

Woodrow Wilson Middle School—Hillsborough County

KEY THEMES:

- 70% parental involvement
- Pervasiveness of caring attitude
- Community of ongoing learning—Teachers & Students
- Teachers who view students as their own
- Recognition of 6th graders as still being children
- Teaching time management
- 7 Nationally Certified Teachers on staff as mentors
- Teachers are professionals
- Extreme vertical articulation—sequence of Blue Ribbon Schools

BEST PRACTICES:

- FCAT anxiety reduction
- High Expectations—High Standards
- Articulation across feeder schools
- Powerful dedicated leadership
- Aligned curriculum
- Vertical teaming
- School newsletter
- Low turnover—consistency of staff
- District foresight - anticipation of State mandates
- Embracing social culture
- Parental involvement & heritage
- Homework access website
- Cognitive Café

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal maintains 7 years of experience in the position as principal of Wilson Middle School, with 31 years of experience in the field of education as well as a Master's Degree. The principal displays an extremely positive and decisive demeanor. Leadership expertise is without equal and is accomplished largely by example.

The principal is thoroughly and clearly at the helm of Wilson Middle School. Two practices regarding this principal rise head and shoulders above all others. First, the principal meets personally with the student and family of every single child preparing to attend Wilson. This creates an immediate conduit for exact information and expectations if not a relationship from which to build.

Secondly, the principal serves lunch in the cafeteria everyday. This practice insures visibility and reinforces a sincere notion that for all the children to understand that every one, and every position, in and out of school, has value, and that no matter your position in life, you are still accountable for others.

Through the staff's daily interaction with students and each other, the leadership qualities necessary for success at Wilson—extreme 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 mentor another, generally several, in the course of his or her tenure at Wilson Middle School. This process insures that the values that have made the school a success are literally passed along to the benefit of upcoming students. New teachers learning from experienced ones as leadership is encouraged and promoted.

The primary goal for the administrative leadership, both at the local and District level, is the treatment of teachers as professionals. No other single topic came to light more often in discussions with staff. Faculty receives respect from all around them—students, administration, and parents, and has been so often referenced herein, respond with an exuberance

of energy for their charges. They also report that their principal is considerate to not overload them with additional projects that take away from their assigned task—to teach. Instruction is clearly the focus.

It is noteworthy that the bar is set high by leadership at Wilson. The goal is 4.0, not the State standard 3.0. High expectations results in quality throughout the system. And yet, this expectation is not without a consequence. As an example, Wilson Middle School scored a 4.9 in the Writing portion of FCAT. While they continue to strive for a perfect 6.0, the leadership commands that other elements of the Language Arts, such as poetry and literature, not be sacrificed in order to pursue FCAT Writing perfection.

The District also demonstrates a commitment to sound leadership in the form of numerous workshops. One with an interesting theme is centered on gardening and equates children with seeds. The workshop reflects the “*No Child Left Behind*” stratagem. It presents data on incoming and outgoing students and leaves the attending faculty with ideas for preparing the soil for the types of seeds (students) they can expect. While light hearted in nature, its literature and impact are well received and represent sound educational research.

Personnel

The people that comprise Wilson Middle are its strength. The process of procuring and retaining these quality individuals begins with the principal. The principal has 100% autonomy in the hiring process once an applicant has satisfied State and District requirements. Prospective teachers are advised clearly during the course of interviews with both the principal and existing teachers on their grade level what the expectations are at Wilson. They are high and largely self-imposed.

Apart from formal questioning in keeping with the existing probes, teachers remarked that they continually gave up personal time in order to meet with students and/or their families. Many commented that this was not the case at prior schools where they had worked. Once again, this is a powerful testament to the chemistry of Wilson Middle School and captures one of the many reasons behind its successes.

On a more readily quantified scale, the turnover rate at Wilson Middle is very low. In fact, the former principal (now employed at the District level), remarked that when she became principal at Wilson, she was the first new hire staff member in six years. This, of course, provides for extensive stability, continuity, and ultimately trust based on a rising comfort level in the professionalism of those around you.

Once within the family of Wilson, there is a mentoring program in place for teachers. They are teamed within their grade level as a primary touchstone resource, but the vertical teaming that occurs exposes the newcomer to staff above and below grade level and brings them rapidly, by example of many others, into the framework of what is expected from a Wilson teacher. Overseeing this process from behind a continuously open door is the readily accessible principal.

Trust again comes to the surface in conversation regarding Wilson Middle School. Teachers trust their principal. Students trust their teachers. Parents, again, most former students themselves, trust the staff and most importantly, the philosophy of Wilson that excellence is expected and a part of the long standing tradition of the school.

Setting

Wilson Middle School was built in 1915 and is the oldest in the District. There have been numerous structural additions throughout its existence. However, the charm of the school, though now covered in contemporary furnishings and technology, is still in existence. This is most personified by the “blowing of the bugle” —a tradition that dates back to the school’s earliest days. As a sidebar, it is both interesting and integral to Wilson’s success that the story of the bugle be relayed herein.

When the school was first constructed there was no electricity and, as follows, no electric bell. Nor was there a hand-rung bell available. Hence, a local bugler would play ‘Reville’ and summon the students from the neighborhood to rally around the flagpole. The flag would be raised and school would begin in earnest.

At the end of the school day ‘Taps’ would be played and parents would know that the children were on their way home. These traditions continue to this day and form the foundation for the school’s motto— “*A Tradition of Excellence*”.

These simplistic, old-fashioned effects contribute in a large way to the warm, friendly appeal, and welcoming attitude of the school. The school retains its close ties with the community and the tradition of the bugle. Again, an actual face is put on this notion when students recount with glee that the vast percentage of their parents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, and even grandparents, attended Wilson Middle School. This fact alone generates a family heritage of excellence in education that is uncommon in today’s transient world.

Climate and Culture

Wilson Middle is a clean, quiet, comfortable, place for its students. The staff and management have recognized and instituted the elements of trust and high expectations first, by building on the school's "*Tradition of Excellence*". In the next breath they have provided the tools for each child to meet or exceed the academic standards. Outside of this comparatively easily documented academic objective, is the attitude of staff and parents to assist the students in reaching beyond themselves to exceed.

This attitude of caring is not lost on the students. There is an Ambassador Program, which is a mentoring program for new students, run by existing students. There is also a Life Skills Program to enhance character building. Both programs contribute to the caring culture that defines Wilson. These programs are referenced in the Student Handbook.

An interesting procedure incorporated at Wilson is the Positive Referral Program. It is a unique spin on the age-old discipline practice of being sent to the principal's office. However, the Positive Referral Program is exactly what the name indicates. A staff member completes a form on a student's positive behavior and forwards it to the office where the principal reviews it and calls the student into her office for a heart felt congratulations. Students welcome the positive attention and the program ends up contributing to the overall caring culture of the school.

Though referred to previously, it bears repeating under this section that FCAT preparation is thoroughly incorporated into the curriculum. For the purposes of this heading the rationale is to reduce the stress associated with the test itself. There is little actual test preparation apart from explaining the format so each student understands completely what to expect and how to fill out the forms correctly. The test itself is diminished in order to reduce anxiety. The staff is quick to point out that FCAT does not result in a change of teaching at Wilson Middle School—excellence is excellence regardless of the face it wears or the acronym it carries.

This is a philosophy maintained by Wilson certainly, but also by the elementary schools that feed it and the high school it in turn feeds. As a result, there exists a continuity of thought and expectation, of care and concern, that follows a child from the first days of formal education, through the three formative years at Wilson Middle School, and on into high school. This sequence of schools is one of only a small number that carry with them the distinction of all being Blue Ribbon Schools and thereby providing blue ribbon education from K through 12.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

There are several small elements to the resources component that impact Wilson in addition to the far larger and encompassing District allocation. The principal, staff, and especially parents have a hand in certain aspects of the budgetary process in the form of the School Advisory Council (SAC). The school, via SAC, also allocates the financial reward received as a result of being classified as an "A" school (FCAT monies).

Professional Development needs, and the associated costs, are addressed within a conduit of teacher to principal to District. Though based on needs and requests they are supported by relevant, documented scoring. As an example, when a need was recognized given a limitation concerning a specific section of learning, the staff acknowledged the opportunity gap and followed through by addressing the issue with a well researched budgetary item. The Teacher Surveys couple with student assessment data to contribute greatly to this effort.

Indirect funding sources come in the form of well-measured use of what Wilson has at its disposal. As an example, they save money by employing internet sites, such as Frogguts.com to do dissection via computer as opposed to going the highly expensive route of obtaining specimens, tools, etc.

Information Management

For the benefit of all associated with Wilson Middle, the school has adopted Easy Grade Pro as the tool in place to access and control individual data. Easy Grade Pro seems especially conducive to demonstrating progress of students. All associated school staff have access to the information contained in this in-house system. The data contained is used as a measurement tool for students, but beyond that, Wilson demonstrates its full capability by sifting through the data to ascertain strengths and weaknesses within the relative instructional programs and, if warranted, teachers themselves.

Regarding this last statement, Wilson is strongly supported by the Hillsborough District. Profile Sheets on all schools are produced by the District and disseminated for ease and clarification - providing a filter, if you will, of literal mountains of data.

The filter takes the form of the Data Analysis Guiding Worksheet. All of this is geared toward affording the individual schools a better understanding of the data generated and how it applies to their unique school, demographics, and needs.

Still another feather in the District's cap is their acknowledged capacity to NOT micro-manage their schools. On the surface, this may be seen as simply a necessity due to the overwhelming size of the District (1 million plus), but compliments of District interviews one is able to drill down to that core of trust in personnel and programs discussed throughout this report.

Lastly, the District makes it an issue to never send out data that has not been discussed with local school staff first. This avoids confusion, loss of time, and loss of resources.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

Ongoing assessment and evaluation of assorted programs occur beyond the accepted FCAT testing, however the Sunshine State Standards always serve as the backdrop for education and educational change and, by all admissions, very much drive the curriculum. This formulates itself in the Middle School Curriculum Section of the District's Strategic Plan.

At the heart of Wilson's many instructional capabilities is an aligned curriculum. The school, and Hillsborough 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 some years ago. When FCAT blanketed the State, Wilson 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.

Deeply rooted in the instructional practices of Wilson is the implementation, recognition, and evolution of problem solving as a skill. This provides still another framework on which to flesh out lesson plans and practical instruction. Its employ also insures higher order thinking and imparts it as an integral element of a Wilson education.

On the County level is the District Strategic Plan. This dedication and direction on the part of the District is a key element of the success of Wilson's student body. Continued assurance that Wilson is moving toward the District's Plan comes from data collected through such testing as FCAT, which affords the measuring stick by which both the school and the District can make additions, modifications, and deletions.

Wilson's instructional practices take on many local issues, such as the impact of West Nile Virus on Floridians and many other current events ripped from the headlines. This makes the programs relevant and interesting to students and staff alike. A marvelous example is an outdoor iguana lab, which is home to many varieties. Nesting habits are documented and offsprings tracked as part of a science project deeply rooted in Florida's own environment.

Another strong instructional tie to the locale is Tackle Math. This exciting program is sponsored by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers professional football team. It includes video introductions by coaches and players and equates all forms of math at the 6 to 8th grade level to the Buccaneers and football. The faculty reports an overwhelmingly positive response to math when presented in this fashion.

Communication

Communication is manifested in the timely meetings and conferences that occur among and between grade level instructors. As noted previously, this active articulation 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 from Wilson to the high school 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.

District communication is highly evident as referenced in prior sections, but takes on yet another role in the implementation of the Benchmark & Student Progression Report, which clearly outlines expectations by grade level. Localized communication is epitomized by the Cognitive Café, a daily session prior to school where staff read, discuss, and share current educational articles and practices.

Parent and Teacher Surveys are also major factors in the communicative success of Wilson Middle School. These ongoing assessments couple with existing documents such as the Parent/Student Handbook to inform all concerns as to the expectations associated with attending Wilson. More current reflective information is ushered along in the school's mini-newspaper/flyer, *The Bulldog Bark*.

Standards for relating academic achievement —ie: the 9 week report card, are augmented by 3 week progress reports. In addition, one-week progress reports are available if a parent and teacher find it beneficial to the student's success. Beyond this standard, there exists *Homework Central*, a website maintained by Wilson where parents and students can locate assignments. Part and parcel to the website is the availability of email between teachers themselves, as well as parents and teachers. Again, this generates a great deal of constant, easy access dialogue.

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 Wilson's own School Improvement 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, Hillsborough and its schools set themselves up for success by maximizing their resources and personnel.

Within Wilson Middle School 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. The interaction touches many areas including communication and accountability as all members of the Wilson family have input and thus, a stake in the program's success or failure.

At the student level there are Bulldog Bucks, an in-house play money system that affords young people the opportunity to earn 'money' to be utilized later as a cohesive class to 'buy' pizza parties, etc. from the administration. Bulldog Bucks are received for doing good work, displaying fine character, or demonstrating student leadership.

The single most unique portion of the decision-making process at Wilson is the interaction of the parents and community. This will be further addressed in the following section, however it bears mentioning herein that Wilson maintains an extremely active School Advisory Council (SAC) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Again, as was previously referenced, most parents are themselves products of Wilson so that a vested interest in the school and the decisions that affect it and their children is maintained.

Parent & Community Involvement

By all accounts, from faculty to administration to District personnel, the contents of this section form the backbone of success at Wilson Middle School. An outstanding 70% of students' parents are involved in the school in one fashion or another. As referenced, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and School Advisory Council (SAC) are well manned and have tremendous impact. 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. The extent of involvement of parents and community are further reflected in Wilson's Vision Statement and Mission Statement, which both include reference to parent and/or community.

Much of this activity and interest stems from the familial nature of the school and its link to the community. As the history of the school and the area is taught and reflected on, parents become and stay involved, recounting their own stories of Wilson to their children, thus perpetuating the heritage.

A sidebar to this is taken from faculty interviews wherein it was repeatedly referenced that the involvement of parents at the school is such that the faculty genuinely feel appreciated and respond with even greater enthusiasm and progression, creating a cyclic effect that feeds on itself.

A marvelous example of parental and community involvement is found in the Discovery Clubs. These are groups of students taught in specific disciplines such as Art (Tampa Museum), history (Tampa Historical Society), and countless others. Each is very much a hands-on learning experience. Classes, or the Clubs themselves, last approx. 6 weeks during the summer. They are so popular, students line up at 6 AM on registration day as space and equipment limitations do exist. The PTA often arranges for scholarships when necessary. The most astounding fact regarding the Discovery Clubs is that they were initiated by parents. Local parents saw a void to be filled in the summer months and sought out business partners in the form of fine arts institutions as well as local artisans.

What is striking to Wilson’s staff is that the care, concern, and generosity of the 70% of parents who participate, spills over onto the remaining 30% of students. The uninvolved family’s student witnesses the vigor of the involved student (bent on working with and pleasing his or her parents) and follows suit as a result. The entire school benefits.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

As with most successful programs of any size, scope, and nature, accountability is painted across Wilson Middle with a broad brush. There are varying measures of liability from student thru teacher thru principal and on to the District level. Each segment of the instructional machine has its own measure of responsibility to both 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, which provide for research based assessment tools to be implemented by operating staff. District, school, and classroom evaluation is an ongoing process and the personnel involved are quick to recognize those tools that work for Wilson and those that do not. It is this follow up, this accountability for success, that assures students of receiving the most current and appropriate programming.

Handbooks for Staff and both Parent and Teacher Surveys afford valuable information that precludes second guessing as to accountability and what is or is not expected of the corresponding individual. This refers back to the previously referenced mandatory meeting with the principal by all potential attendees and their families. The information shared at these meetings support and reiterate the requirements of each segment of the learning community.

Expectations are high at Wilson Middle, and they are not gilded. The requirements for success are set out for all to see and the various individuals within the school’s internal and external community are expected to meet them. This puts a majority of accountability at the feet of students. Wilson has the aforementioned “*Tradition of Excellence*” motto and students readily come to grasp that their participation, like their parents before them, is vital in maintaining that success. If expectations are not met however, each hand in the process is addressed as to his or her shortcoming. On the upside, as is more often the case with Wilson, successes are embraced and rewarded from top to bottom within the educational hierarchy.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Wilson Middle School is located in Hillsborough County School District—a county that maintains a population of just over 1,050,000 of which 185,271 were enrolled in the county’s public schools for the year 2001-2002. The Hillsborough County School District is the 10th largest in the United States and employs 28,242 people.

Within the District there are 119 elementary schools, 38 middle/junior high schools, and 22 senior high schools. In addition, there are 23 special centers—which are made up of charter schools, vocational/technical centers, adult schools, and alternative services. Wilson Middle School figures demonstrate a total enrollment for the 2001-2002 year of 675, with an October enrollment of 619. Ethnic/racial/gender breakdowns for all students/all year are as follows:

Ethnic/Racial	Female	Male	%
Caucasian	195	205	59.3
African American	51	54	15.6
Hispanic	68	66	19.9
Asian	7	10	2.5
Multi-racial	6	13	2.8
Female	327		48.4
Male		348	51.6

Average class size 6th - 8th is 19.6. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 21.6%. The gifted student rate is high at 29.4%, those with disabilities are reported at 11.3% and LEP students are 1.6%. Percentage of out-of-school suspensions is a nominal 3.2%. Student population stability percentages contend that 96.6% of students enrolled in October remained enrolled the following February. This figure runs slightly higher than the District figure of 92.8 and the State figure of 93.6 over the same period. Teachers with advanced degrees comprise 42.5% of the faculty and their average years of experience are slated at 15.9. Both figures are above the District and State averages.

Vital statistics drawn from the FDOE School Advisory Council Report include:

Goals

Goal 3:

Student Performance: Reading & Mathematics scores from Grades 6 thru 8 exceeded both the District and State averages across the board with Mathematics in Grade 7 & Grade 8 exceeding the State average by a remarkable 45 points each. 8th Grade writing also eclipsed the State average considerably, coming in at 4.7 to the District's 4.2 and the State's 3.8.

Relative to FCAT NRT, similar results are noted. Mathematics and Reading scores for Grades 6 thru 8 again exceeded both the District and State percentile rankings many by very wide margins.

Based solely on school accountability grading, Wilson Middle scored a combined 469 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.

There are 3 administrators and 44 instructors. Turnover is historically very low <2% annually, however in the year 2001-02, 15.9% of the staff were newly hired. Interviews indicate that the bulk of this figure was due to retirement. Teacher leave absences were slightly above the State average of 10.3 at 10.5, while Administration absences were documented as nearly half the State mean of 8.9, coming in at 4.7.