

Interviewee: Susan Arnold

Interviewer: Genevieve Shurack

Date: March 11, 2005

S: It is March 11, 2005, and I am here at Hawthorne High School with Dr. Arnold, who is principal. Dr. Arnold, how did you get started in education?

A: I switched my major a couple of times and ended up in education predominantly because my father said, a teacher is a respectable position. I became a teacher and moved on from there. I stayed being a teacher; I've taught elementary, middle, and high. I was an assistant principal in a high school, and then at Hawthorne Middle and High, and then I became the principal here.

S: How does Hawthorne compare to your last school?

A: It's considerably smaller. I was at Gainesville High School for fourteen years. Of course, they were high school, [and we're] middle and high. This is rural, and, I don't know that you'd call it inner city, but they're inside the city limits. The kids out here are very respectful for the most part, not all of them, but the bulk of them [are]. They sort of go to a slower drummer. They move at a little bit slower pace. They were kidding me when I first got out here and they told me to slow down, I was walking too fast. So I've learned how to walk the walk, I guess.

S: Do you find that to be a challenge, or is it easier running this school versus Gainesville?

A: I never ran GHS, I was only an AP [Assistant Principal]. I feel very fortunate to be out here as a principal because, even after being an assistant principal for fourteen years, you still get hit with things that you've never encountered before, and at a small school I don't feel the pressure that I felt at GHS as an assistant principal. I think most of that is because the folks out here, if they ask me a question and I don't know how to answer it, I'll just say, I've got to get back with you because I don't know what the answer is. [At] other places some people, [but] not all the people at GHS, they expected an answer then, and I don't have it. So these people are a little bit more patient.

S: Hawthorne doesn't have a magnet program compared to many of the other high schools in Alachua, and it is also further away from all the other high schools in Alachua County. How does the school satisfy the students' wishes to gain an advanced curriculum?

A: We have the dual enrollment option at Santa Fe Community College that's open to them. We have three AP [Advanced Placement; courses redeemable for college credit] courses out here. If they want to transfer into one of the city schools in the ninth or the tenth grade, they can do so. I mean, they have to go through the zoning, [but they can do it]. We're going to try more AP classes out

here, but we'll never catch up to one of the larger schools, because if there are only thirty students in a class, you can't have an AP class and a regular class running at the same time. And because our enrollment is so small, we can't offer a lot of the courses that the larger high schools can offer.

S: The FCAT was implemented in 1998 and became the leading assessment test in Florida. What methods does the state require the school go through in order to prepare for the exam?

A: When they have textbook committee meetings—there's one representative from each school on the committee—they have to check the standards versus what's in each of the textbooks. So they pick a textbook that is already aligned with the Sunshine State Standards. In regards to the individual teacher in the classroom, they have standards for each of their subjects, and they have to make sure that they hit those standards as they teach the course. Most of those standards have already been checked out to make sure that they are in the textbook. If they want to do some different things, or some things that are more in line with the FCAT... like what we did this year is, we looked at three categories that are tested on the FCAT, three in English and three in math, and we're zooming in on those three areas in every subject area. So, as a teacher in social studies may be talking about the Democratic Party versus the Republican Party, she'll phrase it as a compare-and-contrast so that it hits with the FCAT. But that's done on an individual basis, even though we have monthly meetings and we talk about what we've done so that one teacher can get an idea from another teacher. The way they actually execute it is up to them.

S: How does the FCAT compare to the HSCT [High School Competency Test—a testing program developed in Florida that tested basic communication and mathematical skills, given during the junior year of high school and a requirement for graduation]?

A: I think the FCAT is harder. I taught a class when the HSCT was the test that had to be passed for graduation, and I feel like the FCAT is a harder test. It makes the student think through things, whereas with the HSCT—not that it was rote, and I'm only talking about the math because that's all I know about with the HSCT, but I think the FCAT is asking things on a higher level. Like with Bloom's taxonomy, etc., it's asking the higher order of thinking skills so that the students will rise. [They'll] come up to the bar that the legislators have set.

S: Have you noticed an increase in student performance since 1998?

A: I've been at two different schools, so it's like comparing eggs and oranges kind of thing. We're a D school, and we've worked real hard this year so that we won't be a D school again. I feel like the kids took the test more seriously this year than they did last year. with the exception of the eleventh graders when they had to

take the science test.

S: But that doesn't count towards . . .

A: No, and most of them didn't show up.

S: I know that attendance does play a major role in FCAT because they're only grading the students that go to school. How do you get the students to come to school during testing?

A: Most of them are willing to come. I know one time at Gainesville High School, one year we could have gotten a B, but we didn't test 95%, we only tested 93%. So the following year I was over-testing, and anybody who didn't show up the first day, we made phone calls home. Out here, it's not quite that traumatic. Most of our kids do come to school, and it's unfortunate that the flu season hit us so hard this year, but for the ones who weren't here—because most of my kids are bussed in, we get kids all the way from Micanopy up to Waldo, so they come on the bus—their parents won't drive them that far, so if they miss the bus, they miss the bus—but we were doing make-ups all three days of last week and the three this week, just to make sure that we got everybody that we could.

S: Have you noticed an increase in student performance in the last seven months of you being at Hawthorne? To my understanding, this is your first year here?

A: It's my first year as principal, I was here last year as the assistant. Like I said, they took the test more seriously. We tested them in smaller groups and we also had one of their teachers as their proctor so that they felt comfortable in the classroom they were in. The scores should come up. We feel like last year the ninth graders were tested in a large group in the auditorium, and a lot of them just Christmas-treed it, and we think that's predominantly the reason why we [received] the D. I don't know if that logic holds or not, but we made all the grade levels know that it was really important. We have grade level meetings twice a year with the students, and we told them at the beginning of the second semester that, whichever group improved the most from last year's score to this year, that we would send them into Gainesville to see a movie at one of the theaters. We'd actually rent out the theater so it'd just be them in there, and they were excited about that. So hopefully that'll do it.

S: Well, as a whole, from what I've noticed, all of the Alachua schools have gone down from last year. Buccholz went down from an A, Gainesville went down from a B, Hawthorne got a C. That could be in part, from what I heard yesterday when I was talking to Dr. Dixon [principal of Gainesville High School, 2002-present], they changed the way they grade the schools. He said that they are constantly re-changing it, so whatever formula they are using might just be harder.

Susan Arnold, FCAT-4, Page 4.

A: Yes, could very well be.

S: Do the demographics and the economic status of the students have an effect on the grades?

A: On the school grade?

S: On the school performance as a whole.

A: We have found that a lot of the students out here don't have as varied experiences as the kids in town do. Part of that is some of the kids out here have never been into Gainesville, even as close as it is. I've got one group from the University [of Florida] that works with underprivileged students or low-income students, and she took a whole busload of my kids down to Miami [Florida] to see the University of Miami. They went through this huge mall down there called [the] Galleria [Mall]. She said that my kids' eyes were like saucers, because it's like four-stories.

S: Miami is very different.

A: They had never seen a mall like that. Never. And then some of the crazy folks walking around that you have down in Miami too, well, they had never seen that either. They just don't have a lot of the same experiences that the other kids do. Sometimes I think these kids are more literal than the kids in town. Although there's television, I don't know that my kids watch television that much. There are few of them—well, not that many of our students have computers at home. Usually they're out playing ball in the street or up here on our outside courts or something. So unless it comes up in conversation or around the kitchen table or something like that, they don't know about it.

S: So with this underprivileged program, is the school doing anything else to expose students to more varied experiences?

A: Yes, we're trying. Like I said, I've got several groups that take my kids different places on field trips, but usually they're educational field trips. Not all of them are, some of them are just fun kinds of things so that they can see some stuff. Like my drama instructor is taking a bunch of the drama kids to Disney World for a week. Part of that is educational because they work with some drama groups down there or something, [and] other times it's just to be able to see it. Whether it's—one of them went [somewhere] one time and I thought that was really strange—it will come to me. They [the kids] said they had never seen anything like that before. I'll think of it, it was some place in Gainesville.

S: The Hippodrome [State Theater]?

A: No, [be]cause the Hippodrome comes out here and works with our kids. I don't know. Anyway, I live in Gainesville and I grew up in Gainesville schools, so a lot of things that we take for granted in town, the kids out here have no idea [about]. Some of that's good—we don't have gang problems, we don't have a lot of drug problems. Now there's some drugs in the school, but there's not a whole lot of it. I've got some parents that are real concerned about their kids like you do at every school, and then I've got some that probably haven't seen their kids in a week, you know? I've got parents whose occupation is picking up sticks to sell to the Rattan Furniture Company down in Ocala [Florida], to people who are probably like CEO's in Gainesville. I've got the whole spread, but there's many more underprivileged children out here than there are in town. Sixty percent of my school is on free and reduced lunch.

S: Wow, that's a lot. I understand the FCAT is based on the Sunshine State Standards. Do you feel the test addresses them appropriately?

A: For the most part, I do. Sometimes you'll hear teachers say differently, but predominantly I think they have addressed them. What I don't always agree with is the numbers. For instance, and I probably have these numbers wrong, but in English, there must be eighty-ish standards; they test fifteen, something like that. I think that either they need to cut down on the number of standards that they're requiring us to make sure the kids learn, or increase the ones that they test on the actual test.

S: So, you feel the test is somewhat narrow in scope, [but] the standards themselves cover everything.

A: Yes, the standards do, and for the most part they're relatively broad enough so that you can incorporate them into your curriculum.

S: Considering the other responsibilities of school principal, such as faculty needs, the community concerns, and daily operation of the school, how do you balance all of that—including a high-stakes test like the FCAT?

A: It's just part of the job. Luckily I've got a good faculty, they don't want to be a 'D' school, none of the kids want to be a 'D' school, so that helped tremendously to keep us focused during the year. Now if I was floating with an 'A' or a 'B,' I guess with an 'A,' you'd have to worry about being bumped down, but with a 'B,' you might think, I might be okay, and then come to find out that they've changed the way you're graded again and you end up being a 'C.' You know, you just do it. You put little reminders out there. When I'm in the lunch room doing cafeteria duty, I'll make a comment to a kid, what book have you read this week? Not that that's on the FCAT, but we already know the more books they read, the better the vocabulary is, and the better they comprehend stuff. I just arbitrarily have been pushing reading. This past summer, before the kids left us, a teacher—she

used to be a teacher here who's now a stay-at-home mom got with her church, which is a large church in Gainesville. They got books for all of my middle school students, every single one of my students took home two books this summer for their own, and they got to pick them out. So I think, by stressing reading, that will help too.

S: Well, once you get the scores back, then you'll find out.

A: I hope, I hope.

S: How much pressure does the community place on the school ratings?

A: None.

S: I know that's completely different from over in town.

A: They don't like being a 'D' school. They went to bat and asked for me [to be principal of the school]. My degree is in curriculum, and I think a lot of them had felt in the past the only thing that had been stressed was athletics. Now, I'm sure in some people's mind in this community, that would be just fine. A lot of kids don't graduate, and so it doesn't matter to them what grade their school is or what their child is making in school. But for those that are going on, like this year we've got one young gentlemen that is going to be signing with Brown University. For those kids that we have out here, and not all of them want to do Santa Fe [Community College] dual-enrollment, we need to have the higher stakes so that they can achieve when they leave us and go somewhere else.

S: The FCAT has experienced much criticism over the years. Do you feel that some of these critiques are true?

A: Yes, but I think they've made the test a little bit better over the years too. I'm not sure about the science part, my kids were complaining—and I've never seen the test myself—but my kids were really complaining about the science. I don't know, it may be something that we're going to have to change our curriculum. I think that what they had in mind was a good idea, but I don't know if the way they are going about it is the right way to go about it. Because, like for instance, I feel that we worked real hard at trying to do everything right, and if we're fortunate enough to better our grade, that's awesome, but if we don't, then I don't know how much more we can do. A lot of these kids are not pushed from home to achieve. A lot of them feel like they are never going to amount to anything and all they are going to be doing ten years from now is sitting on [the] street-corner. It's hard to get them to understand that they can make something of themselves. They can move out of this community and do something with their lives, because a lot of them truly feel they will not be able to.

Susan Arnold, FCAT-4, Page 7.

S: That's unfortunate.

A: Yes, it is.

S: How does the school motivate them?

A: Well, we have groups come in, like we have International Week. We have students from the university, from different cultures, come out and they spend all day with us. The kids listen to the different countries, their customs and stuff like that. I also have a[n] activities director who has a career fair, one for the middle school and a different one for high school. People come from [different] communities--Ocala, Starke, and Gainesville. They set up a little display and they talk to the kids that approach them. So we're trying to let them know that there are things out there other than what they may be familiar with. A lot of those programs are not hard to get into, you know. So we're trying to change it, but you never know how much of a dent you make.

S: Do you feel that the FCAT is unfair to minority students, or in this case just students from out here?

A: I don't think it's unfair. I think part of our problem that we have to overcome is to increase their vocabulary so they can understand and become familiar enough with words so that they can see literary expression and not read it so literally. It will come; it just takes a while.

S: Does FCAT testing take away time from classroom instruction?

A: Yes, I mean when they are giving it.

S: [I meant] when you're preparing [for the test]. Obviously it does take two weeks out [of the school year] to give it.

A: I think a lot of that depends on the teacher you're asking. If the teacher truly believes that the things that are tested on the FCAT are in their curriculum, then no. If the teacher believes that this is an added responsibility that the state is making us do, then probably yes. But, as I said, when those textbook committees get together, they find a textbook that has the State Standards in it. So truly, the stuff is there, it's just the way the teacher uses the materials that are before them.

S: Are teachers given incentives for better student performance?

A: Now, I didn't offer them a trip to the theater, no. [laughs.] No, but the school does get money. I know when I was at Gainesville High School, we got to share in a large pot of money. I think predominantly each one of us got about \$300-\$400,

Susan Arnold, FCAT-4, Page 8.

which was nice. So if your school does increase, now, I don't know if we'd get it out of here if we go from a 'D' to a 'C', but I think if you get a 'C' to a 'B, or a 'B' to an 'A,' you get extra money. To me that would be an incentive, but the people out here have never seen it. I don't remember if I mentioned it to them or not to be quite honest [laughs], I don't know, we've been working on the kids.

S: That's all that matters, really. How much of the evaluation is based on FCAT scores?

A: Very little in regards as to what their kids do. You can have teachers that have the low-level classes, and you know those kids aren't going to do quite as well.

S: As a whole, though, the FCAT scores of the school and the school's evaluation?

A: The FCAT scores, you have to move the lowest quartile of your students, you have to. They also look at your attendance, and there's a third thing, and I don't remember what it is. Those are the three things that they look at to determine your grade.

S: Last year's scores?

A: Yes, last year's scores to make sure everyone has progressed at least a year's worth. So those are the three things they look at to determine what the school's score is. Those FCAT scores are a big part of it.

S: Do you think that's fair?

A: To put everything on one test, you know, I don't know, but I think the schools needed to be accountable for what they did, or for what they do. And it's hard, because education is very subjective in my mind. You know, as a classroom teacher, one day Susie may get what you're talking about and Joey may not, and the next day Joey may and Susie may not, but in the long run of the thing, both of them get it. But you can't really prove it, because if you're giving a test on the first day, Susie would have made 100 and Joey would have made an 'F,' and if you gave it to them on the second day, Joey would have made 100 and Susie would have made the 'F.' So it's subjective, but I couldn't think of another way to do it. To me, if you can't come up with a better plan, then you need to keep your mouth shut.

S: We've probably already gone over it, but I understand Hawthorne did receive a 'D' grade, and what measures are you guys taking to increase it?

A: Well, we've had monthly literacy meetings with the teachers so that we've picked out a pre-reading, organizational skills, different things that they can work on across the subject areas that month. We've picked out three areas [Sunshine

State Standards] in the reading and three in the math that everybody is supposed to hit upon no matter what class they're in. Like data analysis, because that sort of stuff goes across the board, some of the other stuff in the reading that we did. We've had two book [clubs]; in fact, I've got one of them on my desk, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What Teachers Can Do About It*. We've had two of those, and those are just voluntary if the teacher wants to join the group. What else have we done? This past summer, I sent a team of teachers, including myself, through a literacy workshop that was offered at Buchholz through the Department of Education. This coming summer they're having another one and I'm sending five more teachers to it so that hopefully I'll eventually get everybody through it. Before school starts this year we're going to go through C.R.I.S.S. Training.

S: What is C.R.I.S.S. training?

A: You would ask me. It's an acronym for reading in the content area, but it's not that, I don't remember what the acronym is for. Anyways, it's different strategies that you use to help kids learn and remember stuff. A lot of it is common sense and over the years that I've been an administrator, I found that some people don't have any common sense. A lot of the stuff, too, I think is good for teachers, particularly veteran teachers who've been teaching a long time. When they go to a workshop like this and they say you need to be doing such and such because it does such and such. And they think, oh, that's why I've been doing that, it just gives them a pat on the back. Yeah, this is why, because research has shown us that this works and I've been doing it. It also brings to the forefront of their mind some strategies or skills that they may have used at one time and just sort of slipped past them and they hadn't used it recently, it brings it back to the forefront of their mind. Because it's all research-based, it's stuff that they know, they've tested and it works, you know, on how to instruct kids and how to work with kids. We'll be going through that [the workshop], too.

S: Alachua is one of the poorest counties due to property taxes, and state funding for schools is predominantly tied to property tax. Do you think this is a fair system?

A: No, but life's not fair. You're going to have the counties with a bunch of money being able to spend more money on their kids. It's just like, even though we're a poor county, up until probably three years ago we had seven periods and the state only funded six, but the community felt like it was important.

S: Rotating seven [where the student signs up for seven classes but only attends six classes per day due to a rotating schedule]?

A: No, they had seven a day. The county finally realized that we truly couldn't afford to do it any longer. We did it, I'd say, four years after the state quit funding it.

What got hit hard were the electives, the arts, music, that kind of stuff is what got hit. So even though we're poor in some respect, the community feels that some things are very important, and we've tried to keep that kind of stuff in. I think being able to spend more money on the kids would be awesome. Like right now, I only have one computer lab, I would love to have two. I've filled out grants hoping to get one, [but] I haven't gotten one yet. But there are other ways around it, and luckily I, for the most part, have a bunch of dedicated teachers who dig into their own pockets, and I know they do it across the board throughout the county. [They] find ways to get the money that they need for whatever they want to do with their kids for the most part.

S: This is actually going on to FCAT, you mentioned the arts and athletics and that part of the curriculum of the school, do you feel the FCAT is taking away from the arts?

A: I don't think that the FCAT did it. When we went from seven to six periods is when it hit. And [now] you don't have enough kids in a class to warrant having a teacher. This past year I had seven kids in a calculus class, and that's because the county gave me two-tenths of a unit to do it. Otherwise, I couldn't have afforded it, you know? Usually, out here I guess our class size is about twenty-eight, and I'd need to have at least fifteen to eighteen in a class to keep the class. When you only have six periods in a day, the kids have to get their academics, and usually they only have room for one elective. So some of the electives fell off because there wasn't the student interest, and art is what got lost out here.

S: That's unfortunate.

A: We still do have the band, though.

S: Can you describe the relationship the school has with the school board?

A: Well, like I said, my parents [the students' parents] went to bat to have me the principal. When the school board came out for the site analysis—whenever a principal is leaving, they come out and they ask the faculty and they have a night meeting for the parents, you're not supposed to give out names—but they let them know who they wanted. They wrote letters, they had a petition that went around the community that got sent to the board. My students signed a petition saying they wanted me, the teachers did, and one teacher made a comment that this is the first time in something like ten years in the school that every faculty member agreed about something. So they wanted me, and I think the school board heard them, because they went ahead and made me the principal. I don't know if I had not been sitting across the hall [as assistant principal] the year before, I don't know if I would have gotten named, but I'm glad it happened the way it happened.

S: How much does the school board help with FCAT preparation?

A: Are you talking about the five school board members, or are you talking about the county office where our supervisors are?

S: I'm talking about the county office, because I know the board is just elected.

A: Right. The county office: I had one supervisor come out here every single day that we gave the FCAT to help us proctor. I had another person, I don't know if I can name names or not, but Pam Morgan came out and helped every day. She's the math supervisor. Sandy Anusavice sent me two cases of paper because the state did not make the [FCAT] booklets this year. They told us to get it off of the Internet. I didn't have the money to buy the paper to make the booklets. Usually in the past, they'd sent the booklets to help prepare them. So she sent two cases of paper over for me. [There are] probably untold people I can't even think of right now that are willing to help out. Like I said, we don't have AP [Advanced Placement] monies, we don't have A+ monies, you know we're poor.

S: You're really just scrounging around.

A: I don't think I've been turned down yet when I've picked up the phone and said can I have such-and-such. When I've told them what its for, the money always comes through. So they've been very supportive.

S: That's good. I guess the last question I have for you is, how would you make the FCAT, or the whole system, better? I know it's a semi-daunting question.

A: Yeah. I don't know how you could make it better. I'd love to be able to throw it out the window, to be quite honest.

S: The FCAT?

A: Yes, but like I said, the general public felt that we needed to be accountable. As teachers, we had never been held accountable. Kids would get out of school and not be able to read; you know, you hear all these stories. It's probably one person out of a million. I don't have a problem with the accountability, I just wish that they'd give us the money to then do it. I mean, the county office gave us extra money for the counselors who had to stay untold hours to get everything ready so we could pay them a stipend, now we're talking \$10 an hour for the time after school that they spend counting the booklets, getting the pencils ready, and all that kind of stuff, because during the day they are working with kids.

S: That's not necessarily in their job requirement either.

A: Well, testing is for a counselor, unfortunately. I think that they should be given

their regular rate of pay. When I was at Gainesville High School, we spent a *beaucoup* amount of time, because I'd help them do it. We were there on the weekend before, making sure we had everything right. It's just not funded for the amount of time and effort that went into it for all the folks that had to go through extra hoops to get it ready for us. I understand where the legislators are coming from, that we do need some kind of accountability, and grades aren't going to do it because one teacher might grade easier than another teacher. You know, I understand where they are coming from, I just. . .I don't know.

S: You can't really think of a better way to do it yet.

A: I can't, so I can't really condemn what we've got. When I come up with it I'll let them know.

S: That's all I really have for you, is there anything else you would like to address?

A: No, good luck to you compiling all of this.

S: Thank you so much.

A: You're welcome.

[End of Interview.]