

Silver Trail Middle School—Broward County

KEY THEMES:

- Shared leadership style of principal that includes collaboration and humanistic approach with all stakeholders
- Extensive staff development
- Not in body
- Methods for instruction that include team teaching, cooperative learning, rubrics, and journaling
- Collegiality as evidenced by successful teaming and sharing of best practices by staff members
- CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies) and Bloom's taxonomy questioning skills incorporated across the curriculum
- High level of parent involvement and support
- School technology support that includes two computer labs, three business labs on wheels, computers in the classroom and laptop computers for 90% of teachers
- Remedial instruction for students with before and after school tutoring
- High school-wide expectations of excellence and student achievement

BEST PRACTICES:

- Emphasis on using proven effective, research-based, instructional strategies
 - CRISS strategies
 - Bloom's taxonomy questioning
 - Teaching students how to think independently, to apply learning strategies to real life situations, and to make informed decisions rather than to teach to a test
 - Two-hour language arts block with emphasis on reading and writing
 - Portfolios maintained in grades 6-8 to measure growth in writing
 - Students assess and evaluate writing using rubrics
 - Six-Traits training in writing instruction
 - Infusion of technology as a motivating force to support instruction
 - School-provided laptop computers for 90% of teachers
 - Two computer labs
 - CCC for remedial instruction
 - Sign-up lab for individual teacher use
 - Three mobile labs for business education
 - Electronic gradebook
 - Required use of email for intraschool communication
 - Constant monitoring of student performance
 - Benchmark testing
 - Before and after school tutoring programs
 - FCAT Academy for lowest 25% of students
 - Professional development
 - Teaming
- Integrating FCAT strategies in Family and Consumer Science

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

The Principal

The current principal has been at the school for four years; having previously served five years as assistant principal at another middle school in Broward County before assuming the principalship. Also, the principal taught elementary school as well as gifted classes in Miami-Dade County, a neighboring school district.

Leadership

The leadership style of this principal is best described by one of the parents who said, "The principal doesn't expect anything from you that the principal wouldn't do also." The principal is a facilitative leader who encourages others to take charge whenever possible. The principal instills the attitude that we should be the best that we can be in all that we do and

recognizes the efforts of students, teachers, staff, and parents on a regular basis. A collaborative atmosphere is prevalent due to the principal's emphasis on working together as a team in order to increase student learning and provide a safe school environment.

These qualities are priorities in hiring of personnel for the school. The principal said, "I look for individuals who love children and who are committed to the profession of teaching." Other priorities in hiring include; a willingness to work as a team, creativity, energy, enthusiasm, and organizational skills. The principal is always visible and can be easily approached by anyone who has a concern, demonstrating an "open door policy". The principal is respected not only by staff but also by parents and students as well.

The principal has introduced strategies to boost morale and improve results from *FISH*, the Wall Street Journal bestseller. It is based on the premise that work made fun gets done. *FISH* activities are used with the faculty and staff and also with the students. This creates an environment in which people are truly connected to their work, to their colleagues, and to their customers (students). Fish are displayed in classrooms, hallways, and offices, indicating awards for those who bring energy, passion, and a positive attitude to the school daily.

The principal makes every effort to delegate leadership as often as possible. The teachers help interview new faculty members, chair committees, plan school events and activities, and manage faculty meetings.

Personnel

Astute and knowledgeable about budgeting and with input from staff members, the principal has been able to hire needed personnel to work with the students and staff at the school. The high morale and mentoring provided for newly hired personnel make the school a desirable place to work. Staff development is a priority and money is available to hire temporary duty personnel. Staff turnover, however, is a concern for the principal. Located in the rapidly growing southwestern area of Broward County; new schools are constantly being opened and staff transfers are common.

A reading coach supervises, monitors and coordinates the reading program and remediation of students. Three of the four assistant principals are assigned to a grade level in addition to specific subject areas and general administrative duties. The main responsibility of the fourth assistant principal is technology and its implementation.

All groups interviewed agreed that the single most critical element needed to be successful at Silver Trail is to "love kids". To be a team player, to be willing to work hard, and to be caring and compassionate toward the students are other characteristics of the successful educator at this school.

Setting

Silver Trail Middle is located in the southwestern area of Broward County in the rapidly developing suburbs; it is the first middle school north of the Dade County line. The sixth grade is currently housed in portable buildings of which there are a total of twenty-nine. Thirty-six buses bring in the students from the surrounding community—an upper middle class area of single family homes, town houses, and a trailer park. Many of the large single family homes house multiple families, many of whom are of South American and Caribbean descent.

As you enter the building you are in the midst of an inviting atmosphere. Student work lines the walls and "certificates of appreciation" from local businesses are in evidence. The office staff is busy but courteous and very pleasant. The eight-year old school is clean; the classrooms are attractive. The grounds outside are well kept.

Climate & Culture

This school makes everyone feel welcome as soon as they enter the front door. The halls and classrooms are decorated with student work and educational materials. The building is well maintained and very clean, as are the school grounds. There is very little traffic in the hallways thus providing an atmosphere conducive to uninterrupted teaching and learning. The school depicts a drug-free environment that protects students' health, safety, and civil rights.

The entire staff readily recognizes the fact that the school is comprised of many different cultures and thus differences are dealt with on a daily basis. It was quoted "the school utilizes their diversity as a strength in enhancing the communication process." For example, there are many multicultural programs held during the school year. Cultural days and celebrations are a part of the school calendar; extra curricular club participation is encouraged as a means of getting to know others and their customs. Teachers are encouraged to display cultural projects, dress, food, and art work in their classrooms. All parents are encouraged to become a part of the school by becoming a member of the PTA, the School Advisory Council or

any of the other organizations that exist on the Silver Trail campus. The principal schedules sensitivity training for the faculty on a yearly basis.

The culture of the school stresses fairness to students. What is fair? Fair is not every child getting the same treatment; it is every child getting what they need. This philosophy permeates the campus and certainly lends itself to not leaving any child behind.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

Linking the budget to academic goals and student achievement is the underlying goal of all resources received by the school. Early in the year a staff retreat is held for school improvement planning. Each department has determined the resources needed to implement its goals. At the retreat the needs are presented and discussed with continuous student improvement as the goal. The objectives for the school year are decided. Money is then allocated to each department—once in the beginning of the year and again mid-year. According to the principal, “If money is in the budget and the teachers have something they want to do that’s good for kids, they’re given the money.”

The principal makes sure that money received for special programs supports the students for whom it is intended, such as ESE and ESOL. Professional development, linked to academic goals, is a major priority. In addition to using school funds, the principal is always looking for district support to supply consultants and substitutes for needed workshops. Teachers are encouraged to attend conferences, to belong to professional organizations and to work on advanced degrees.

The PTA is extremely supportive of the school. The principal described the many volunteers as “additional staff members” and “ears to the community”. They can be relied upon to perform needed tasks such as security monitors, traffic assistants, and classroom volunteers. Some of the ways the parents support the school are with treats and academic awards (certificates, pins, bookmarks and other trinkets) for the students, by providing lunch on FCAT testing days, and by securing community partnerships.

Money received from the state for Silver Trail’s “A” rating was distributed after input from teachers, staff members, parents and the School Advisory Council (SAC). Eighty percent of the money was used for equal bonuses to all staff members and 20% for technology.

Information Management

The school has access to online data in a multitude of areas, including student data (health, report card grades, test scores, psychological testing, attendance), budget, and demographics. Broward County’s data warehouse provides student test scores and pinpoints the benchmarks that need instruction. Many teachers access the Department of Education’s web site for lesson plans that focus on FCAT-related skills. Florida Atlantic University is another source, both physically and electronically, for instructional strategies. Ninety percent of the teachers at Silver Trail have school-provided laptop computers and use them to access the Internet for instructional purposes.

In addition, a wealth of information, for both the school and the community, is available through the district’s website, www.browardschools.com. Detailed FCAT results and the School Improvement Plan are online. All parents have access to the SIP, either at home or at school. FCAT data allow teachers to focus on the weaknesses of their students as well as on the strengths of the programs and strategies that are being used.

School personnel and a student’s parents or guardian have access to student assessment data. Data is used to assist in grouping for instruction and to determine if additional assistance is needed to accomplish grade level goals. Teachers meet regularly to review progress of children with data that includes benchmark testing, remedial instruction results, and daily work. Parent conferences are held to share information and to discuss continued strategies as needed.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

The target areas for the SIP are aligned with the state’s goal of “student performance” and Broward County’s strategic plan goal of “All students will achieve at their highest potential.” The action steps for the school are based on the curriculum areas of writing, math, reading, and additional emphasis on the lowest 25% in reading. Silver Trail’s SIP is aligned to the district’s goals with special emphasis on increasing student achievement.

Working with the SAC, the SIP is a culminating effort based on input from teachers, parents, administrators, students and the community. The previous year's testing and the students' current needs determine strategies to be undertaken to improve the instructional program. The Sunshine State Standards are the basis for the curriculum.

Continuous monitoring through the use of benchmark testing, teacher-made tests and remedial instruction assist the staff in assessing progress toward SIP goals. CRISS strategies and questioning based on Bloom's taxonomy are employed in all subject areas to expose students to higher-level thinking. With an emphasis on writing school-wide, the daily use of journaling and the incorporation of rubrics to assess progress are ongoing. Instructional materials and methods are based on best practices training. Teachers interviewed stated that the principal provides adequate time for data to be interpreted and trained personnel to assist in this interpretation.

Teachers are encouraged to attend and share information gained from workshops and conferences at team and staff meetings. Continuous training and high expectations of and for all staff members yield good results for Silver Trail's students.

Communication

Communication, both verbal and written, between all stakeholders in the school is an extremely important goal of Silver Trail Middle School. Numerous means of sharing information with the home are in place, such as the Principal's newsletter, school website, teacher phone calls, and daily announcements. A Reading Connection newsletter communicates ways parents can support teachers' efforts to encourage reading at home. Curriculum events utilizing the Roundup newsletter ensures parents are aware of pertinent curriculum information to enhance their student's progress.

Communication with and among teachers is facilitated through faculty, departmental, and team meetings. Early release days are sometimes used for parent conferences, home phone contacts, and workshops in methods of communication. Teachers are continually encouraged to use all means of communication to keep parents informed.

The school is part of the Flanagan Innovation Zone. Flanagan High School, two middle schools and the elementary schools in the feeder pattern are also members of this Innovation Zone. These principals meet during the school year to articulate information that will assist staff in meeting the needs of the students and to plan activities that will maximize access to parents at all levels. The Innovation Zone also offers staff development activities for teachers focusing on the transition at critical points where students move from elementary to middle to high school. Parents are also included in Zone meetings and become part of the communication loop across levels.

Decision Making

The principal is a strong advocate of shared decision-making and does not believe in making decisions relative to the school and its stakeholders in isolation. To better facilitate this process the principal involves everyone in virtually all decision-making.

The school is organized with an assistant principal, guidance counselor, and a team leader at each grade level as well as department chairs and coordinators. These school leaders are the principal's administrative team who is constantly involved when decisions need to be made.

Using assessment data, school grades, and teacher recommendations, students are evaluated and decisions regarding placement, instructional materials, methods, and arrangements are made. Opportunities are provided for parents and teachers to have input into these decisions. An active School Advisory Council is also involved in school decisions and budget matters.

The principal's "open door policy" provides ample opportunity for anyone who has concerns or would like to contribute in the decision-making process to do so. All stakeholders expressed comfort in approaching the principal with concerns.

An excellent example of shared decision-making at work would be the distribution of money from the state to all staff members on an equal basis, with 20% of the funds allocated for technology.

Parent & Community Involvement

When a new family arrives at the school, the parent and student are given a tour of the campus and are introduced to the administration. A peer counselor is linked with the student in what is called a "Buddy Program." Parents are told they may sit in on a classroom if they so choose and are informed on an evening of open house activities when again they can tour the school and gather more information. The student is assigned to the guidance counselor who works with the student and parent in completing a schedule.

Parents are encouraged to become school volunteers. The principal said, "We have anywhere from 12-16 volunteers here on a daily basis and we rely upon them to assist us with security, traffic control, office work, classroom assistance, and various other duties. These volunteers are our ears to the community."

The PTA is a very strong parent organization on the campus. All new and existing parents are encouraged to join. The organization sponsors awards programs for the students, breakfasts for the faculty and staff, and conducts several fundraisers during the school year to aid other school endeavors.

The principal encourages participation in the School Advisory Forum and School Advisory Council; thus, these groups have become viable and strong facets of parent involvement in the school.

The community surrounding the school is also involved in the activities of the school. There are many community business partners who help the school not only financially but also as volunteers or guest speakers on career experiences. Some of these include Publix, Papa John's Pizza, Wal-Mart, Galaxy Skating Rink, Kinko's, New River Groves, Regal Theaters and IHOP, to name a few.

It is quite evident from visiting this campus that parents are very comfortable with the administration and faculty and consider Silver Trail their school. Teachers also express this same comfort level in dealing with parents. A teacher said, "We are treated as professionals because we always have the best interest of our students before us."

The principal has discovered how to energize those who are stakeholders in the school and effect an astonishing transformation in the community.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

Personnel are held accountable for the achievement of goals and objectives through frequent monitoring of student work. During team and department planning meetings, data on students are discussed; students needing additional help are identified; and professional development opportunities are shared. FCAT tips and strategies are implemented daily across the curriculum; teacher made FCAT-type quizzes and tests are used. Using data received from the "virtual counselor" (Broward County's data warehouse), students are assigned to the computer lab for intensive reading and math assistance. Interim reports are given every two weeks for struggling students in need of remediation.

Parents are made aware of standards their children are expected to meet early in the school year. Open houses and parent orientations for sixth grade parents set the stage for awareness of standards and expectations for students. An agenda planner is used daily; teachers write notes to parents and vice versa. Parent conferences are held with the entire team of teachers. Interim reports are given if a drop of two grades occurs. Excellent parent involvement is key to this school. Positive as well as negative phone calls, weekly and daily reports as needed, and a weekly reading log are some of the strategies used. The "open door policy" used by all administrators was praised by the parents. "Teachers can't do it alone", "a tight knit family", and "the administration is so supportive" are some of the quotes given by the parents interviewed.

Cultural sensitivity is demonstrated through classroom projects and multicultural clubs. Sensitivity training has been conducted for all staff members; they feel as if all students are treated equally. Throughout the year, many cultures and ethnicities are celebrated.

Informal assessments, other than those mandated, include questioning utilizing Bloom's taxonomy; all teachers have been trained in writing higher order questions in all curriculum areas. The children have also been taught to write questions modeling Bloom's hierarchy. The reading coach models this type of questioning in the classrooms. Rubrics in all curriculum areas have been developed; this "recipe for success" is shared throughout the school. Additionally, CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies) strategies are incorporated to expose students to critical and creative thinking on a regular basis.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Silver Trail Middle School is located in Broward County School District in the western suburbs. One hundred instructional staff are employed with five administrators. Silver Trail Middle enrolled 2,345 students. The school report grade for both 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 was an A. 11.5% of the students were on free and reduced lunch in 2001-2002. The stability rate

is 97.5%, with 9.4% of the students classified as LEP, 10.1% of the students as Gifted and 9.6% of the students classified with disabilities. Average class size for language arts, math, science, and social studies is 31.2, 30.1, 30.4 and 29.8 respectively.

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	31.9
African American	19.0
Hispanic	42.3
Asian	5.5
Native American	0.2
Multi-racial	1.1

Goals

Goal 3:

Student Performance: In grade 8, tested 733 students in FCAT Writing Assessment, with a school average score of 3.9, as compared to the district average of 3.9 and a state average of 3.8. (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 ranks (NPR) and were higher than district and state percentile ranks for reading and math in grades 6-8. FCAT School Accountability Data in grade 6 Reading and Mathematics, with 812 students tested, reported a mean scale score of 315 in Reading and 326 in Mathematics, as compared to the district at 298 and 310 and the state at 291 and 298 respectively. In seventh grade, 831 students were tested with scores of 316 in Reading and 318 in Mathematics as compared with district scores of 298 and 302 and state scores of 294 and 292 respectively. 733 eighth grade students were tested and achieved scores of 312 in Reading and 319 in Mathematics as compared with district scores of 300 and 310 and state scores of 295 and 305.

Goal 4:

Learning Environment: Reported that 29 or 29% new instructional staff were hired for the 2001-2002 school year as compared to the district average of 18.9% and the state average of 16.7%. Absentee rates were slightly lower for the number of student absences of 11-20 days and considerably lower for students absent 21+ days or more. Leave days for both teachers and administrators were higher than the district average with teachers having 10.9 absences as compared to 9.6 for the district and administrators with 24.4 as compared to the district average of 10.2.

Goal 5:

School Safety and Environment: Reported 189 discipline incidences overall; 78 of these were fighting.

Goal 6:

Teachers and Staff: Reported that 26.8% of the staff had graduate degrees (includes master's, specialist, and doctorate).