

S: It is March 29, 2005, and I am here at Eastside High School with Mr. Thorne. Mr. Thorne, how did you get started in education?

T: Well, I was influenced by my mother, who has been a teacher for over thirty-five years. [She's] retired now, but that was a big influence; helping students, helping other kids. When I was in college I taught at a private school, so it's sort of genetic; it just followed me. This is all I've ever been involved in. I love it.

S: How does Eastside compare to your last school?

T: My last school was Sebastian River Middle School in Indian River County. I also worked at the Vero Beach High School in that same county for five years. I was at Sebastian just one year as principle. The alike things are, students are alike everywhere. They're just fabulous, and they also bring in all that baggage from home and their outside interests. It's neat that we can influence them all to do what's right and to work hard in their classrooms and to do what's right to mold to great people. The differences here is that Eastside is such a melting pot. It's really close to the real world. There's students from forty-eight different nations here, including students who, on the socio-economic screen, are low income also. It's really about the real world here, where everybody gets together and brings all their influences from the outside and they all act as one. That's how we try to treat them. It's amazing how it works.

S: In light of all the magnet programs circulating around the county, what types of students are brought to Eastside, especially since you have the IB program here?

T: We have several different types of students. We have the exceptional ed students [ESE]—a large percentage of exceptional ed students—which include gifted, but it also includes physically impaired and everything in the middle. We have major program students. That's students like Mr. Thorne was in high school, just your average guys that work hard to try to do well and maintain a 2.0 GPA, and anything above that is super. Then we have our IB students, which are really students who love the challenge of academics and seem to push the envelope. You can just really tell that they are students who really strive to do really well in their classes—not that the others don't—but they just have a lot of advantages and they are just really unbelievable to see.

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

T: Well, here's how we feel. That the FCAT test basically follows the Sunshine State Standards. That's our opinion, meaning that if teachers teach by the Sunshine Standards, they're going to cover a lot of the FCAT material from day one. We

like our teachers teaching bell to bell. When we get near the test, a lot of schools shut down and just go completely to FCAT, and we feel comfortable that we're hitting it from August, and continuing after the exam. There is a time where we really go at it big time, November/December, because there's almost a month off from school in December and January [due to] the semester breaks. So we feel that it's comparable.

S: How does the FCAT compare to the HSCT?

T: The HSCT, we discussed/talked about math and reading. The FCAT covers the math and reading, but now it's branched off into science and will continue to work also with writing. So it covers a lot; it's a more varied curricula or standards for students to cover. I think it covers more of a circle of math and reading components than the HSCT did.

S: Have you noticed an increase in student performance since 1998, especially in the lower quartile?

T: Now this is my [feeling], that the way the test was scored has changed since 1998. There are a lot of schools that were A schools in the beginning that no longer are because the criteria has changed. I'm biased because I love Eastside, but I can tell you with the conglomerate or melting pot of students we have here with varied levels of academics, we're really proud of our B—would love an A—and work hard for that. I think today that it really covers more material that our teachers cover in the classroom than in the beginning. I'm not afraid to say that it's probably a little more difficult because the average yearly progression (AYP) has been thrown in there. It has to do a lot with attendance and how many people you're testing. That can be tough in a school like ours where we may have a high rate of absenteeism. Sadly, our dropout rate may be higher than we want it to be, so we physically went looking for students after the beginning of the year. That's why attendance is incredibly important from the beginning to the end as teachers. We found those students who were missing ten or more days and went after those to make sure they were going to be there for the test, not just for the test physically, but also for the reviews. Common sense tells you that if you attend school, you have a better chance of passing than not attending, and that relates to scores on the test.

S: Do the demographics and the economic status have an effect on the scores?

T: I believe it does, but I'm going to have to tell you as a principal I have to drive on from that and take the demographics and the economic situations and know that they play a big role in our situation. A lot of students aren't fed in the morning; we offer breakfast here. A lot of students go home and may not have the support at home that we'd like. We might be the real deal for them here, so we have to take that into our problem and make sure we can solve it for our students more so

than, say, other schools. I think that has a big play into it, although when it comes to test time, I have to look at it as here's our students, here's the test, they have to go for it and do the best they can because they've been prepared. We have to prepare every student.

S: How is the school fixing this problem?

T: Every year we work harder and harder and smarter and smarter to find ways to entice those students who are dropout potential to coming back into school. It's more than just written or said. Students who score in the levels one and two, we give them an extra math and English or reading class. Sadly, they have to let go of an elective, but the benefits are, okay now they're really getting prepped for the test, and more importantly, getting prepped for the basics that they need to graduate. So we offer that for level ones and twos. When I say level ones and twos, that's how they're scored on the FCAT possibly in their eighth grade year. When they come over to high school, we already know where they are and where they need help.

S: Do you feel that the FCAT addresses the Sunshine State Standards completely?

T: Well, I mentioned that earlier. Completely is a tough word, I don't know about completely, but the feedback I get back from teachers and other administrators, that it covers many of the Sunshine State Standards, and that makes it appropriate for the classroom, and it doesn't make it such a foreign animal when it comes time to test.

S: Considering the other responsibilities of a school principal such as faculty needs and community concerns and the daily operation of the school, how do you balance the FCAT with all of those duties considering the high stakes of the test?

T: How this works is just incredible. We've had time since 1998 to understand; here's the slot of time for FCAT, so everybody is basically on board. It's a lot of hard work at the beginning of the school year to get all your new teachers on board to understand how the test is given and why it's important and why teaching in the classroom from bell to bell and the Sunshine State Standards are covering these items so that they can make it understandable and the students will remember in August when they're taking the test in February or March. But it's something we really have to work in our curricula, so it becomes part of us. It's not something that we say, okay, February is the test, let's be afraid. We just work from day one on it, but still cover the important parts of the curricula that's going to help students graduate.

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

T: The community of course, it's the politics of that. If I'm moving into this area,

some clients ask the real estate agents what the grade of the schools are. One of the big things for the schools is where they're located. Sometimes, on the east side of town we get a bad rep, and that's not fair at all. In fact, I know this is a great school and there's some great ones surrounding us that feed us. That is the one blessing of Alachua County, that you've got great schools and great teachers. I've been in other counties where it's definitely more discriminatory where you live. Yet you feel that here, but I can tell you that the schools are very good, you just can't go wrong with them. That's a blessing for all the high schools, as well as the middle and elementary [schools] that feed them.

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

T: Well, I think it's like anything you hear in the press or when the public opinion is strong whether you know the facts or not. They've been testing students since the beginning of time. Even if you take the 1950s; they use the old example of the pendulum swinging. They had tests when I was a student; anywhere from SRA's to the major comprehensive tests, and every five or six years those would go out and a new one would come in. That was supposed to be the end all. We've been with FCAT now for six or seven years, and we'll see how it goes. Other states have other types of exams that are similar to this, but it changes what education has to be about. There's always a better answer eventually. This is still experimental, if you ask me, of where we're going. It sadly is powerful because it tells a son or daughter, a student, whether they're going to walk or not for graduation. If you're talking about fearful; that's a student who's struggling and knows he has to face that exam to walk. They can have their 2.0 [Grade Point Average] and all their credits and just be a gem, and yet this thing that lingers over their heads can hold them back.

S: Is it unfair to minority students?

T: I always take that in. When we say minority students, I think about the majority of our school are minority students so I worry about them, yes, because are they getting the same skills that they would get at other schools? Well, my answer is yes. We've got to work hard for them, but this is where the community and I have to hold hands. We have to work together. We have the tutorial programs during and after school, our honor society students help tutor our students, so it's student on student, which takes off the walls of the parental or teacher factor. We try to give all of our students an opportunity to do well on this. So then you take away any kind of title or color away where it just becomes students. We try to give them the benefit of all.

S: Just a random question, what is the percentage of your school that is on free or reduced lunch?

T: I believe around sixty-eight percent free and reduced. It's a high percentage.

S: Does the FCAT take time out of classroom instruction?

T: We will get that complaint from some teachers. But again, I'll tell you, if you involved FCAT in your curricula and it follows the Sunshine Standards, which I believe it does, and if it doesn't, then you can adapt it your program, then there's no complaints. It should be part of your curricula. It's not going away, we know that, so why not make it part of your curriculum? But yes, I do get complaints from a handful of teachers who say, I want to do all these great things, but now I've got to stop and do this. There's some truth to that statement, but the real sequential way of teaching is to involve part of that in your curricula, and then you can still do all those wonderful things.

S: Would you say that complaint comes more from the IB teachers or from others?

T: No, I get it from IB, major programs, even ESE teachers, but it is a small minority of teachers. Most of them accept it and know it's a part of the life. Even those that complain about it, I find a lot respect in them because they really mean well in their program. They're basically wanting to cover things that they think will really benefit the students—not that FCAT won't—but it frustrates them that they have all these great plans and now that becomes easily two months of their curricula that they've got to, in their opinion, shut down and go to, but they really don't.

S: Do you think maybe those big plans do cover Sunshine State Standards, but maybe not the ones that are directed at the test?

T: That's a possibility. I know every year that the test is taken, students tell us how, man . . . They're either going to tell me, oh, I knew all of it, or they're going to tell me, there were parts that were on it that I never saw before. For instance, tenth grade students taking the math section get into geometry; well, a lot of them haven't had geometry yet, so it's very frustrating. This year we had our math teachers touch on geometry even in our Algebra 1A and 1B classes to let them know, you might be seeing this on the test.

S: Are teachers given incentives for better student performance?

T: That's funny. The county I left down in Indian River, depending on your evaluation—if you were exemplary you had a chance to get a ten percent bonus—quite a bit of money. That had a lot to do with test scores and how you performed in the classroom and how your evaluations were. I'm not really sure we have that in place here, master teacher or any of those bonuses here. If we were to become an A-grade, there's a percentage of money we get from the state that we divide up as bonuses or however into whomever we want to

encompass. In my opinion, that would cover everybody in the school; instructional, staff, from custodial to cafeteria people. We're all supposed to be one on a team. Anytime you put that in there, you get into the politics of who gets what.

S: Can you describe the school grading scale, or the system rather?

T: You have to have a certain percentage scoring in a quartile or on a level, and you have to have your attendance up to a certain percent, 96 or 97 percent tested. Subgroups have to test and test well, as well as maintaining the groups that you figure are going to do well. They have to stay above. Then you have a shot of an A or B. You always want to get above a 50 percent in reading. Math, you want to try to improve on your year before, and that can be very tough. So if you score an A, everybody thinks that's wonderful, and it is fabulous, but to keep that A is even harder the next year, especially when _____. We went after all these students this year that hurt us last year because they were counted yet they weren't in there taking the test. This year we found them. We only missed three students this year, and that's because they were in different programs. We feel like we did a great job of getting all the students who participate tested, as well as those that are having trouble being truant. We've actually saved a lot of those students; they've stayed with us even after the testing, which is what it's all about to me. That, I hope, makes a difference.

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

T: I cringe sometimes as a principal, I feel like that's how I'm judged, and that has nothing to do with Alachua County. That's with any county. Quite frankly, the county I left, they got a new superintendent down there. He basically told the principals, look, you're going to have this grade or that's it. It's pretty sad when you're judged by the grade of the school. I think the lay person looks at the grade of the school and that's the end results like you see on the test paper. Well, that's a C-school. Do I want my son and daughter going to an average school? It has nothing to do with that at all. Same thing with an A-school. Although that sounds great on paper, are they meeting the needs of my son and my daughter? So it's really a catch-22. That weighs heavily on the principals, at least me, that I'm judged by that grade, especially when it's easy for me to make excuses about my demographics, which I don't accept it because this is where I should be.

S: I understand that Eastside has a B grade. What measures are you trying to do to increase it?

T: Well, I mentioned them before. We found subgroups that we wanted to make sure that were tested that may have been missed last year. We made a big effort to get all students tested this year because last year we missed several, and we've been maintaining them in school. We had, again, students who were level

one and two taking reading and extra math. We offered tutorial classes. We had the workbooks for FCAT that we ran through all the English and math and reading classes, and science this year. We made students, in a way, in a competitive fever. The ninth graders take it, but does it count? We made them feel like, hey, let's see how you do this year, compare it to the next year, so they were excited about that. We made it a little competitive with each other, not so much school to school or class to class, but with themselves, and we hope that's really going to make a difference.

S: Considering Alachua County is one of the poorest counties in the state, and funding is pretty much directly related to property tax, and all this can relate to FCAT, do you feel like the system is fair?

T: For some reason this is the system that's been accepted. Whether it's fair or not, I can only hope, and I hope it's fair for students. That's my only concern, that students are given a shot at this where they have an opportunity to pass with good teaching and can get their diploma. I can argue with you all day that Alachua County has all these problems, but every county I've been in has some unique problem, it's just the business were in. Businesses throughout time have had to go through radical changes to survive. Education is the only business that still stays the same, in a sense, which is unfortunate. You have a teacher in front of about twenty-five desks; they've been doing that since the beginning of time. We need to do things different, and I feel like at Eastside we are. We're doing a lot of cooperative and we're doing a lot of interdisciplinary teaching where math and science work together, or English. Where it used to be real tight in the class, where you'd want to hear a pin drop, it's much different now. It's almost a lab setting for a lot of classes. You walk in and it's controlled chaos. They're all learning different levels and helping one another, the teacher keeps them involved, it's pretty unique. We had to change to survive.

S: Can you describe the relationship that the school has with the county office, or school board?

T: Well, we survive on the support of the county office. In a sense we make our calls there to get answers for tough questions. A lot of things come from the county office that supports us to help us be successful, yet the county office still gives you the opportunity to sort of manage your school as a corporation on its own. They're there to assist you in any manner and you have your budget and things you have to do when you're teachers. It's definitely a tool for service and help.

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

T: They let us know ahead of time when things are coming, they prepared us for the exam, what it's about, getting the academic information out to us in a fast pace

so we can prepare the summer before, and scheduling help and all those things. They're a big plus with us.

S: Finally, how would you make the FCAT better?

T: Every year you have to have the attitude that it's going to get better. A lot of it doesn't so much have to do with the test itself as it does with the attitude of the teachers and students you have. I constantly have to keep motivating and finding answers here in order to make that better. I think some say in what the questions are would help. You always wonder, who are these people who put it together, and where are they from? You wish you could have more of a say in that. Why is this book better than these other books? How many FCAT manuals are there out there that you can use for practice? You just hope you got the right ones. If I can't solve those answers, I can try to solve them here, which is teacher buy in, student participation, and the community involvement, all working together. In fact, the church down the street offers tutoring for FCAT too, so we've really made some big strides.

S: Okay, that's pretty much all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you wanted to include?

T: [No]. You'll be a great teacher.

S: Thank you. Have a great day.

[End of Interview.]