

- S: Today is March 9, 2005, and I am in an interview with Mr. Calsam, who is the FCAT Coordinator.
- C: Assistant Principal for Curriculum and FCAT Coordinator, it's part of that job.
- S: For Buchholz High School. Mr. Calsam, how did you get started in education?
- C: It's been a long time. I was inspired by some of my high school and middle school teachers. In the late 1970s I went to the University of Florida College of Education and got started in 1979 in the classroom.
- S: How does Buchholz High compare to your last high school?
- C: Previously, my high school was Gainesville High for a year. Buchholz is larger, has a little different student population, a little different parent population, and has done better traditionally on tests like FCAT than Gainesville High has.
- S: In light of all the magnet programs circulating around the county, what types of students are brought to Buchholz?
- C: Our geographic zone is pretty middle and upper-middle class for the most part. We do have some students that are at lower socio-economic groups, about twenty-five percent probably. With magnet programs we bring in all kinds of students from around the district. We have students that are zoned from every school in the district, so we have them from rural to inner city.
- S: Can you explain exactly what your position entails?
- C: As the Assistant Principal for Curriculum, I am involved with scheduling, both master schedule and student schedules. [I am in charge of the] purchase of textbooks, scheduling of rooms, test monitoring, help[ing] develop the schedule for FCAT testing, and anything else that we have to do like that. I also do most of the hiring of teachers for the school.
- S: The FCAT was implemented in 1998, and became the leading assessment in Florida. What methods does the state require the school go through in order to prepare for the exam?
- C: The state has developed a series of standards called the Sunshine State Standards. Each course in the core areas has a set of Sunshine State Standards that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. We emphasize those standards very heavily. We ask that teachers document that they have taught those standards and that they have assessed students on those standards prior to getting into FCAT. We have some specific classes geared towards students who have struggled with FCAT in the past at their elementary and middle school level, and we put students in those classes and focus primarily on those FCAT skills.
- S: So do you feel that the FCAT adequately assesses the Sunshine State Standards?
- C: I think it adequately assesses the Sunshine State Standards. I'm not sure that it's the best measure of how our students are doing, but I do think it does assess the Sunshine State Standards very well.

S: How does the FCAT compare to the HSCT?

C: It's a much more involved type of test. Multiple choice was the format for the High School Competency Test, for HSCT. On the FCAT there's different types of questions; they have to do a little more reasoning, a little more writing. It's higher order, more critical thinking involved in the FCAT than it was on the HSCT.

S: What preparation do you give the teachers at Buchholz, specifically for FCAT testing?

C: Each year we meet with the department chairs [and] administration, and then we ask them to have their teachers focus on certain standards that we've looked at based on previous years tests scores, areas that we didn't do well in, whether it's in reading or math. We ask the teachers in all subject areas to work on those standards, to help improve students reading skills, comprehension skills, whatever it might be.

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

C: [There's been a] definite improvement since 1998. The first year or two students really struggled because it was a new test format. They hadn't seen it previous to that time, and the teachers weren't used to teaching that format. So we've all grown up with this thing together so it's definitely gotten better as far as that goes. I think we've definitely seen an improvement since 1998.

- S: Do the demographics and the economic status of students have an effect on the student's performance?
- C: I think there's no question that the low SES students struggle more with standardized tests in general, not just the FCAT. Whether it's the fact that they've got to spend so much time worrying about survival skills, where their next meal is coming from, how to get to school, and other issues in the home, I'm not sure exactly how it plays together, but if you look at the data, low-SES students definitely struggle more with standardized testing than middle and upper-middle class students do.
- S: How is the school attempting to fix this problem?
- C: Again, we focus some specific classes on students that have shown a history of struggling with the FCAT and with standardized tests, and we try to teach them the skills there. We also have a very strong parent organization here at Buchholz. We had about 100,000 volunteer hours here at Buchholz last year among our parents. We have some of those folks who work directly with students one on one, we have a strong mentoring program for students that struggle, and we have provided some before school and after school opportunities for students to come in and get some extra practice on FCAT. So we're working to try and level the playing field as much as we can.
- S: That's good. I was going to ask, are all these mentoring or extra tutoring hours before, after, or during class?
- C: All of the above. We do a lot before school and after school, but some of the mentors come in during the day—especially lunch—and talk to the students. [They] sit down with them and talk about life in general in a lot of cases just because they may not have someone at home that they can do that with.
- S: Teachers, principals, and students, they are confronted with a lot of other needs aside from just the FCAT, so how do you prepare everybody for it since it does take a whole week out of school time?
- C: One of the biggest things we have to try and overcome is student anxiety. We work with the teachers to try and reduce that anxiety level as much as possible. We want them to reassure the students that yes, this is a high stakes assessment, yes it is important to the school and to the students, but that all they can do is relax and do their best and focus on the task at hand. [We] try to take as much of the pressure off as we can and let them focus on the task at hand, whether its math testing or reading testing or whatever it might be.
- S: Have you found that to be effective?
- C: It has worked for us pretty well. It does alleviate some of that pressure that students feel. They say, Oh my God, we have this huge test coming up. It's in the newspaper, its on the TV, its on the radio—everybody's talking about it. But by

saying, okay, we understand all that pressure is there, [but] this is not the only opportunity you're going to have to pass this test. You're going to have some other chances; do the best you can do [and] focus as much as you can. We hope that you do well this time around, but if we have to, we'll do it again next year.

S: How much pressure does the community place on the school due to the school rating?

C: It's a large amount of pressure, that's for sure. Real estate values are tied to school grades in some areas. Parents want their students, obviously, to go to the highest graded school they can find. So if you're not an 'A' school, there's a lot of pressure on us to find out why we're not an 'A' school and fix it. Buchholz was an 'A' school four years in a row, last year we fell to a 'B.' So, there was a renewed emphasis on what we need to do to get us back to that 'A' level. There's a lot of pressure from the community for us to be an 'A' school.

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

C: I do. I think that to place so much emphasis on one test makes the rest of the educational process seem like it's just filler. If all it takes to get a high school diploma is to pass the FCAT, that's not really a good measure of how the schools are doing overall. We need to look at other factors involved and include them in school grades, in my opinion. We need to look at graduation rates, we need to look at where students end up going to college, how many of our students are going directly to a four-year college, and what kinds of colleges they are going to. We have kids that are going to some of the most highly ranked colleges in the country; we've got students at Brown, Stanford, North Carolina, and MIT, and the University of Florida is no slouch either, its not easy to get in there. So in addition to just this test, I think there's a lot of other factors that need to be considered when you're judging how well a school is doing.

S: I had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Lucas over at the school board, and he was telling me that since the FCAT is based on the Sunshine State Standards, and our curriculum is based on the Sunshine State Standards, my question to you is, how can this test still not adequately judge student performance?

C: You're looking at a very narrow curriculum, in my opinion, when you're teaching the Sunshine State Standards. It's going to measure those minimums in areas like an English class or a Math class, but it's not going to measure those students that are going above and beyond. We've got kids that are taking second year Calculus, FCAT math to them is nothing. On the other hand, I've got students who are handicapped in some way, and for them to pass FCAT might be an unrealistic goal because the curriculum and the accommodations we can make may not put them in a position to be able to pass the FCAT. I think to measure the curriculum based on Sunshine State Standards is fine, but I think that is a very narrow range. There's so much beyond that, that makes a school a good school that you can't measure that with FCAT.

S: Is the FCAT unfair to minority students?

C: That question has been debated and will continue to be debated, I'm sure. I think that any student that has a narrower range of experiences is going to struggle on these sorts of tests. Whether it's SAT or FCAT or whatever it might be. I'm not sure if minority students in particular are singled out, but again, any student whose experiences are not broad enough to help them in this kind of an arena are going to have a more difficult time with FCAT.

S: How are the teacher's broadening their experiences?

C: Well, there's only so much you can do in the classroom. They do try to expose students to as much knowledge and information as they can. They relate their own experiences, other students in the classes try to relate their experiences, but some things you just can't learn in a classroom, that's all there is to it.

S: Does FCAT preparation take time out of the classroom for the teachers?

C: I think with the emphasis on FCAT preparation, it does take away from other things that could be done in the classroom, beyond FCAT. FCAT's important, there's no question, and the Sunshine State Standards are an important factor of what goes on, but I think there's so much beyond those that we can do in classrooms, that all this time we spend preparing for FCAT kind of hurts us in those areas.

S: The school board actually said they do not encourage specific FCAT preparation, do you find that teachers still go ahead and do that?

C: There's still a lot of pressure on the teachers, especially when there's money tied to it. I mean when a school can get \$250,000. If you've got a lot of students and they pass the FCAT, there's a lot of pressure to prepare for FCAT and there's a lot of pressure to get that 'A' grade. There's a lot of pressure to ensure that your students are doing their part to get the school to that point where they can earn an 'A' grade. So I think there may not be any direct pressure from the school board, or even from me, but teachers feel that pressure.

S: Do you specifically ask the teachers to endure FCAT preparation and take away time from other classroom instruction?

C: We ask them to do the best job they can do preparing students to take [the] FCAT or any kind of standardized tests that we're giving, and to do the best job they can with the rest of their curriculum in the classroom as well.

S: What do you feel is the best way to prepare the students?

C: I think to teach them—and this is going to be a continuing process from the time they enter school until the time they leave school—to teach them the skills to take the test, the knowledge base that they need to be able do well on a test, and to learn some strategies on how to deal with pressure that they are going to encounter when they do this test every year from the third grade to the tenth

grade, or beyond if they don't pass it in tenth grade.

S: How much of the school evaluation system is based on the FCAT?

C: A huge part of the school evaluation system come[s] from [the] FCAT. Not only the absolute score that we make, but also the annual growth is measured. It's not just the fact that eighty percent might pass math, we also have to look at the lowest quartile of students and how they progress from ninth grade to tenth grade, or eighth grade to ninth grade, what ever it might be. So [the] FCAT is a major focus when it comes to school evaluation.

S: I understand Buchholz High scored a 'B' on the last school assessment. What measures are you guys taking to increase this grade, considering especially you had received an 'A' the past four years.

C: Our major focus this year has been on that lowest quartile. We did a great job for years with those kids that came into us, you know the average kid, and they did well. We neglected that lowest quartile, and our focus this year has been on that group to make sure that they are not being left behind. We want to get involved in helping them to develop the skills they need to grow. We may not have any higher percentage pass, but we would certainly like to see that year's worth of growth that they can do, because some of them are starting very low, and to show that year's worth of growth is what we're aiming for.

S: Alachua County, from what I was told, is one of the poorest counties in the state.

C: Tax based, right?

S: Tax based, yes, and funding is directly linked to FCAT as a result of this. Do you think it's a fair system?

C: I think there's a lot of things that the legislature could do to fix the funding for schools in the state of Florida, and I think they're exploring some options, this legislative session they are going to look at some options. Obviously some place that has a really high tax base is going to have more money to pay teachers and they are going to have more things, more stuff that they that they can do, computer programs--whatever it might be--than some of the schools in Alachua county. Buchholz is in a pretty good position. We have a very strong advanced placement program and we earn quite a bit of money from that, so we're able to keep up with the technology, to keep up with the latest curriculum and those sorts of things. Some of the other schools in the district aren't that fortunate, they don't have those advantages that we do, and I think it's difficult for them to be able to compete with the school's that do have the good stuff.

S: Can you describe the relationship between Buchholz and the school board?

C: In what way, I'm not sure [what you're asking]?

S: I guess, for the purpose of this interview, FCAT. But in general, is it a good

relationship, or bad?

- C: I think we have a pretty strong relationship with the folks at the school board. I mean the school board members themselves are pretty good about visiting schools and seeing what's going on and getting feedback from teachers and administrators and even from parents and students about what they see are strong points in the schools and what are some of the weaknesses that need to be addressed. In addition, the folks that work at the school board office, the administration building, are very involved in helping the schools to look for new curriculum, to develop what we have to find new ways to train the teachers, to find better methods to teach the students to do well on not just [the] FCAT, but improve the curriculum overall.
- S: How much does the school board help with FCAT preparation, especially with the lower quartile?
- C: They are very good about providing in-service training for teachers to be able to develop new methods, new strategies to work with students. They're pretty good about helping us with new educational programs. They've got programs like Read 180, which is a program designed to help lower students read at a higher level so that they can do better on not just FCAT, but in life in general. That seems to be the biggest focus is reading right now. If students can't read, it's hard for them to do well on the reading test, or on the science test or in their social studies classroom or whatever. So that's the focus right now, and they've done a good job of providing us with opportunities for our teachers to grow and develop in that area.
- S: This whole idea of having a state standardized test has been the trend of education and spread to other states. Administrators and people in government love this idea, but the average American, especially in this state, may have major problems with the FCAT. Why is that?
- C: Well, I think, one of the things that I see is that your high school diploma is based on this one test. Some students are not going to be prepared to take that test in the tenth grade. A student who comes in at a high reading level with strong science and math background, probably won't have a difficult time with that at all. A student who comes in the ninth grade and is taking the lowest level class in math and the lowest level class in English, is going to have a much more difficult time. I think they look at the fairness of the situation [and ask], are we really measuring what we need to measure? Those students that are doing well, we know are going to do well; there's no question that they'll pass FCAT. It's that struggling group, and I think that they see that perhaps that we need to spend more time preparing those students, whether it's just at the high school or at in the middle schools or in the elementary. My personal take is we need to start as early as we can preparing the students to give them as much opportunity to pass that test.

The other thing is you're just taking a reading test, or you're just taking a math test—you're not measuring whether you know anything about geometry, or

whether you know anything about a particular piece of literature, or whether you know anything about history. I think in some states—especially North Carolina comes to mind, New York comes to mind—they have end of the year exams in a particular course. [They have] a state wide test in American History or whatever, and I think some folks view that might be a more advantageous way to go because you spend a year preparing for American History and then you can take that test at the end of the year to determine whether or not you have mastered the skill.

S: This leads directly into my last question, how would you make the FCAT better?

C: How would I make the FCAT better. . . I think I might give it a year later than it's given now, junior year as opposed to sophomore year, to give students a little more time to prepare, and I think I might make it a little more subject specific, as opposed to just reading and just math. And [I would] not just add science, but add biology, add a chemistry if you need a chemistry. [I would] make it subject specific more than it is now. We want to measure how our history teachers are doing, let's give them a history test-American History, or World History, or Government, whatever it might be. But I think I would like to see us lean more towards an end of the year exam, a Regents type of exam, as opposed to what we're doing right now.

S: Okay, pretty much those are all the questions I have for you. Do you have anything else that you feel I haven't addressed?

C: No, I think we've covered a lot of ground there. I think that's okay.

S: Well, that's it, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]