

Wesley Matthews Elementary School—Miami-Dade

KEY THEMES:

- Leadership by example style of principal, assistant principal and project director for ACCESS grant.
- Parent communication in English and Spanish.
- School-wide Multicultural Committee.
- Affirmation of students' culture and promotion of multiculturalism.
- Emphasis on development of bilingual and biliterate students as evidenced by Extended Foreign Language Program and activities of ACCESS grant.
- School technology support that includes at least two computers in each classrooms, open access computer lab, over 100 laptop computers, computer graphics lab in art room, specialized electronics lab in music room, and entire building wired for wireless technology.
- Comprehensive Reading Plan with emphasis on guided reading component.
- Methods for instruction that include technology, hand-on activities and 4MAT strategies in all curriculum areas.
- Extensive remedial instruction that includes before, during, and after school and Saturdays with certified hourly teachers and paraprofessionals.
- Collegiality is evidenced by collaborative working together of staff members.
- Numerous grants received in excess of \$1,370,000 in last three years:
 - 1) ACCESS Project—a five year \$1.1 million federal grant for bilingual education
 - 2) Adult Literacy Grants—\$250,000
 - 3) Reading Enhancement Grants—\$20,000
- High level of parent involvement, including attendance at workshops and employment in the school.
- High school-wide expectations of excellence and student achievement.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Infusion of technology as a motivating force to support instruction
 - media center and computers available for daily student and parent use after school until 6:00 p.m.
 - computer lab and 100 laptops available
 - entire building wired for wireless technology
- Constant monitoring of student performance
 - principal and teachers meet several times a year to discuss individual student performance
 - before, after and during school and Saturday tutoring programs
- Using support personnel effectively
 - resource personnel with expertise available to assist teachers
 - paraprofessionals trained to work one on one with students
- Scheduling that provided daily common planning time for each grade level
- Emphasis on using proven effective, research-based, instructional strategies
 - interactive, hands-on instruction
 - technology
 - 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
- Providing parent workshops
 - ESOL classes
 - Family literacy nights
- Seeking grants to improve student achievement
 - ACCESS Project - \$1.1 million five-year grant
 - technology acquisition and teacher training
 - assist in development of bilingual and biliterate students
 - Adult literacy grant totaling \$250,000
 - Parent workshops
 - Family literacy nights
 - ESOL classes
 - Reading enhancement grants totaling \$20,000
- Extended Foreign Language Program
 - developing bilingual and biliterate students
 - language arts instruction in both English and Spanish
 - science instruction in Spanish

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

Administration, teachers, and all staff make up the leadership of the school—"everybody is a team." The principal's leadership style is one of leading by example: "I never ask anyone to get dirty without me getting dirty." The principal holds very high—yet reasonable—expectations of everyone.

The principal of Wesley Matthews has a master's degree and twenty years administrative experience, 15 of those years as a principal at both the middle and elementary level. Both the principal and lead teacher have served the school since its inception. Three different assistant principals have been assigned during the school's seven years; the current assistant principal is in her second year.

Teachers perceive the administration as "very strong and very supportive." The principal is known as a "budget guru" and "money person," who knows how to manage the district allocated budget wisely as well as locate extra outside funding. The principal has developed a reputation not only for finding money but knowing how to spend it. As a result, the principal is often called unexpectedly with extra funding that needs to be spent immediately. Other schools may not know how to make such decisions as quickly. "You get a reputation for knowing how to spend dollars and they will give them to you."

Perceived as very generous, the principal always ensures that teachers have what they need to be effective in the classroom—"You don't have to beg." The question of what teachers need is "always on the table," even if they don't have the money at the time.

Parents perceive the principal as in "charge of everything" because of knowledge of everything that happens—good or bad. They feel that the principal is the key element in a well-run school.

Personnel are held accountable for achieving goals. While they are given a lot of "leeway," "everybody knows what the bottom line is." In this regard, the principal is very "intense" and teachers feel this [my] "intensity." The administration knows what is going on because they spend a lot of time in the classrooms.

Teachers are encouraged to join outside local and national organizations, including the Dade Reading Council and the Florida Reading Association in order to continue growing professionally.

The School Improvement Team meets regularly and everyone is welcomed. Parents and students are included. Teachers and parents are actively recruited and encouraged to participate. Similarly, various cultural groups are recruited to ensure diversity in the committee. The committee sends meeting minutes to keep everyone informed.

Personnel

Astute and knowledgeable about budgeting and with the assistance of grant funds, the principal has been able to hire needed personnel to assist the students and staff at the school. Many teachers are former student teachers and/or paraprofessionals. The high morale and mentoring provided for newly hired personnel make the school a desirable place to work. Staff development is a priority and the EESAC allocates about \$9-10,000 a year for subs for whatever they want to do related to staff development.

A reading leader supervises, monitors and coordinates the reading program and the many facets of remediation offered. The lead teacher, employed at the school since its inception seven years ago, works with the assistant principal in coordinating curriculum and the SPEP. He is also responsible for the many technology programs, including hardware and software.

The project director, funded through the ACCESS grant, provides inservice training and support for teachers on the objectives of the grant. She also organizes informative meetings and parent workshops. The grant supports an outside evaluator who assesses the progress of the staff in assisting the students to become bilingual and biliterate. Results of multimodal instruction, acquisition of computer skills, and students' facility in oral and written English and Spanish are among objectives of the grant that are measured.

Well-trained paraprofessionals work with students and teachers in preparing and conducting activities. The paraprofessionals prepare lessons, organize materials and tutor below level students.

Setting

Wesley Matthews Elementary, currently in its seventh year of operation, is located on approximately ten acres in west Miami-Dade County. It consists of four classroom buildings, one of which also houses the cafeteria/auditorium; a fifth building houses the media center; a sixth building houses the physical education shelter, storage area and office; and one relocatable classroom. All rooms and offices have access to the Internet; the school has a dedicated T1 line and a wireless network that is used by most classroom desktop and laptop computers.

The school has a strong commitment to enhancing technology, spending in excess of \$130,000 on technology during the 2001-2002 school year. Every classroom has at least two computers for student use and a 15-station computer lab. As a result of a five-year \$1.1 million federal grant for bilingual education, over a five-year period all students will have access to 165 laptop computers; currently 75 laptops are in the school. Additionally, a computer graphics lab in the art room and a specialized music lab are available.

The focus of the school is “A Global Village for the Total Child” with an emphasis on building a community of learners. This goal is accomplished through the EESAC (Educational Excellence School Advisory Council), PTA, volunteer outreach program, an intergenerational program, a school site adult ESOL and literacy class, “Parent Nights” at the school, adult computer skills workshops, before and after-school care, and parenting skills classes.

The atmosphere of the school is cheerful, businesslike and very courteous. The school is spotlessly clean; all areas are attractive.

Climate and Culture

An atmosphere of friendliness and hospitality permeates the school. Teachers feel treated like professionals by both the administrators and parents. Formal and informal communication networks support this atmosphere. Parents are visible all around the school grounds, the office, and classrooms. They are encouraged to join their children for lunch. Tours of the school are offered for new parents.

A Multicultural Committee plans activities year round. Students learn and share about their culture. This helps foster an environment of cultural affirmation so essential in the development of high and positive students’ self-perception and academic achievement. Students feel that the school values their culture. This makes them feel comfortable and helps them develop pride.

New teachers are assigned mentors and new students are assigned buddies—to learn the school culture. This is a culture based on mutual respect and positive—not assertive—discipline. Everyone, from PreK on, lives by the “school rules,” which were developed collaboratively by the staff and remain consistent across grade levels. There are five basic rules—all grounded on kindness and respect. As such, the school does not have serious discipline problems.

Everyone’s effort, including students, is recognized and rewarded through “many awards, many accolades.” The school has been rated an A school and received A+ merit funds. To reward the students, more books were purchased for the library. A whole day of fun activities was another way to reward students for their hard work. There is also a “Student of the Month” program. That child, along with their family, is invited to a breakfast at the school. Both students and teachers are rewarded for attendance through a “Perfect Attendance” luncheon.

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. Wesley Matthews receives a large amount of money annually from grants; much of this money is used to purchase personnel and provide training for teachers and paraprofessionals. Hourly paraprofessionals work with students during the school day; certified teachers are used for tutoring in the before school, after school and Saturday programs.

The ACCESS Project (Achieving Through Communication and Collaboration Using English and Spanish Skills), a federal \$1.1 million five-year grant, is an enormous resource for the school. The main goal of this grant is to produce bilingual and biliterate students. Half of the money is used to purchase technology (software and hardware) and provide teachers with training in not only technology but also multimodal instruction. Multimodal instruction is integrated throughout the curriculum. ACCESS Project teachers incorporate all learning modalities as part of the instructional delivery, based on Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and Bernice McCarthy’s 4MAT approach, key elements of multimodal instruction.

The family literacy grant promotes activities in the evening such as adult ESOL classes. The PTA supports the school with fund raising and provides motivational and congratulatory events for both students and teachers.

The principal makes sure that money received for special programs support the students for whom they are intended, such as ESE and ESOL. Professional development, linked to academic goals, is a major priority. The assistant principal interviewed referred to the principal as “the guru in the budget.”

Money received from the state for Wesley Matthews’ “A” rating was distributed after input from teachers, staff members, parents and the Educational Excellence School Advisory Council (EESAC). Thirteen percent (13%) of the Florida School Recognition Program money was designated for the students; 87% was divided among full and part-time staff.

Information Management

The school has access to online data in a multitude of areas, including student data (health, report card grades, test scores, psychological data, attendance, discipline referrals), budget, and demographics.

In addition a wealth of information, for both the school and the community, is available through the district’s website, www.dadeschools.net. Detailed FCAT results, EESAC information (including minutes of meetings, roster and bylaws), overcrowding and safety issues are some of the obtainable information. Each school’s SREP is online. All parents have access to the school improvement plan. At Wesley Matthews parents are encouraged to use the school’s computers until 6:00 p.m. daily; checkout of laptops is also permitted and encouraged.

FCAT data allows teachers to focus on the weaknesses of their students as well as on the strengths of the programs. The school uses results obtained from the FCAT Explorer and Riverdeep Math technology programs. FCAT Explorer uses FCAT-like questions to provide practice for the test; its use is supported by the state. Additionally, the teachers compose exercises that are criterion referenced, not just multiple choice, in an effort to strengthen their students’ ability to do higher-level thinking.

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, FCAT pre/progress tests, remedial instruction results, and daily work. Parent conferences are held to share information and to discuss continued strategies that are needed.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

The school district goals are: School to Career, Effective Learning Environment and Efficient Management Practices. The focus for each goal is (1) preparation of students for graduation, employment, postsecondary education and becoming responsible citizens and lifelong learners; (2) enhancement of safety of students and staff and increasing the quality of the learning environment; and (3) ensuring that school system operations conform to the highest business and professional standards of effectiveness, ethics and efficiency respectively. Wesley Matthews’ SREP is aligned to the district’s goals with special emphasis on increasing student achievement.

Working with the EESAC the SREP is a culminating effort based on input from teachers, parents, administrators, students and the community. The results of the previous year’s testing and the needs of the current students determine strategies that will be undertaken to improve the instructional program. The Sunshine State Standards and the Grade Level Expectations are the basis for the curriculum.

Continuous monitoring through the use of benchmark testing, district-made pre and progress tests for FCAT, teacher made tests and remedial instruction assist the staff in assessing progress toward SREP goals. Within the classroom, students are assessed daily and/or weekly. Assessments developed at the school are tailored to students’ needs, for example in math, science, and reading. Benchmarking and assessments are also used to establish student achievement in Spanish. An external evaluator helps monitor both the Bilingual Program and the Extended Foreign Language Program.

The school offers tutoring classes for all students, including ESOL and ESE; certified teachers are paid hourly. Students are assessed on every subject and the results are used to coordinate tutorials. Each tutoring is different and based on individual student needs established by continued assessment throughout the year. DRA tests are used to diagnose students performing below grade level, to assess their strengths and determine the “next stepping stone” in their instruction. Teachers and tutors review student progress frequently.

This school has established many research based instructional models to meet the needs of students. Teachers have been trained on learning styles for multi-ability grouping.

FCAT Task Cards are tailored for higher order thinking skills and those skills are also incorporated in daily instruction. Fifth grade is departmentalized with classes switching every hour, allowing more flexibility for assessing student progress in each content area as well as grouping for tutorials. All second graders receive three free books to take home as part of a supplementary reading program.

The school uses its resources “to the max.” Because of the way administration uses the budget, they are able to make decisions in areas known, through research, to impact student achievement. One area known is class size. At this school, class size is kept at the lowest level possible. Kindergarten classes average 20 to 21 students. Most classes are in the 20s. They are able to provide an after-school program with approximately 400 students, offering dance, chorus, cheerleading, video-graphy.

The school has curriculum leaders, teachers with no classroom teaching responsibilities designated to oversee certain programs such as reading. The reading specialist is “well-versed” and trains new teachers in writing strategies. Another such specialist/leader is in charge of bilingual education. Two classes at each grade level are designated bilingual and English Foreign Language (EFL) students are taught in self-contained classes with bilingual teachers. Students are encouraged to use their native language and share their culture.

There is a computer tech on the staff. Teachers are pleased to have “all kinds of equipment” that is readily available. For example, a teacher shared that she needed computers and had five installed within a week—all “hooked up with Accelerated Reader.” The same is planned for math—Accelerated Math—purchased with A+ merit funds. Whole class sets of laptops are available.

When grade level teachers meet to establish Grade Level Expectations (GLE) they also discuss the skills they need to master. Teachers are encouraged to and supported in attending workshops and conferences and share the information through grade-level and faculty meetings.

Communication

Effective communication is based on an “open-door” policy. There is ongoing communication with parents; staff listens to their opinions about the school and education of their children. Repeatedly teachers stated that the principal and assistant principal are available to them at all times. Administrators listen to teachers’ needs, concerns, and suggestions. They constantly ask teachers for their input on school-wide matters such as budget, “how to spend this money,” and matters impacting their instruction. Input regarding what teachers need in terms of technology and classroom instructional materials are solicited.

The principal is very open in the assessment of teachers and keeps them informed of their progress regularly. As such, teachers state that they know “just how they are doing.” The administration also notifies teachers about new grants available and offers support in applying for them.

Teachers feel they are “well informed.” Internet is available in each classroom and communication via email is supported. Teachers can obtain information from the state, including data to do school analysis.

Decision Making

The school is only seven years old. Many of the teachers started when the school opened. As such, the entire school culture and decision making process have evolved over the years. Decision making is based on open communication and an “open door policy.” Administration is very accessible and “there is never a concern.” It is felt that whatever the concern or need is, as long as it impacts teacher effectiveness and student achievement, administration will always “find a way.”

Although most budget decisions are made by the principal, decisions based on classroom instructional needs involve teachers’ input. Additionally, the school ensures that parents’ voices are important in school decisions. Everyone is given the opportunity to propose ideas that are brought to the floor for the faculty to consider and then presented to the EESAC.

Parent and Community Involvement

The school works well with the community and communication with parents is ongoing, leading to much parent involvement and support. “Teachers are absolutely wonderful in communicating with the parents. Even though it is time consuming the rewards are outrageous.” Parents are very active with EESAC and PTA. Parents do much more than just “selling candy” but are legitimately involved in decision-making and the learning process.

Each student from second through fifth grade has an “Academic Planner,” used to notify parents of homework, special assignments, and student progress on a daily basis. Parents can be seen at the school constantly, whether just visiting or volunteering. They are invited to many activities, such as numerous “Parent Nights,” grade level meetings, committee meetings and to be a part of the entire school culture.

Parents are involved in students’ learning process. They actually agree on and sign a piece of paper outlining what students are responsible for and what they, as parents, are also responsible for.

A Multicultural Committee promotes pride in the ethnic heritage of the children at the school as well as fostering appreciation of other cultures. This committee is involved in the planning of all activities at the school. As such, you just don’t find a Hispanic program but a diverse one, addressing all cultural groups, throughout the year. The school stresses development of student pride in their culture and multilingualism. It has even implemented an Extended Foreign Language Program.

The school targets parents who are trying to learn English in order for them to be able to help their children at home. They teach parents strategies they can use to reinforce learning. Through a two-year grant they provide ESOL classes for parents.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

Personnel are held accountable for the achievement of goals and objectives through frequent monitoring of student work. During common planning meetings, data on students are discussed; students needing additional help are identified; professional development opportunities are shared. Teachers meet with the principal/assistant principal and/or the reading leader to determine which students should be included in tutoring programs.

Parents are made aware of standards their children will be expected to meet early in the school year. A variety of parent workshops are offered on a regular basis; workshops include adult ESOL and literacy classes, adult computer skills and “Parent Nights.” Parent workshops are designed to improve facility with technology, to develop communication skills and to assist in effectively working with their children with home learning assignments and projects.

A variety of remedial services are provided on a daily and weekly basis for students who need additional help to be successful in school. Saturday classes, plus before, during and after school tutoring are provided for identified students. Ongoing assessment is charted and maintained on the students. Inclusion classes for ESE students and a program for gifted students are offered.

Cultural sensitivity is demonstrated by sending everything home in both English and Spanish. Although the majority of the students are Hispanic, many cultures and ethnicities are celebrated. School Climate Surveys administered through the district for the past five years indicate that parents, students and teachers are overwhelmingly satisfied with the school and that staff morale is high.

Informal assessments, other than those mandated, are utilized school-wide. The DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) instrument is used as well as the Accelerated Reader results. FCAT Explorer and Riverdeep Math progress is monitored; teacher-made tests are administered in all subject areas weekly. An outside evaluator for a bilingual grant assesses student progress on a regular basis. Parent conferences are held as needed so parents are aware of students’ progress.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographic Information

Wesley Matthews Elementary is located in the western part of Miami-Dade County. Sixty-seven full-time instructional staff, approximately 75 to 100 hourly or part-time staff and two administrators are employed. According to the 2001-2002 Florida Department of Education School Advisory Council Report, the school enrolled 1,116 students—93.3% Hispanic, 5.4% Caucasian, 0.7% African American, 0.4% Asian and 0.3% Multi-racial. The school report grade for the past two years has been A. In 2001-2002, 55.5% of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The mobility rate was approximately 19% (mostly due to a continuous influx of immigrant children). Fourteen percent (14%) of the students were classified as Gifted and 10% have learning disabilities. Average class size (K - 5) was 26.8 students.

Based on the 2002-2003 School Performance Excellence Plan (SPEP), the school employs a full-time teaching staff of 69 and another 75 to 100 additional employees, many of whom are hourly or part-time. Most of the faculty has less than ten years of teaching experience; several teachers have advanced degrees.

The students who attend Wesley Matthews are predominantly Hispanic. Three hundred forty three (343) students participate in ESOL; the number is greatest in Kindergarten, decreasing to minimal participation in the upper grades. Many students come from single parent homes. Many parents work more than one job and have limited ability to communicate in English. A sizeable proportion of the student population is new to this country and consequently experience communication difficulties and adjustment problems.

Ethnic/Racial %

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|------------------|------|
| Hispanic | 93.3 |
| Caucasian | 5.4 |
| African American | 0.7 |
| Asian | 0.4 |
| Multi-racial | 0.3 |

Goals

Goal 1:

Readiness to Start School: Reported the evaluation of 171 kindergarten students with 148 meeting the State's expectation for readiness.

Goal 3:

Student Performance: According to The 2001-2002 School Accountability Report, listed 78% of the students met high standards in reading; 74% met high standards in math, 94% met high standards in writing, 72% made learning gains in reading, 91% made learning gains in math, and 72% of the lowest 25% made learning gains in reading. These percentages resulted in a sum of 481 and earned the school an A grade. A score of 410 or higher is needed to obtain the top grade from the state.

Goal 4:

Learning Environment: 9 or 13% 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%. Student absences for 11-20 days were 18.5% as compared with rates of 18.6% and 19.1% for the district and state respectively. Leave days for teachers were higher (16.8%) than the district and state averages respectively (13.8%, 10.2%). Administrator absences were lower than the district (11.7%) but matched the state (10%).

Goal 5:

School Safety and Environment: Reported 14 incidents that would impair safety; five incidents were for fighting; two each for breaking and entering, drugs, and larceny/theft; and one each for battery, threat/intimidation, and vandalism.

Goal 6:

Teachers and Staff: Reported that 10.9% of the staff had master's degrees.