

Darnell-Cookman Middle School—Duval County

KEY THEMES:

- High expectations
- Data driven curriculum planning
- Use of student achievement data to guide instruction
- Vertical team planning
- Incentives for successful students
- School-wide team scheduling to allow for common planning
- Specialized instruction for underachieving students
- Good leadership and communication

BEST PRACTICES:

- Team meetings that allow all teachers and administrators to share their expertise and communicate regularly.
- Morning and After School Tutorial Programs featuring one on one tutoring for students that need academic help.
- Safety Net Programs that offer Saturday school and individual help for students needing additional assistance.
- Practice FCAT's to help students understand the format and content of the standardized testing program.
- Extra periods in each grade level block to give a double dose of a critical academic subject.
- Rewards and extra emphasis on extra curricular programs such as sports and band for advanced students to relieve the pressures of the highly academic curriculum.
- Classroom teachers from each grade level meet with other grade level teachers to discuss strategies that will improve the vertical flow of instruction.
- Involvement of parents and the community in the education of all the students through good communication is emphasized and practiced.

LEADING CHANGE: CREATING SCHOOL CULTURE

Leadership

The principal has been at Darnell-Cookman Middle for the past three years. She has served as an administrator for sixteen years prior to becoming principal and believes in the importance of data based decision making the cultural climate of the school. She works closely with her staff to collect and analyze data and uses it to create what she calls the “Big Picture.” This assists the school in fine-tuning their curriculum and programs to ensure optimal learning experiences for all children.

The principal at believes in “calling the shots”, but also realizes that contributions and buy-in from the staff are essential. Her staff helps make critical decisions on curriculum issues, program changes, and other issues that effect the direction of the school. Teachers expressed an appreciation of the manner in which this principal treated them and students.

Clear expectations of both behavior and goals are communicated individually and at team meetings. The principal believes that the schools goals and plans are living breathing documents. She believes in being proactive rather than reactive and that by clear communication of expectations she can lead in this manner.

Personnel

The principal is responsible for the hiring of new teachers. She often involves team members in the selection process. Her ability to choose teachers that will be successful team members at Darnell-Cookman Middle is critical to the success of the program.

Personnel at Darnell-Cookman are proud of what the school has accomplished and consider their team members their second family. This is evidenced by the minimal turnover rate at the school and the extra attention given to acculturating new teachers.

New teachers are welcomed by their team members and their respective department both formally and informally and continually exposed to Cookman's philosophy for success. The teachers believe a successful teacher is a passionate teacher that respects kids and never lowers expectations. They believe in rewarding students for accomplishments and hard work. The

teachers believe in working hard and playing hard and the same applies to students. Personnel hold students and each other accountable while providing ongoing incentives and support.

Setting

Darnell-Cookman Middle School opened in 1952 and is located in a downtown business district in Jacksonville, Florida. There is very little housing in the vicinity and residents are primarily low-income individuals who rent rather than own homes. Neighborhood students make up only six percent of the schools enrollment. The school is an old plant that is in need of renovation as there is a lack of space for special programs and very little technology is evident.

Climate and Culture

The school climate is one of high expectation. The bar remains high and students are given a warm friendly atmosphere in which to achieve their goals. The result is numerous accolades and rewards. The one that means the most for the students, parents, staff and administrators is the intrinsic reward of achievement through hard work.

Students are naturally exposed to different cultural experience, primarily through the student diversity established as a magnet school. Students are selected to attend Darnell-Cookman Middle School using a lottery. Anyone is eligible to attend the school. Students are recruited through a series of feeder school programs. Darnell-Cookman places special emphasis on recruiting gifted minority students for its college preparatory magnet. This recruitment results in a waiting list of over 700 applicants. Approximately one of every three students is certified as gifted. All students are encouraged to share their cultural differences on an ongoing basis throughout the year.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: DATA DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Resources

In addition to traditional sources, the budget for Darnell-Cookman Middle is supplemented through various means including utilization of the Planning and Development Department at the district level. This department is responsible for overseeing the acquisition and management of all funds obtained through the submission of grant applications to a variety of sources including state, federal, and other agencies. These grants serve to supplement and enhance the learning experiences of the students.

Another resource utilized by the school is a partnership program, which provides mostly non-monetary resources from local businesses that are utilized to reward students. Parents offer support in much the same way as partnerships. They make available items such as furniture, paper, reward certificates, and even computers donated by their businesses or places they work.

A unique and much used service available to the school is "The Teacher Supply Depot." This is a joint effort between the Duval County Public Schools' Community Involvement Office, Warehousing Division and The Duval County Council of PTA's/PTSA's. It is a warehouse of reusable materials donated by businesses and community members, which is then distributed free to public school teachers to enhance instruction in their classroom and to promote student achievement.

The Teacher Supply Depot enjoys tremendous support from the business community, volunteers, the media and the many other individuals who contribute items and also by the teachers who utilize these resources.

Information Management

As mentioned previously, Duval County Public Schools is fortunate to have a Research, Assessment & Evaluation unit that monitors academic performances and provides schools with data that can be used to monitor individual student progress. This allows teachers to focus resources on areas where students need the greatest assistance. School Climate Survey data is also reported, which allows the school to view student, parent and teacher satisfaction with the programs and services offered by the school.

The Testing Department at the district level oversees the distribution and administration of all state mandated assessments such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). In addition, the Testing Department is responsible for the distribution, administration, scoring, and reporting of all other district-wide assessments, such as the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test (SDRT).

Monitoring of data gives the school a good snapshot of what is happening in the classroom and how goals are being met. Teachers are provided with printouts of test results at monthly team meetings with the principal. Data is analyzed on an individual student basis as well as how it pertains to the “Big Picture” of the school. Item analysis is used to drive the curriculum, making necessary changes to meet the needs of students at Darnell-Cookman Middle.

COMMUNICATING CHANGE: PROFESSIONAL TEAMWORK

Instruction

The district and school goals are aligned with the Sunshine States Standards. Teachers emphasize teamwork and provide a rigorous program for gifted and advanced students. The goal is to prepare students to be academically successful in a college prep high school environment. Teaching the FCAT skills is secondary to setting the bar for future *life* success of these academically oriented students. Non-academic activities include field trips and participation in a variety of extra curricular programs including sports and band. All students are required to participate in the Science Fair.

To accomplish the academic goals of the school, safety nets are provided to help support students, including modification of the daily schedule. Periods have been doubled up to allow for an extra period with an extra teacher assigned to the team. Essentially the block of time remains the same but individual periods have been shortened. Students also get an extra period of reading in the sixth grade and will be offered an extra math period in seventh grade in the 2003-04 school year. In addition, students are offered an AA program. This program features an Advisor/Advise period that is non-graded and offers students advice and extra academic help. Extra help is given to students not ready for the rigorous curriculum offered at the school.

Accommodations for ESE students are made for the FCAT. These include one on one testing, smaller groups, and extended time accommodations. These students are usually administered the test by their resource teacher.

Communication

Teachers regularly meet to discuss curriculum and programs. This is made possible by scheduling common team planning periods. Vertical progression is a key topic at the planning meetings. Skills taught at different grade levels are reviewed and visitations are made with other teams and feeder schools to insure an even flow of seamless curriculum for all students. Administration and support personnel meet on a regular basis with individual teams. The principal believes very strongly in looking at the “Data Story” so that the staff can see the “Big Picture” that drives the academic program as part of the “Grand Design”.

Parents are kept informed of their child’s progress through conferences, planners, report cards, newsletters, and frequent phone calls.

Decision-Making

Darnell-Cookman middle schools maintains a School Advisory committee comprised of staff, parents, and business partners that assist in the decision making process at different levels.

The administration works closely with staff and often meets with team members on an individual basis during their common planning periods. The teachers feel that they are empowered and that they have a boss that supports them. Good communication between administration and staff is a key component in the team approach at Darnell-Cookman.

Parent and Community Involvement

Parents are actively involved in their children’s education. Parents are only a phone call away and are very supportive of the program at Darnell-Cookman. Parent involvement and support is a very important ingredient that contributes to the success of the school.

A very active group of parents serve on the school improvement team. Parents are partners in education at Darnell-Cookman Middle providing the school with many resources that the budget can’t afford.

Incoming students and their parents are invited to attend a spring orientation to learn about the policies and expectations of the school. A student guide program offers a real insight into the school and serves as an excellent recruiting tool. Parents are very involved with the school and are eagerly support the efforts of Darnell-Cookman Middle. Teachers communicate with parents on a regular basis.

EVALUATING CHANGE: REFLECTION AND CELEBRATION

Accountability

Accountability is evident beginning at the district level. Students are expected to abide by the Code of Student Conduct and the Code of Appearance. Duval County's Student Progression Plan, which is modified annually, is an extensive 79-page document containing all of the school district's academic guidelines and expectations and is used by the school.

The Research, Assessment & Evaluation unit is the statistical hub of Duval County Public Schools. Its main responsibility is to monitor scholastic performances and trends that chart the academic progress of Duval County students. Included within the unit are three departments: Research & Evaluation, Testing, and Planning & Development.

The Research and Evaluation Department provides data for both school-based and district personnel; parent, business, and community organizations; and other educational agencies. The data are used primarily to monitor the progress of both students and schools and to help the classroom teacher focus in on those areas where students are in greatest need of assistance.

At the school level, teachers at Darnell-Cookman use the above mentioned information and believe that high academic standards are necessary for all students and that students can attain this through hard work in a climate that is "Kid Warm & Child Friendly." Students are given the support they need in a learning climate designed to ensure their success and garner mutual respect and trust. All personnel believe that promoting pride and recognition of self and school creates a learning climate that fosters success.

Teaching teams are the heart of the school and include all teachers. The teachers plan and act as one to carry out the rigorous academic program under the watchful eye of the principal. The school is organized into three teams for each grade level. Two teams are considered academically advanced and one of the teams in each grade level is exclusively for certified gifted students.

The staff at Darnell-Cookman Middle meets regularly with the principal to discuss what she calls "The Grand Design." Each student is monitored and their progress is discussed with the teams. The team members are held accountable for their teaching responsibilities and the progress of the students they teach. Teachers make good use of planners/agendas to monitor students and report their progress to the parents on a regular basis. Special emphasis is given to sixth grade students to help parents understand the goals and expectations of the school. Assignments are available from the guidance department and are posted on the Internet.

Teacher accountability is insured by administration through frequent team meetings, test result analysis, and conferences with individual teachers and teams. The administration plays a very important role in supporting the teachers through direct interaction and follow up with students that need help.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

School Demographics

Darnell-Cookman Middle is located in the Duval County School District- a county that supports a population of over one million, of which 129,000 were enrolled in the county's public schools. Duval County Public Schools consists of 150-plus schools throughout Northeast Florida. The school district is divided into five geographical regions, which are managed by five regional superintendents who report directly to the Superintendent. Each region consists of nearly 30 schools. Darnell-Cookman Middle School serves students from all areas of Duval County and is a Gifted and Academically Talented school with a Medical Magnet that offers three main curriculums. The first Curriculum is an advanced curriculum, which is offered to Academically Talented students. The second curriculum is a gifted program that is offered to students who are identified as Gifted. The third curriculum offered is a PASSD curriculum for Trainably Mentally Handicapped (TMH) students. The school employs 57 instructional staff and four administrators. Darnell-Cookman Middle has 1,228 students. Ethnic/racial breakdowns for all students are as follows:

Ethnic/Racial %	
Caucasian	61.7
African American	29.6
Hispanic	2.4
Asian	4.4
Native American	0.3
Multi-racial	1.6

The average class sizes are: Language Arts 30.3, Math 28.3, Science 28.3, Social Studies 29.3. Approximately 30% of the students are gifted. Students on free/reduced lunch are reported at 16.1%. There are 0.03% LEP students and 3.8 % disabled students at Darnell-Cookman Middle. Darnell-Cookman Middle has a very stable student body at 95.4 % enrolled district-wide in October remained enrolled the following February. The school has been designated as an "A" school by the Florida Department of Education for three years.

Vital statistics of note drawn from the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) School Advisory Council Report include:

Goal 3 - Student Performance, FCAT norm referenced test results were reported by median national percentile and were higher than the State and the district in every category. The district was lower in every category than the state. The skewed group of students at Darnell-Cookman Middle cannot be overlooked when comparing test results with the district and the state.

In grade eight, 364 students were tested on the FCAT Writing assessment, with 98% scoring 3.0 or higher on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 6.0 (highest). Darnell-Cookman Middle scored an average of 4.5 compared to the district average of 3.7 and the state average of 3.8. FCAT Reading scores showed 83% of 363 eighth grade students taking the test scoring 3 or better on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 5.0 (highest). Eighth grade FCAT Mathematics scores showed 94% of 362 students taking the test scoring 3 or better on a scale from 1.0 (lowest) to 5.0 (highest).

Goal 4 - Learning Environment, reported 8.8% new instructional staff was hired for the 2001-02 school year as compared to the district average of 17.4%. The absentee rate was 6.0% lower than the district average for students absent 11-20 days and 11.8% lower than the district average for students absent 21 days or more. Leave days for teachers were 2.0% higher than the district average. (14.8 days for Darnell-Cookman Middle and 11.7 days for the district) Administrator absences were 6.7 days higher than the districts average for the year.

Goal 5 - School Safety Environment, reported 36 total incidents at the school, with 24 incidents of fighting, three incidents of sexual harassment, two incidents each of battery, breaking and entering, threat/intimidation and one incident each of drugs, excluding alcohol, sex offenses and vandalism.

Goal 6 - Teachers and Staff, reported that 35.3% of the instructional staff as holding a Masters Degree or higher.