Year after year, Florida’s Choices in Learning Elementary Charter School reaches high academic achievements. The school credits its eleven-year partnership with Success for All for helping it remain one of Seminole County Public Schools’ top scorers. >>>
When Choices in Learning Elementary Charter School established its charter in 2001, it was looking for a curriculum that was different than the rest and something that was based on proven results. When administrators found Success for All (SFA), they knew they had what they needed. “The people involved had seen and heard about what SFA could do,” said Principal Janet Kearney. “[They] liked the various aspects.”

Eleven years later, Choices in Learning (CIL) and SFA’s collaboration continues to deliver academic excellence. The school has maintained an A grade for four years running and is consistently ranked among Seminole County’s top schools. Additionally, in 2010–2011, 93 percent of CIL students were proficient in reading on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). “A lot of it can be attributed to SFA,” Kearney said. “An excellent program with really strong teachers and really strong follow-through from administration and staff is the key to making anything happen successfully.”

Furthermore, in the 2011–2012 school year, CIL recorded the highest writing scores in Seminole County. All students met the curved score of 3.0, and 80 percent of students received a 4.0. That 80 percent led the district by a wide margin, considering that the district average was only 31 percent scoring 4.0.

A Single Focus

Kearney became CIL’s principal three years ago, taking on her first role as an administrator. Previous teaching experience in an SFA school helped her make the jump; she credits SFA’s systemic approach, in addition to its emphasis on fidelity, for her smooth transition into administration. “I can’t imagine being in a school where every teacher in every grade level can be implementing whatever they feel like implementing,” she said. “It [SFA] gives me a lot of comfort. I know that teachers are very clearly aware of what my expectations are and what the expectations of the program are.”

This systemic approach is a key SFA component. When paired with its ongoing professional development, in-school coaching, and other built-in supports, SFA gives teachers and administrators a common language. Ensuring that everyone is on the same page and using the same teaching techniques helps teachers “get to a higher level of expertise and understanding [of] learning behaviors and kids,” Kearney said. “I think it’s helped us all become better educators.” She also places high value on the cycle of effective instruction because “it’s just a good way to teach, no matter what the content is.”

SFA’s methods have contributed to CIL’s high performance numbers. In the 2011–2012 school year, 91 percent of CIL’s third graders tested proficient on the Gates-MacGinitie reading assessment in the third quarter, and 85 percent of Hispanic students in grades 3–5 were proficient—a 9 percent increase from the first quarter.
With myriad components and learning strategies, SFA gives teachers a strong instructional foundation. This consistent pedagogy, Kearney noted, is critical. “It gives them some comfort knowing that, while there can be some flexibility, they have somewhere to jump off from,” she said. This structure is especially valuable for first-time teachers. “I can’t even imagine going back to another way,” said Kearney.

As a fourth-grade teacher at CIL, Denni Breen knows firsthand how all of SFA’s elements come together to help students succeed. “I think success comes from the combination of all [the pieces],” she said, which include teaching students at grade level, using novels instead of basals, making quarterly assessments, and using research-based methods.

SFA’s solid structure, Kearney noted, “makes it more of a safe place to come, and then you can take risks and meet challenges that you may not be able to meet otherwise.” She recalled a student with a learning disability who was struggling with reading. Teachers worked diligently within the SFA model to help him, and “he finally got to the point where he likes to read and feels confident as a reader! It’s very exciting. That’s why you do it, right?”

Coaches and SFA facilitators also give teachers an outside perspective, allowing them to see and address issues that may be overlooked. “I think having other people help you determine root causes for things when you’re seeing it every day is very beneficial,” Kearney said. “It helps to have a fresh pair of eyes come in and say, ‘Well did you notice this?’ or ‘Let’s really look at this.”

Cooperative Culture: “It’s different”

As a career-long advocate for cooperative learning, Kearney welcomed the chance to work with SFA with its focus on this educational method. She is pleased to see that cooperative learning has permeated the school’s culture, extending to teachers, administrators, and the rest of the staff. “We’re completely bought in: hook, line, and sinker,” she said.

She credits this cooperative culture and consistency in instruction for the school’s regularly positive dynamic.

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—Janet Kearney, Principal, Choices in Learning Elementary Charter School

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Parents and community members find SFA “very appealing,” especially noting the school’s sustained results, which stem from SFA’s cornerstone of teaching students at their proper instructional levels. Parents appreciate “how the program meets the needs of their children and allows them to advance at a faster pace when they are placed appropriately,” Breen said. She also noted that struggling students “are able to catch up easier since they are being met at their level.”

SFA’s rigorous standards require students to think critically and challenge one another. Kearney observed that this is something she’s rarely seen in other classrooms. “It’s different than at other schools,” she said. As she walks through classrooms to observe, she is proud to see students engaged in deep conversations, asking thought-provoking questions, and providing insightful answers. “I think cooperative learning and the built-in expectation for kids to discuss and talk and challenge each other—that to me is probably the biggest and strongest factor of what SFA does,” Kearney said.

Choices in Learning Elementary Charter School has wholeheartedly embraced Success for All’s research-proven methods. Staff members are proud of the school’s consistently high academic achievements and are optimistic about CIL’s future direction. “With the continued support and guidance of our principal, the awesome commitment of our staff, and the great program of SFA, I see us becoming number one,” Breen said. As Kearney reflected, SFA is “a win-win, for our parents, for our staff and teachers, and students. We just love it.”

“I think that’s another reason we have few behavior problems—just the consistency and the follow-through at every grade level, at every area.”

Indeed, SFA is designed to address the whole school. Knowing that a child’s home life has a direct effect on how he or she learns in the classroom, SFA’s resources, such as the Leading for Success program, provide staff with the tools to deal with behavioral and social issues that may hinder a student’s academic progress. Kearney has found this especially valuable at CIL. “We’re a very successful school overall, not just academically, and I attribute a lot of that to SFA,” she said.

Breen agrees that SFA’s “phenomenal” built-in support has contributed to CIL’s continued achievements. “Our success is due to the fact that we fully embrace the Getting Along Together component of the program, as well as have our students immersed in cooperative learning all day in all subjects,” she said.

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The Success for All Foundation, founded in 1987, was awarded a $50 million federal Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up grant in 2010. It enables eligible Title I elementary schools to receive grants of $50,000 or more toward first-year implementation costs. To learn more about available i3 grants, contact us at (800) 548-4998, ext. 2372, or visit www.successforall.org.