

Village Green Elementary School—Miami-Dade County

KEY THEMES:

- o Assessment data drives instruction
- o Curriculum is determined by the Sunshine State Standards
- o Students wear uniforms
- o Funding for paraprofessionals to lower the teacher/student ratio
- o Tutoring or instruction in a small group
- o Higher-order thinking
- o Grade-level department chairs (K-1, 2-3, 4-5, & ESE). Special teachers are assigned to one of the departments
- o Former, retired teachers help students, especially third graders
- o ESE inclusion

BEST PRACTICES:

- o Horizontal and vertical scheduling is used along with block scheduling to enable teachers to focus on particular areas of the curriculum. For example, one teacher at a particular grade level teaches language arts, while another teacher teaches science, social studies or math.
- o All staff members are included in the decision making process.
- o Behavior management is practiced on an individual basis; however, the administration emphasizes that it be consistent and viable.
- o Teachers share their expertise with each other. They also share strategies from workshops they have attended enabling all of teachers to benefit from new strategies and instructional methods.
- o Technology, training and the use of retired teachers instead of para-professionals for student remediation are top priorities when budgeting.
- o All teachers are provided the book *First Days of School*, by Harry Wong. This encourages consistency in behavior and procedures.
- o A variety of incentives are used to reward positive behavior of students. Citizen of the Month, good cafeteria behavior and attendance are all recognized and rewarded.
- o The Scholastic Reading Inventory is used to determine students reading levels.
- o Various clubs and groups, such as The Chess Club, French Club, chorus, crime watch, student patrol, and string group are offered to students.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal has been the leading administrator at Village Green for six years. She came to Village Green with considerable experience – 19 years and holds a Master’s Degree. The assistant principal has been at Village Green for the past 10 years and also holds a Master’s Degree.

The leaders at Village Green stress clear expectations that are communicated to staff, teachers, and students. Clear statements of expectations help avoid confusion and in turn lead to less discipline problems with the students. Teachers expressed an appreciation of the professional manner in which the administration treats them.

Leadership is participatory and distributed across the teachers. It is based on valid reasoning and targeted to the correction of specific identified needs. Chairpersons are assigned for K-1, 2-3, 4-5 and ESE. The special area teachers are assigned to one of the departments. Chairpersons meet with the administration when a decision is needed on a school wide issue.

Personnel

An applicant tracking system is used to hire new personnel consistent with district policies and procedures. District clearance of a potential new hire does not remove the principal’s autonomy. That is, she has the autonomy to decide whom to hire, as long as the policy and standards of the district are met. The aforementioned practice is for new district-level personnel and must be attentive to the district’s placement of all surplus teachers. The hiring process is attentive to and focused on a match between the needs of the students and goals of the school. Commitment and caring are important characteristics expected of

those who may be hired at Village Green. Also highly considered are ethnic and gender representation at all levels. The district is aware that there may be a shortage of teachers in the future and are looking at professionals considering career changes into the teaching profession.

The district provides a mentoring program for all teachers. Encouraged to participate in the mentoring program are those who are new to the system and those who are contract teachers. Professional growth teams are structured to support and work with the teachers when they are hired, providing support and direction for neophyte teachers.

The principal is free to choose the manner in which to use the mentoring or coaching programs. More prescriptive, is a model in which new teachers are paired with a senior teacher for mentoring. Department chairpersons also help with mentoring.

Village Green is characterized by low turnover. Generally, teachers and support staff believe that offering support at all levels reduces turnover. The school offers an employee assistance program for staff members and strives to provide a comfortable working condition for everyone.

The administration is sympathetic and sensitive to the fact that most teachers have families and personal lives. Hence, teachers and staff members expressed their appreciation for the supportive relationships that exist at Village Green. Perhaps the best evidence of a supportive philosophy at Village Green is the top ranking of quality of work life by the administration.

The Management Academy, which is directed at the district level, provides opportunities for developing new and veteran leaders. Administrators have access to a wide variety of training such as technology and instruction. Monthly meetings are held for principals and assistant principals so they have opportunities to network and share ideas with others in the field.

Teachers work together by grade level and subject area. The articulation of the curriculum is done informally (over lunch) and formally. Classroom management training is usually done at regular faculty meetings.

Student achievement is the main priority and is fostered by having inservice training for teachers and staff. Teachers decide the content of their training experiences and the administration encourages teachers to be self-directed about their professional development. Specific development needs are met by workshops that address a specific content area and issues of a particular grade level.

The School Improvement Team receives several training sessions. Members are sent for training and then return to the school sharing beneficial information for other teachers. This practice has addressed factors such as data, monitoring students and the manner in which to pace instruction.

Highly motivated, well-informed and well-trained professionals characterize Village Green. Teachers are provided with multiple workshops and in-service training. The teachers believe they make a major difference in the way children are taught and believe that their language arts department is one of the best in the nation. Teachers at Village Green Elementary identified research and programs that work and brought them into the county. They attend professional development programs, such as The Reading Institute, sponsored by Dade County Public Schools, and The University of Miami.

Setting

Village Green Elementary School has attractive and well cared for buildings. The school is located in a predominately Latino neighborhood surrounded by apartment buildings and single-family homes. The area is well cared for and includes many major businesses.

Climate and Culture

The provision of all school communications in English and Spanish exemplifies cultural sensitivity and meets practical considerations for communication and collaboration. All meetings include Spanish language translators to encourage parent participation.

The school holds special activities during Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month and cultural awareness activities are incorporated into the curriculum on a daily.

Parents are socialized into the school by freely accessing the administration, touring the school facilities, joining PTA, and attending Open House. New teachers and staff are partnered with others in similar programs to ease adaptation and inclusion. Students are familiarized with their schedules and welcomed by special area teachers.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

The principal distributes the budget fairly and by emphasizing a manageable class size. Also, the principal provides support for students who do not make adequate gains in reading. Decisions about purchases are made informally in consultation with teachers. Funds are allocated equitably to various programs.

Village Green's budget reflects an allocation for enrichment. For example, the budget supports a full-time gifted program at the school. When available, funds are used for tutors - usually experienced teachers - to lower the student/teacher ratio. Various clubs are funded and there is also a community school program.

FCAT money is spent on additional personnel for tutoring and assisting third grade teachers. Recently, a large grant was obtained whereas most of the funds were allocated to the purchase of technology and on faculty technology development and training. In the last few years, increasing amounts of money has been spent on technology, a priority for Village Green

The PTA provides some funds to the school. The majority of these funds are dedicated to incentive programs such as attendance and good cafeteria behavior.

Community resources are identified and allocated in various ways. Sometimes companies approach the school with ideas however, the school also sends representatives into the community to speak to potential partners. Oftentimes parents provide resources and make connections among administrators, teachers and community partners.

Professional development is identified by the district, but they also take into consideration any training that the teachers would like to be engaged in. School goals are discussed to insure that professional development plans include the areas of technology and service. Professional development in reading is available for all instructional staff.

Teachers and instructional staff are encouraged to attend conferences, especially in the areas of technology and reading. The belief held at Village Green is that those who attend conferences and further their education will bring back information for everyone at the school.

Administrators and teachers expressed that an area of concern is "bullying" and how to properly utilize counseling interventions to curb it. ESE requires additional training because of the changes in the IEP's and the use of the Functional Assessment of Behavior instrument.

Information Management

The Miami-Dade County School Board has websites to show school data pertinent to the school, district and states. The accessibility of information quickly allows teachers immediate implementation of strategies designed to improve academic achievement. The school improvement plan is available on the Internet. This allows easy access to whoever may be interested in the school.

Administrators and teachers have access to student assessment data. The data are used for planning, instruction and individual conferences. Assessment data are used to make decisions about student programs and for professional development planning. The school improvement plan is also based on available data. The determination of whether or not goals are met according to the school improvement plan is based on available data.

The school employs a cogent methodology to assess writing. Evaluations concerning writing are made using a pre-test/post-test methodology. School personnel use basic standardized tests, the Sunshine State Standards and reading program evaluations to track student progress.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

Committees composed of the principal, teachers and community members are assigned to task forces. These task forces work on distinct areas of development and write the mission and strategic plan for the school. To insure familiarity with and understanding, the faculty reviews them on a regular basis. The DSPS handbook *The Handle*, provides relevant information about the school's goals, objectives, mission and leadership vision. All are required to be familiar with it and are kept up-to-date through regular discussions.

The administration ensures that the district mission and the school strategic plan align. The district's office supports this effort and addresses the accomplishment of this alignment by reviewing school data. There is an indisputable link between the district goals and the school improvement plan. The staff studies the data and determines goals for the next year. Given that Village Green is rated an "A" school, limited requirements are placed on its programs.

The School Improvement Plan (SIP) is available to everyone. The goal is for all parties to become familiar with both the SIP and the school mission, discussing it at PTA meetings, parent conferences and open house settings. This practice is so central to Village Green that every nine weeks plans are reviewed in selected grade levels. By mid-year a formalized review is conducted.

The Sunshine State Standards are used to develop curriculum. Additionally, the district provides standards for the various grade levels to insure that the curriculum aligns with the various requirements. The curriculum is sequenced to insure that students meet expected requirements. Teachers' assist in determining standards to be addressed and the manner in which to develop and implement a course of study. Teachers are given the flexibility to depart from common textbook sequencing and utilize textbooks in a manner that best fits with district and state standards. FCAT goals and objectives are used as a guide. Students are not "taught to the FCAT", but instead focus on knowledge comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Instructional material and methods of instruction are decided upon in meetings where teachers evaluate and assess materials. Instructional groups are flexible and continuous assessment is conducted by teachers to insure children receive the support they need.

Decisions are made from a combination of research, data and knowledge derived from teaching experience. Teachers believe that experience instructs and research guides. Hence, experiences and results of research studies are carefully balanced. Also important is the practice of evaluating ongoing programs.

A Classroom Management Plan is developed and administered by the teachers who are encouraged to be consistent with the adopted plan. The administration provides resources and ideas teachers can use in specific situations. Teachers are responsible for the development of a classroom management plan that is effective, reasonable and consistent.

Instruction is adjusted to students needs, regardless of performance above or below grade level. The teachers freely enrich the curriculum. Remediation is provided when needed and usually is availed via paraprofessionals.

New math and reading programs are continually assessed to ensure standards and critical thinking skills are incorporated. Cross grouping is also used. Two-hour blocks have been successful because the teachers are committed to instruction in this format. When employed, one teacher is responsible for math, science and social studies, and another teacher covers language arts.

Communication

School administrators maintain open communication with teachers. Moreover, administrators encourage teachers to avail themselves to the parents and are encouraged to meet with parents before and after interim reports are submitted.

The school relies heavily on parent/teacher conferences and parent logs. Many teachers offer checklists to parents to help them track their child's work. Each child from second to fifth grade has a planner. The child writes in his/her homework allowing parents to see what the child needs to do and write any notes to the teacher. It is a form of daily communication between teachers and parents.

The school may be reached online and parents are encouraged to go online and check for projects, homework assignments, events, etc. The PTA also maintains a school webpage.

Decision-Making

The school has both an Educational Excellence and Budgeting Council that meet regularly to discuss the budget, fiscal improvement plan and other areas related to school improvement.

Teachers are involved in all aspects of decision-making. The school has department chairs and a leadership division that teachers can apply for at the beginning of each year.

Collaborative decision-making is facilitated by the size of the school and the quality of the relationship among teachers, staff and administrators. In a distributed model of leadership nearly everyone has leadership responsibilities in some area.

Parent and Community Involvement

The teachers and administrators believe that the school's success can be explained by the commitment and involvement of the community and parents. The school enjoys the active support of parents and the community. The school has targeted programs for their involvement and considers parent participation as one of its core values. Parents indicated that they feel welcome and encouraged to participate in school activities. The business partners have provided money as well as in-kind products and services.

EVALUATING CHANGE: CELEBRATION AND REFLECTION

Accountability

In order to ensure that all students have equal access to the knowledge and skills they need, all departments within the school have equal access to training and professional development. Students are pre-tested to determine what skills they have and what skills they need to develop. Continual growth toward high standards and learning is assessed by continuous testing and examination of data.

State-mandated and other assessments are frequent at Village Green. In addition to the FCAT and other state-mandated assessments the school has the reading program assessment tool - which comes with the basal reading program; regular writing assessments; and an accomplished learning program that is used for reading, math, and science. Also, teachers informally assess students by developing their own instruments.

Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students are provided special accommodations for FCAT testing. This includes smaller test settings, extended time and breaks.

Student progress and achievement is monitored through lesson plans, grade level meetings and attendance at staff meetings. Teachers coordinate the curriculum to ensure uniform learning across grade levels.

Teachers are given the previous year's testing profiles to enable them to group the students according to need. ESE teachers update objectives every nine weeks and either meet with the parents to modify the IEP (Individual Education Plan) or modify the objectives.

Teachers realize that they are responsible for the academic achievement of their students and set professional development goals related to student achievement. The school's administrators value clear and determined goals for each teacher.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographic Information

Village Green Elementary School is part of the Miami-Dade County Public School System and is located in the western area of the county. Thirty-five instructional staff members and two administrators are employed at the school. According to the *Florida Department of Education School Advisory Council Report 2001-2002*, Village Green enrolled approximately 600 students. The majority of the students (86.9%) are Hispanic, 10.2% are White, .9% Asian, .9% Multiracial, .8% Black, and .2% American Indian. The school report grade for 2001-2002 was an "A". Fifty four percent of the students were on free or reduced-price lunch. The mobility index was 21. Students with disabilities were listed as 9.9%, and 35.7% of students were classified as gifted. Limited English Proficiency students accounted for 29.9% of the school's population. There are 20 classes including 5 gifted classes. The average class size was 19.7 students.

Goals

Goal 1, *Readiness to Start School* evaluated 66 kindergarten students of which 53 children met the State's expectation for readiness.

Goal 2, *Student Performance*, in grade 4, tested 108 students in FCAT Writing Assessment. The school average score was 3.8, compared to the district average of 3.3 and a state average of 3.4. Scores ranged 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 3-5. FCAT school accountability data in grade 3 reading tested 80 students and had 74% scoring at Level 3 or above. Grade 4 reading tested 86 students and had 72% scoring at Level 3 or above. Grade 5 reading had 86 students tested with 78% scoring at Level 3 or above.

Grade 3 mathematics tested 84 students with 71% scoring at level 3 or above. Grade 4 mathematics tested 86 students with 69% scoring at Level 3 or above. Last, grade 5 mathematics tested 87 students with 69% scoring at Level 3 or higher.

Goal 3, *Learning Environment*, reported 4 or 11.4% new instructional staff hired for the 2001-2002 school year as compared to the district average of 12.5% and the state average of 16%. Absentee rates were lower - 15.2% for the number of student absences of 11-20 days as compared to 18.6% at the district and 19.1% at the state. Student absences of 21+ days was lower - 1.8% as compared to 5.9% at the district and 6.0 at the state. Leave days for teachers were 13.5 days compared to the district's average of 13.8 and the state's average of 10.2. Administration absences were significantly lower - 4.5 days - than the district absences at 11.7 and the state absences at 10.

Goal 4, *School and Safety and Environment*, reported 18 total incidents at the school, with 13 incidents of vandalism, two incidents of breaking and entering, one incident of battery, one incident of theft and one of trespassing.

Goal 5, *Teachers and Staff*, reported that 72.7% of the staff had a Bachelor's Degree and 27.3% of the staff had a Master's Degree. There are no specialist or doctorate degrees.