students absent 21+ days or more. Leave days for teachers were slightly higher (10.9) than the district and state averages of 10.3 and 10.2. Administrator absences were not reported because there is only one administrator in the school.

Goal 5:

School Safety and Environment: Reported only 9 discipline incidents overall for the year, the most number of incidents being under the categories of fighting and threat/intimidation.

Goal 6:

Teachers and Staff: Reported that 33.3% of the instructional staff had graduate degrees (includes master's and specialists).