



# How Fern Creek Is

*Put the right rocks in your slingshot,  
and you may just win a battle or two.*

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**T**he “David” is Fern Creek Elementary, a small urban school that serves an overwhelmingly disadvantaged student population.

Our “Goliaths” are the mountains of problems that many inner-city students face—poverty, homelessness, mobility, instability, limited parent involvement, and violent neighborhood surroundings. Although our war with these Goliaths is ongoing, we’ve won some major battles.

Built nearly 65 years ago and situated near downtown Orlando, Florida, Fern

Creek Elementary serves approximately 365 students. Of these, 95.8 percent are economically disadvantaged, 21 percent are homeless, 73.5 percent are minority students, 14 percent are English language learners, and 9.8 percent have individualized education plans as students in special education. An additional 9.5 percent have been identified as gifted.

Like David of the biblical story, Fern Creek Elementary had assets in place that have contributed to our victories. Although the student population is often mobile, the faculty and

staff have been stable and steadfast. Our leadership is innovative and committed to providing crucial professional development. Both faculty and administration have a “doing whatever it takes” attitude and foster the sense of being a school family.

The process of defeating our Goliaths began several years ago, when we armed our slingshot with three big rocks. The first rock was creating a strong school family, the second was increasing community involvement, and the third was implementing best practices in instruction and intervention.

## **Rock 1: Creating a Strong School Family**

When a child’s home life is chaotic and unsafe, and perhaps lacking in good adult role models, it’s imperative for that child to find shelter and inspiration somewhere. Fern Creek recognized that it had to be that place. We needed



# Beating Goliath

to address student needs in this regard before we could expect students to concentrate on academic concerns. We focused on three strategies.

## **Consistent Routines**

We understood it was important to create an ordered environment for students to feel safe. We implement consistent schoolwide practices—and adhere to them—to produce a sense of dependability.

For example, we teach students that when they're in the cafeteria, there's a time for eating and a time for talking with friends. We designate this by placing one of two cups on each table. During the first 10 minutes of lunch, red cups indicate quiet eating time. We then place green cups on each table to signal talk time. Adults teach students this procedure, along with all other schoolwide procedures, by stating it, role-playing, using verbal reminders,

creating class books that illustrate the process, and showing videos of students engaging in the expected procedure.

## **Conscious Discipline Practices**

Previously, discipline issues at Fern Creek had subverted its academic focus and undermined the school climate. We felt that traditional approaches to discipline weren't productive with the students we served and that we needed a more child-centered, brain-based response.

The school administrators decided that the practices outlined in Conscious Discipline ([www.consciousdiscipline.com](http://www.consciousdiscipline.com)) would be a good fit for our students, and the entire staff was trained in the model. Becky Bailey (2000), the creator of Conscious Discipline, noted that the goal of the program is “to provide systematic changes in schools by fostering the emotional intelligence of teachers first and children second”

(p. 11). Specific routines, rituals, structures, and skills empower staff members with greater understanding of our population's needs and provide strategies to address those needs.

For example, when a teacher notices that a student is becoming agitated, the teacher may suggest that the student use the classroom's *safe place*. Safe places typically include pillows or a rocking chair, stuffed animals, books, writing tools, and various posters or signs that illustrate emotions and previously taught self-calming techniques. Once in the safe place, students may use the *composure man*, a tool that enables them to identify the emotions they're feeling and develop a plan to handle those emotions appropriately.

The result of these strategies has been an incredible transformation in our school community. Four years ago, we had 376 discipline referrals from teachers, which resulted in 109

suspensions from school. Over the past three years, we've had zero suspensions and only 44 discipline referrals. Further, we've had only one incident of fighting.

A collaborative atmosphere of mutual respect and problem solving dominates the school climate. In his *New York Times* article on homelessness, Michael Winerip (2011) described Fern Creek as "a sanctuary for children." Fern Creek has become a place where the phrase *school family* actually describes what happens here.

### **School Family Rituals**

Children who are fortunate enough to grow up in families in which dinner conversation is the norm and a bedtime story tops off the night understand the feeling of having routines and rituals as part of everyday life. Our students who live in unstable, disadvantaged homes often know only unpredictability and chaos. School family rituals are a vital component in building trust and relationships with students who put up emotional roadblocks, such as withdrawing or acting out, that can interfere with learning.

One of the rituals embedded in Fern Creek's school culture is the monthly school family assembly. Assemblies are a time for the entire student body to come together as we welcome new students, celebrate birthdays, sing, reinforce the character education trait of the month, and inspire student achievement by recognizing students' recent academic efforts. Students come on stage to make announcements about positive things going on in their lives. By celebrating successes and uniting with one another as a school family, students feel connected to the school and to one another.

Another ritual is the morning greeting. Staff members enter each bus and greet the students with, "Good morning, Fern Creek Scholars!" They review the day's agenda and then dismiss students according to morning arrival procedures. This includes walking in a quiet, single-file line and

receiving greetings from other staff members, including the principal, at stopping points along the way to breakfast. Staff members are strategically located so they can greet students who arrive as walkers, day-care van riders, or car riders. We also consistently remind students that "you're safe, and you can handle this," which reassures them that we care.

Another established ritual that helps break down barriers between home and school is involving parents. Fern Creek holds family nights throughout the year to enable teachers, parents, and students to learn and have fun together. At math night, students and



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parents play a variety of math-enhanced games; at reading night, students and parents engage in book making, storytelling, and literature exploration; and at science night, families complete scientific experiments.

In addition, Fern Creek hosts a community outreach night. Faculty travel to a neighborhood recreation center near students' homes and to the Coalition for the Homeless to engage students and parents in educational activities. This enables parents without transportation to participate in their child's school life.

To encourage attendance at family nights, we offer meals and transportation, as well as door prizes and educational "take home" materials, such as free books, math games, and reading and math fluency practice cards.

### **Rock 2: Increased Community Involvement**

When we looked at our student population, we saw that many students came from families with limited financial resources and restricted education and world experiences. Basic needs such as food, clothing, and school supplies were often unavailable. Experiences that enable students to dream about the future and commit to school success were in short supply.

Addressing these needs was beyond the scope of the typical school budget and required us to form partnerships with community agencies and businesses. Knowing that communicating with community partners is key to successful sustained partnerships, Fern Creek has a dedicated, full-time community coordinator to spearhead and maintain all community-based programs.

### **Important Partnerships**

Although all partnerships within the community are important to student success, some partners go above and beyond. Rollins College, a private liberal arts college located five miles from Fern Creek, is one such partner. During any given week, approximately 100 Rollins students and faculty are involved at Fern Creek in the mentoring program, service days, and class tutoring projects. In addition, Rollins faculty members collaborate with Fern Creek teachers to tackle academic tasks that our students are having difficulty with. For example, one Rollins professor works with a 4th grade teacher to teach students the writing process.

Moreover, every year, the college hosts *all* Fern Creek students for a college awareness day on its campus. The program, aptly named Pathways to College, gives our students a firsthand look into a possible future as a college student and into the opportunities that path might provide.

Another longstanding partnership is with SeaWorld, which welcomes all

Fern Creek students, free of charge, for a day of animal education and conservation exploration. SeaWorld also provides an overnight stay to all 5th graders for a once-in-a-lifetime, behind-the-scenes opportunity to develop and enhance environmental awareness. The students experience animal encounters and conservation lessons throughout the evening and then sleep inside an exhibit.

SeaWorld's outreach program also sends an educator to our family science night to further involve families in learning. The SeaWorld educator lets students and family members touch the bones of such animals as a shark or whale and compare the size of the animals to other sea animals with the aid of life-size mats. Dozens of other partners provide similar programs, totaling many tens of thousands of dollars in financial and in-kind donations.

### **Mentoring Program**

A noteworthy contributor to Fern Creek's students' success is the 100-member-strong student mentoring program. Established almost 15 years ago by a local environmental engineering firm that worked with Fern Creek, the program provides mentors who spend 30–45 minutes each week working one-on-one with selected students on academics and on making good choices. An eclectic group of community business members, neighborhood volunteers, and college students, the mentoring program enables struggling students to work with a caring adult who provides extra academic support, a listening ear, and consistency.

After reviewing any difficulties the student may be facing and helping the student with a specific academic task, mentors often wrap up the session with more informal activities, such as playing a board game or shooting a few hoops

of basketball. Students in the mentoring program often demonstrate increased positive behaviors, academic success, and attendance, and many mentors return to Fern Creek year after year to work with the same student.

### **Fern Creek Elementary Foundation**

Several years ago, a core group of concerned citizens created the nonprofit Fern Creek Elementary Foundation.



Every year, the foundation provides each student with a school T-shirt, a backpack, and school supplies. It also provides a fund that the principal can access to offer families needed items, such as toiletries, laundry services, bus passes, emergency food, clothing, and even rent assistance in times of crisis.

Most important, the foundation funds the position of public ally, which enables dedicated, young professionals—often recent college graduates—to serve their community for 10 months for a nominal wage. Fern Creek uses the public ally to assist the school-based community coordinator with establishing and maintaining partnerships and operating the mentor program.

### **Clothing Closet and Food Bank**

Most of our students depend on both the breakfast and lunch we provide during the school day. But we also recognized the need to provide students with shelf-stable food over the weekend. The Fern Creek Foundation established a relationship with a large local food bank to purchase quality food at a reasonable price. The foundation also relies on community partners to conduct frequent food drives on behalf of the school. Every Friday, all students on free and reduced-price meals receive a weekend “snack pack” of food. A typical snack pack might include a box of macaroni and cheese, a can of ravioli, soup, peanut butter, canned tuna, raisins, apple-sauce, and a granola bar.

Clean and well-fitting clothing also is a basic need among our students. If students are self-conscious about the way they look, learning becomes secondary to them. We house an on-campus clothing closet that community partners keep stocked with everything from hygiene items and undergarments to basic clothing and shoes.

The old saying that “it takes a village to raise a child” plays out in real time at Fern Creek. *Orlando Sentinel* columnist Scott Maxwell (2011) put it this way:

The real difference [at Fern Creek] is the number of outsiders who are stepping up and getting involved: businesses that provide mentors, artists who volunteer their time to teach dance and music, and lawyers who cut checks. These are the villagers.

Nancy Robinson of the Orange County School Board summed it up: “It shows we don’t just need money; we need people who care.”

### **Rock 3: Academic Best Practices**

Many of our students don’t come to school with preschool experience

or the kindergarten readiness skills needed for academic success. Yet in the 2010–11 school year, Fern Creek’s students achieved at the highest level ever attained at our school, surpassing district averages and achieving an “A” school rating for the third straight year. Our lowest-performing 25 percent of students made substantial learning gains.

We accomplished this through a school plan that called for Response to Intervention for struggling students, enriched supplemental instruction for students who were surpassing expectations, and professional learning communities (PLCs) and lesson study practices for our teachers.

### Response to Intervention

Three years ago, Fern Creek implemented a plan to maximize faculty time in support of struggling learners. We used every available minute and dollar to have resource staff in classrooms working with small groups of students who weren’t achieving at expectation. This involved rearranging faculty and staff assignments and helping teachers move from a mentality of *my* students to a mentality of *our* students. We accomplished this by providing the entire faculty with training on the principles of professional learning communities.

The plan grew to support learners who would benefit from enriched instruction. During the established intervention time, Fern Creek provides students who are on or above grade level with challenging self-paced computer programs, vocabulary enrichment activities, and hands-on creative projects that extend students’ learning. Our school data from the past three years indicate that this plan has steadily increased student achievement.

### PLCs and Lesson Study

A growing body of research has found that teachers who work in strong learning communities have a significant effect on student learning

gains (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). To foster this practice, we arranged for all faculty members to attend the Professional Learning Communities at Work Institute in Jacksonville, Florida, in June 2010. Inspired by that training, teachers agreed to meet in grade-level professional learning communities for two additional summer days to analyze student data and plan instruction and interventions geared to our students’ needs.

As part of that process, teachers analyzed their own learning needs. Some teachers wanted additional training on data collection and progress monitoring, others wanted to expand

VIDEO

### Watch and Learn

Watch the video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rThdAv2s3r0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rThdAv2s3r0) to learn more about Fern Creek Elementary.

their knowledge of meaningful center activities in the reading block, and many expressed the need to learn how to differentiate math instruction. We arranged teacher inservice training throughout the year to meet those and other needs.


By revising the school schedule, we created time for each grade-level team to meet weekly for 75 uninterrupted minutes, empowering teachers to continually analyze student performance and adjust instruction as needed. This year, Fern Creek has also implemented lesson study, a research-based practice that enables teachers to analyze their instruction and make improvements that benefit student learning.

### The Results

In spite of demographics that would predict otherwise, Fern Creek has blossomed into a school in which every child matters and achieves. Students at

Fern Creek know that we care about them and that we believe they’re capable as learners.

Meeting our students’ physical and emotional needs enables us to more productively engage our students academically. Student results on Florida’s Comprehensive Assessment Test, a high-stakes measure of academic achievement and success in mastering grade-level standards, speak for themselves. Fern Creek has moved from a “D”-rated school to a high-performing “A”- or “B”-rated school on the state report card for the past seven years.

Although we have no control over many of the Goliaths that threaten our students, we have identified a coherent, comprehensive approach to mitigating their effects. Fern Creek is a school in which research, practice, and a caring community come together to create a new reality of success for all children. 

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