

## Wahnetta Elementary School—Polk County

### KEY THEMES:

- The superintendent's single basal approach to education across the District, thus insuring continuity within a mobile county population.
- Also stemming from the superintendent's office is the strong sense that he empowers his principals to make decisions based on their school's unique needs and circumstances. This is an especially poignant statement in light of the makeup of Wahnetta's students and their families.
- The recognition of lower than average school readiness and the response of a formal Pre-K Program
- Reading ability grouping
- Reading as the school's focal point
- The alignment of curriculum
- A strong recognition and commitment to the culturally diverse student population
- The firmly rooted parental involvement and concern for education that is evident

### BEST PRACTICES:

The bulk of the success at Wahnetta comes from improvement in the lower 25%. That is not to suggest that the remaining students are ignored. Rather, the inverse is more the case. Successes in the least achieving percentile provide the impetus for expectations to rise, almost systemically, through the remaining 75%. Whether targeting the lower performers, the median, or the gifted, several programs and practices stand out at Wahnetta Elementary and each one is tailored by the highly dedicated staff to the unique composition of the community and its people.

- Cultural Recognition
- District Grant Writing Program
- 90 Minute Daily Reading Block
- Paraprofessionals
- Aligned curriculum
- Pre-K Program
- After School FCAT Tutoring Program
- Vertical teaming
- School newsletter
- Low turnover—consistency of staff
- District foresight—anticipation of State mandates
- Uniform Dress Code
- Feeder School Interaction

### LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

#### Leadership

This school rose from a "C" to "A" in recent scoring. The current principal is a first year principal of Wahnetta Elementary School. The principal has 4 years of experience as an administrator and 23 years in the field of education. She has a Master's Degree and displays a positive, upbeat demeanor.

One of the most basic examples of leadership comes in the form of the District's single basal approach to education curriculum. This provides for and insures that mobility within the county does not negatively impact on a student and is a credit to the District personnel's foresight regarding their population.

It is also worthy of note that the District makes available Assistant Superintendents that can be "summoned to the field" to provide support to a principal who is requiring assistance for any number of temporary reasons such as staffing shortages, testing or workload. The District also has the technological capability to track each individual classroom's performance and can clearly demonstrate those members of the teaching staff who excel at their profession.

Through Wahnetta's staff's daily interaction with students and each other, the leadership qualities necessary for success at the school—dedication, single mindedness geared to the benefit of students, teamwork, time management, adaptability and flexibility, are fostered, encouraged and nurtured. Reciting specifics, each teacher will also mentor another, generally

several, in the course of his or her tenure at Wahneta Elementary. This process insures that the values that have made the school a success of late, will be passed along to the benefit of upcoming students—new teachers learning from experienced ones.

### **Personnel**

The people that comprise Wahneta Elementary are its strength. The principal has 100% autonomy in the hiring process once an applicant has satisfied State and District requirements. Prospective teachers are clearly advised during the course of interviews with both the principal and current teachers on their grade level, what the expectations are at Wahneta.

Perhaps one of the most actively sought qualities of a Wahneta teacher is patience. This was referenced many times. The unique challenges presented at Wahneta demand much of its staff and patience here is indeed a virtue. It is apparent that the entire hiring procedure is geared toward finding people whose goal in life is to teach—that is the level of dedication Wahneta administration seeks.

Wahneta has an active mentoring program in place, which is affectionately referred to as “Flight Training”. It provides for active participation from a variety of sources in the development of new staff. The bulk of the progression comes from teachers within the newcomer’s grade level. These teachers are familiar with the requirements and unique demands placed on staff at that particular plane.

Students’ needs are the top priority when it comes to staffing Wahneta. Teacher hiring focuses on people who are committed team players and are comfortable with the large Spanish speaking populace and the need/mandate for home visits. Though not a requirement, a number of teachers and especially support staff are bi-lingual. This is especially true of the paraprofessionals, non-certified individuals, who work in the classroom under the supervision of a certified teacher. These dedicated members of Wahneta’s community are an invaluable resource to the school and the assistance provided by their language skills is immeasurable. This was witnessed first hand as parents came in to meet with staff or pickup their children.

### **Setting**

Wahneta Elementary School, as a structure, is a functional 45-year-old building with few amenities. It is clean, orderly, and well maintained. The grounds are typical Florida fare, but far from lush or manicured. While its aesthetics are simple, the school’s overall environment is warm, friendly, and welcoming. This is of paramount importance, as Wahneta, given its mission, is often the most orderly, clean, and safe place a student may find him or herself in on any given day. This exceptional detail sets the stage for many interesting components that comprise the school and its programs.

The geographic area from which the school draws its students also produces a very high crime rate. Much, if not all of this, is kept at bay from the school grounds proper—much to the credit of parents, staff, and alumni, but the heavy propensity for crime in the immediate area is a factor worthy of note.

However, the most single dynamic of Wahneta is the type of employment undertaken by approximately one-third of its students’ families—they are agricultural migrant workers. The Wahneta staff has to deal with the unique obstacles of Spanish being the primary language spoken in the home and the extensive travel among the working parents.

### **Climate and Culture**

Wahneta Elementary is a clean, quiet, comfortable, safe haven for its students, many of whom enjoy these basic amenities nowhere else. Surrounded by this security, they are free to learn and encouraged to flourish. The staff and management have recognized and instituted the safe haven first, and in the next breath provided the tools for each child to meet or exceed the academic standards in place. Outside of this comparatively easily documented objective, is the attitude of staff to assist the students in reaching beyond themselves to their full potential.

The culture of Wahneta is one of caring. Teachers are caretakers beyond educators. Of the 170 students active in the after school tutoring program a large number are given rides home by the same teachers who spent the day with them. This goes well beyond the requirements listed in the formal job description. Suffice to say, teachers at Wahneta enjoy their charges.

Teachers and the administration extend themselves to include “*Diversity in Literature*” to capture the Spanish influence of the community. In a further demonstration of this concern, the staff recognizes the varying geographical dialects within the Spanish language and reach out to those students impacted. Perhaps the extreme is accounted for in so much as the teachers know what crops are being picked at what time of year and as a result, know if and when parents will be readily

available. They schedule conferences accordingly and understand and compensate for the additional burdens and stresses that occur within homes tied so closely to harvesting seasons.

On a more academic front is the utilization of “*Questions for Critical Thinking*” and “*Activities for Multiple Intelligences*”, which install vision in the children’s learning. These are very specific practices and include flip charts for teachers to employ that promote learning at a level beyond the readily replicated ‘A + B = C’ formulas for the Sciences and English, not just the obvious Mathematics comparison. “*Thinking Maps*” and Bloom’s Taxonomy encourage higher order thinking and, in turn, raises the bar of expectations at Wahneta. In doing so, the program also raises the standard by which manageable data such as the Sunshine State Standards and FCAT are applied.

Another element of Wahneta’s successful program is the implementation (District wide) of a firmly enforced dress code. The code mandates, among other criteria, that all shirts are tucked in and a belt is worn as required. On the grander scale, the dress code alleviates the concerns many students have regarding their dress—inappropriate or extravagant, poorly fashioned or indicative of a low-income household, removing an onus, self-perceived or otherwise, from their shoulders. If a child’s family is unable to meet the clothing standard, the local retirement community, previously referenced, steps in and obtains the necessary garments—another example of community involvement.

During the principal’s limited tenure, Wahneta Elementary reached the plateau of being graded an ‘A’ school for the first time. The preceding year the school had received a ‘C’. Quick to point out that the administration’s efforts were built largely on the foundation of processes in place when the principal assumed control of Wahneta. While this may be partially accountable for the program’s recent grade elevation, it is readily apparent that this administrator’s concern for both student and staff translates to a successful relationship. Staff members confirm that despite being new to the current position, the principal carries experience and is both accessible and receptive. Certainly there is an excellent administrator to school and school to administrator fit in place at Wahneta.

## **BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION MAKING**

### **Resources**

The District allocation is naturally the primary resource for Wahneta. This is most certainly true of resources in terms of financial support and materials. Given the prior understanding regarding the community at large, this is expected. However, additional resources are located and utilized by an ambitious staff. These are primarily personnel and associated time resources and will be reference in upcoming sections.

The previously cited “*Mutual Commitments & Expectations*” plan also details the resources required to complete the listed commitment; i.e. the support systems required. Having this documentation helps insure the attainment of the resource as a necessity to completion of the listed commitments.

The principal, staff, and even parents have a hand in certain aspects of the budgetary process in the form of the “*School Advisory Council*” (SAC) and a diminutive number of additional resources. Wahneta Elementary also allocates the financial reward received as a result of being classified as an “A” school (FCAT monies).

Professional Development and Improvement are needs addressed within a conduit of teacher to principal to District in keeping with District protocol. Though based on student needs and staff requests, they are supported by relevant assessment documents. The “*Teacher Surveys*” couple with student assessment data to contribute to this effort.

Technology needs are established and documented in reference to the budgetary process. A “*Five Year Technology Plan*” exists—updated yearly, commensurate with rapid advances in the field. The stratagem affords direction and stability in addition to outlining specific goals for the District and its schools. Wahneta, as an example, currently has at its disposal a bank of over 60 computers.

Perhaps most apparent in the Polk County District is its extremely active “*Grants Procurement Program*”. This small contingency of operatives pursues grant money from a variety of sources and has many documented successes since its inception under the superintendent’s watch. The monies obtained are scattered across far-flung programs within the District and relieve the financial burden on taxpayers while providing additional resources unattainable in the past. It is a credit to the Superintendent’s office and the Board of Education that they developed and maintain this program.

### **Information Management**

Staff at Wahneta Elementary use traditional grade books for classroom grading computation, however, beyond this rudimentary practice lay a wealth of information and material generated and provided by the District for the control and flow of data. All associated school staff have access to the information contained in the District system. As indicated in a prior

section, the data contained is used as a measurement tool for students, but beyond that, Wahneta demonstrates its full capability by sifting through the data to ascertain strengths and weaknesses within the relative instructional programs and, if warranted, teachers themselves.

Associated with these instruments is the broader “*School Improvement Plan*”. The plan itself is inclusive of Wahneta’s “*Mission Statement*”, which outlines that, “the students of Wahneta Elementary will show progress in skills, thinking, and attitude now and for the rest of their lives.” Access to the plan is unlimited and copies are available in the school’s office for ready reference, but beyond accessibility is the direct tie back to the information systems in place.

## COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

### Instruction

The ongoing assessment and evaluation of assorted programs such as, “*Collier’s Strategies for Reading*”, the “*Accelerated Reading Program*”, etc., occur beyond the accepted FCAT preparation and testing and accordance with the Sunshine State Standards. As a strong compliment to these and other existing programs, some externally produced and others internally manufactured, is the application of Bloom’s Taxonomy to aid in the measurement of higher order critical thinking. This historical foundational program is extremely evident in many classrooms visited. The Bloom methodology is coupled with “*Thinking Maps*” that are employed as tools to calculate and encourage very specific thinking processes. These range from basic defining and describing skills to the ability to witness cause/effect and analogies.

At the heart of Wahneta’s many instructional capabilities is an aligned curriculum. The school, and Polk County in general, had provided themselves a substantial head start toward this end by beginning to align curriculum across grade levels prior to the institution of the Sunshine State Standards. When FCAT blanketed the State, Wahneta was prepared. Vertical teaming played a vital role in this early process and continues to do so. Regular meetings, conducted at various school levels, insure compliance and enhance communication as well as present needs and areas of opportunity for growth and modification.

An indicator of progressive interaction and follow up with student learning is the weekly “*Mad Math Minutes*” that tests (informally) students in order to insure past skills are kept fresh and honed over an extended period.

On the County level is the “*District Strategic Plan*”. It specifically outlines eight well-developed areas, which support the District’s objectives. A full five of the main points have as their focus classroom instruction. This dedication and direction on the part of the District is a key element of the success of Wahneta’s student body. Continued assurance that Wahneta is moving toward the District’s Plan comes from data collected from such testing as FCAT, but also from sources such as “*Parent and Teacher Surveys*”.

Wahneta’s primary concern throughout their instructional program is Reading based. The “*Accelerated Reader*” Program begins in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade officially, but “*Reading Progress Charts*” from a multitude of grade levels are reviewed by the Assistant Principal every week. Within this concentration however, is an even finer tuning of the agenda toward students operating in the lower 25%. This notion provides for extreme focus.

### Communication

This section describes one of the major contributing factors to the success of Wahneta Elementary. Tremendous, yet gleefully pain free effort is expended in insuring that the extensive Spanish speaking population that comprise the parental base of the school is kept apprised of every facet of their child’s education. Translators are available within the school at all times and are present at any function or conference where language may present a barrier to understanding. In keeping with this theme, all parental handout material is bi-lingual, as are directional and informational signs around the school itself.

Communication in the broader sense of the school and staff is manifested in the timely meetings and conferences that occur among and between grade level instructors. This active communication insures continuity and provides open doors to minor issues before they can mature into major difficulties. Along this same line, yet broader still, are the visits to Wahneta from the middle schools it feeds. Once again, this proactive approach affords the opportunity to both acknowledge and prepare curriculum and students for what is expected at the next level.

“*Parent and Teacher Surveys*” are also major factors in the communicative success of Wahneta Elementary. These ongoing assessments couple with existing documents such as the “*Parent/Student Handbook*” and “*Elementary Code of Student Conduct*” to inform all concerns as to the expectations associated with attending Wahneta. More current reflective information is ushered along in the school’s mini-newspaper/flyer, issued bi-monthly - “*Smoke Signals*”, which is published in both English and Spanish.

Parents are required to sign daily homework assignments and “*Friday Night Notes*” are sent home weekly to inform parents of their child’s recent successes or shortcomings. Each contact - teacher to parent or parent to teacher reaffirms a bond that solidifies commitment and builds trust, all of which filters down to the youngster who remains the focal point for both parent and educator.

Standards for relating academic achievement (i.e. the 9-week report cards and 4-week interim reports) are in place as expected, but the high level of parental interaction referenced above historically precludes any communication breakdowns regarding student development and advancement.

### **Decision Making**

At the District level there exists a “*Strategic Plan*” which outlines in very specific detail the parameters to and from which decisions are made. The existence of this document serves as the backdrop for all that follows—on down and inclusive of Wahneta’s own “*School Development Plan*” and further, into existing “*Classroom Management Plans*”. This purposeful one-thought guidance system directs the decision making process from top to bottom and extends its arms in every direction. In providing this framework it insures the cohesiveness and continuity necessary for success.

It is imperative to note that each level of strategic plan referenced above is the result of input from a very wide range of sources. Once again, by utilizing expertise from all levels, all sides and all fronts, the Polk county school district and its schools set themselves up for success by maximizing their resources and personnel.

A unique perspective on the decision-making processes within the District at large is the consensus that everyone plays a vital role in the success of Polk County students. The superintendent specifically addressed the concern that the District’s bus drivers, the very first representative of the vision and authority of school, be equipped with the necessary charter to begin students on a day in which challenge and success are commonplace.

Within Wahneta Elementary proper, decision-making processes are marked by dual sided dialogue. Administration and staff confer on available programs for instance, reach a democratic consensus, and move on the project before them with the referenced plans as the constant guidelines. Though it is readily apparent that data drives the curriculum at Wahneta, the interaction that occurs touches many areas including Communication and Accountability as all members of the Wahneta family have input and thus, a stake in the program’s success or failure. This expands to the District level when one references the feeder school visits.

Perhaps one of the more easily and readily recognizable facets of the decision making processes comes in the form of the flexible grouping that is ongoing at Wahneta. Though equally at home in the Instruction section of this report, the school-wide 90 minute daily reading block is a perfect example of the seamless decisions that move youngsters from one level of ability to another as the needs and requirements of the child dictate.

### **Parent and Community Involvement**

Home visits play an important role in the progress of students at Wahneta. Parents recognize the genuine care and concern staff has for the students’ academic and personal well-being and respond with overwhelming enthusiasm. The end result is a marvelously low discipline problem. Parental support of staff and education in general translates in any language to the importance of proper behavior in the learning environment. This commitment by parents is referenced often and openly by Wahneta staff. Many teachers offered reports of parents, often lacking formal education themselves, holding out their calloused hands to their children and reminding them that minus education, a migrant worker’s life is what awaited them. This powerful picture provides for anxious, willing learners and supportive parents—keys to success in any program.

Community involvement is clearly demonstrated by the activities of a local retirement subdivision. Reading/Picture Flash Cards by the hundreds were painstakingly cut out and assembled free of charge by a bevy of senior citizens. This unheralded group is also well known to staff to quietly supply gifts to the many children in the school whose circumstances would preclude a pleasant holiday season.

A bi-lingual computer program is in place for parents in order that they can stay abreast of technology as their children progress. This creates a wonderful interface for both children and parents.

The Polk County Department of Parks and Recreation continues to carry the banner of community commitment by maintaining a free “*Homework Club*” for students, which is manned by older students and volunteers. More formally is Wahneta’s own after school “*FCAT Tutoring Program*” that boasts over 170 student attendees—all voluntary, all anxious to learn, all supported by parents and able teachers from their school.

The ongoing “*Parent Survey*” is well received and responded to, once again, consistent with the community interest and involvement in the school, its programs, and its students.

## EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

### Accountability

Wahneta shares a tightly regimented scope of responsibility with its unique families. Of course, there remain varying measures of liability from student through teacher through principal and on to the District level, but at Wahneta the success stems from the relationship, trust, and emphasis on education instilled by parents and fostered by staff.

Each segment of the educational process and/or level has its own measure of responsibility to the “*Strategic Plan*” of the District, the “*School Improvement Plan*”, and the ultimate success of the student. At the District level are the budgetary processes that provide for research based assessment tools to be implemented by operating staff. District, school, and classroom evaluation is ongoing and the personnel involved are quick to recognize those tools that work for Wahneta and those that do not. This recognition is based in no small part on the needs of the specific population Wahneta services.

Of keynote interest here is the need for consistency within the school program and the school itself. Patterns of behavior and academic progress are developed early, encouraged and allowed to bloom. Unacceptable progress—itsself a contradiction, is not tolerated by staff and perhaps more importantly, nor by the parents. The process however, as stated, demands consistency in an environment where language and culture variances throw open the door to misconception and misinformation.

“*Handbooks for Staff*” and both “*Parent & Teacher Surveys*” afford valuable information that precludes second guessing as to accountability and what is or is not expected of the corresponding individual. A “*Mutual Commitments & Expectations*” form is prepared by staff as well and clearly delineates what the individual will do in order to meet objectives—those of the District, school, and student.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

### School Demographic Information

Wahneta Elementary School is located in Polk County School District—a county that boasts a population of 500,000 of which nearly 82,000 were enrolled in the county’s public schools for the year 2001-2002. The Polk County School District is the 8<sup>th</sup> largest in Florida and the 37<sup>th</sup> largest nationwide. The District is by far the largest employer in the county with >10,000 employees.

Within the Polk County School District there are 66 elementary schools, 18 middle/junior high schools, and 13 senior high schools. In addition, there are 52 special centers—which are made up of charter schools, vocational/technical centers, adult schools, and alternative services. Wahneta Elementary figures demonstrate a total enrollment for the 2001-2002 period of 674, with an October enrollment of 556. Average class size K-5 is 22.9. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at a staggering 90.6%—clearly demonstrating that Wahneta is located in one of the more economically stressed neighborhoods in the State. This is an important fact to retain as their success is outlined.

Ethnic/racial breakdowns for all students/all year are as follows: Caucasian, 35.6%; African American, 1.6%; Hispanic, 62.6%; and Multi-racial, 0.1%. The gifted student rate is 0.9% and those with disabilities are reported at 7.4%. Percentages of in and out of school suspensions are 2.2% and 1.3% respectively. The extremely low rate of out-of-school suspensions is another interesting fact to recall periodically. Student population stability percentages contend that 92% of students enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. For Wahneta, this figures runs higher—at 94.4% over the same period—still another remarkable figure. LEP stands at 28.5%.

### Ethnic/Racial %

Hispanic	62.6
Caucasian	35.6
African American	1.6
Multi-racial	0.1

#### Goals

##### Goal 1:

**Readiness to Start School:** 111 kindergarten students were evaluated and 90 met the State's expectation for readiness. The percentage translates to 81.1%—2.7 percentage points lower than the District average and 2.9 percentage points lower than the State average.

##### Goal 3:

**Student Performance:** Reading & Mathematics scores from Grades 3 thru 5 fell short of both the District and State averages with the lone exception of Reading Grade 4, which narrowly exceeded the District average and equaled the State average of 299. Relative to FCAT NRT, similar results are noted. Mathematics and Reading scores for Grades 3 thru 5 again were below, often markedly so, both the District and State percentile rankings with the sole exception of Mathematics Grade 3, which bettered the District average by a single point. Based solely on school accountability grading, Wahneta Elementary scored a combined 425 points on the FCAT Reading, Math, and Writing High Standards & Gains portions of the test, exceeding the State mandate of 410 points required for classification as an 'A' school. This is in sharp contrast to the 2001 grade of 'C'. This improvement is due, only in part, to modifications in the FCAT scoring/testing procedures which measure and account for improvement and not merely status.

##### Goal 4:

**Learning Environment:** There are 2 administrators and 34 instructors along with 29 individuals classified as support staff (the comparatively high number of 'support staff' is inflated by a number of individuals whose proper classification would fall under 'paraprofessionals' and whose job descriptions more closely parallel 'instructors'). Average years of teacher experience is slated at 14 with several at 20+ and a surprising number at 30+. Turnover for the 2001-2002 year was slightly <9% and was manually reported as an anomaly (prior turnover rates are <2% annually). Teacher absences are comparable to the district at 8.6 days and 8.2 days respectively.

##### Goal 6:

**Teachers and Staff:** Teachers with advanced degrees comprise 13.3% of the operating staff.