

Lakewood Elementary:

How Florida's Lowest Performing School Improved from an "F" to an "A"

For more of the consulting team members'* historical work visit InstructionalEmpowerment.com

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Lakewood Elementary School Demographics

Number of students: **405**

Number of core teachers: **33**

Percent free and reduced meals: **100%**

Percent homeless or in foster care **15%**

Percent special education **15%**

Percent Black: **95%**

Percent White **3%**

Percent Hispanic **1%**

Percent two or more races **1%**

Transforming Lakewood Elementary

In 2018, Lakewood Elementary School in Pinellas County, Florida was the lowest-performing traditional public school* in the entire state (Florida Department of Education, 2018). 87% of its third-graders were reading at a kindergarten level, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning article by the Tampa Bay Times had dubbed the school a “failure factory” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015).

The district faced a strict new law from the state which compelled them to make a tough decision about the persistently failing school – close the school, turn it into a charter school, or contract with an outside entity that has a demonstrated record of effectiveness to operate the school (External Operator).

The district’s visionary superintendent, Dr. Grego, believed Lakewood could be turned around and opted to hire a team of external consultants (“the team members”) as an External Operator to bring the school up to a “C” or higher.

Mutual Accountability Partnership for Lakewood’s Success

The team conducted a School Comprehensive Needs Assessment and presented the recommended action plan to Pinellas County Schools. The team wanted a true partnership, deepening the work Pinellas was already doing at Lakewood and helping the district create sustainable systems that aligned to their vision.

The powerful combination of the team’s expertise and metrics, the district’s support and resources, and the school team’s knowledge of their students and commitment to improving instruction made for a strong turnaround effort.

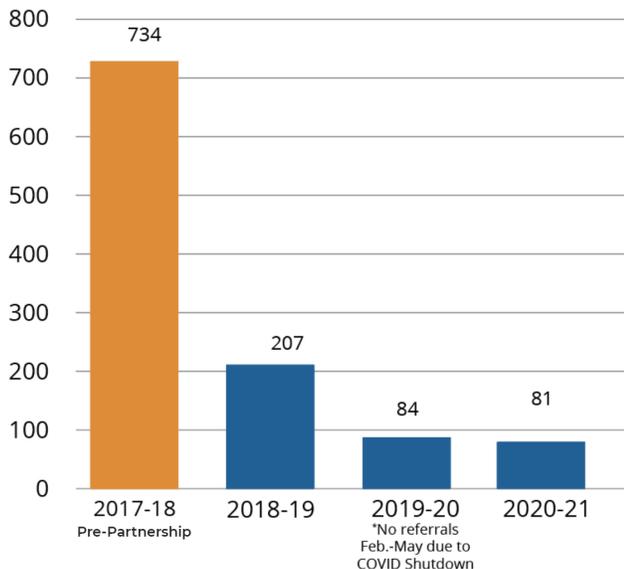
Leveraging The Two Missing Pieces of School Improvement

Research says students become more engaged and learn more deeply when given the chance to exercise their agency and tackle academically rigorous tasks in teams (Toth & Sousa, 2019), though this isn't the norm in whole-school reform programs. The consulting team members introduced these two missing pieces at Lakewood – student agency and academic rigor – and the results speak for themselves.

Negative Behavior Referrals Decrease by 160%

Negative behavior referrals dropped dramatically in the first year of Lakewood's new turnaround approach with the team's support and have remained low since then. See figure 1.

Negative Behavior Referrals at Lakewood Elementary School, 2018-2021



Teacher Turnover Reduced from 70% to 3%

At many low-performing schools, teacher turnover is a dire issue, and Lakewood had been no different in the past – as one Lakewood staff member said, “When I first got here, it was like a revolving door – teachers coming in, teachers coming out.” When Lakewood teachers began to feel more supported by PLCs and coaching from the external consultants and the Lakewood leadership team, more teachers decided to stay. See figure 2 for teacher turnover rates.

Teacher Turnover Rates at Lakewood Elementary School, 2018-2021

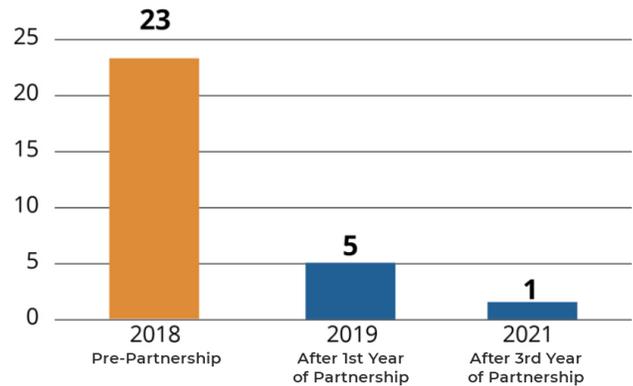


Figure 2 above. Teacher turnover decreased from 23 out of 33 replaced before Lakewood partnered with the external consulting team, to only five teachers replaced after one year of partnership and one teacher replaced after three years of partnership.

Figure 1 left. Referrals are used when student misbehavior is too severe for the teacher to handle through classroom management, which necessitates the school's behavior team to intervene. Lakewood students had 734 referrals in 2018, before Lakewood partnered with the external consulting team. Referrals dropped to 207 in 2019, 84 in 2020, and 81 in 2021.

Student Achievement More Than Doubles in ELA, Nearly Triples in Math

Typical school improvement approaches largely focus on remediation – attempting to “meet students where they are” by teaching below grade level. With this approach, students often get stuck in a cycle of interventions and never experience academically rigorous, grade-level content.

Traditional intensive interventions may result in learning gains, but students need academically rigorous tasks and texts at their own grade level to achieve proficiency (achievement). Lakewood’s grade level proficiency and learning gains were both high. See figure 3.

Lakewood Elementary School’s Achievement and Learning Gains, 2018-2021

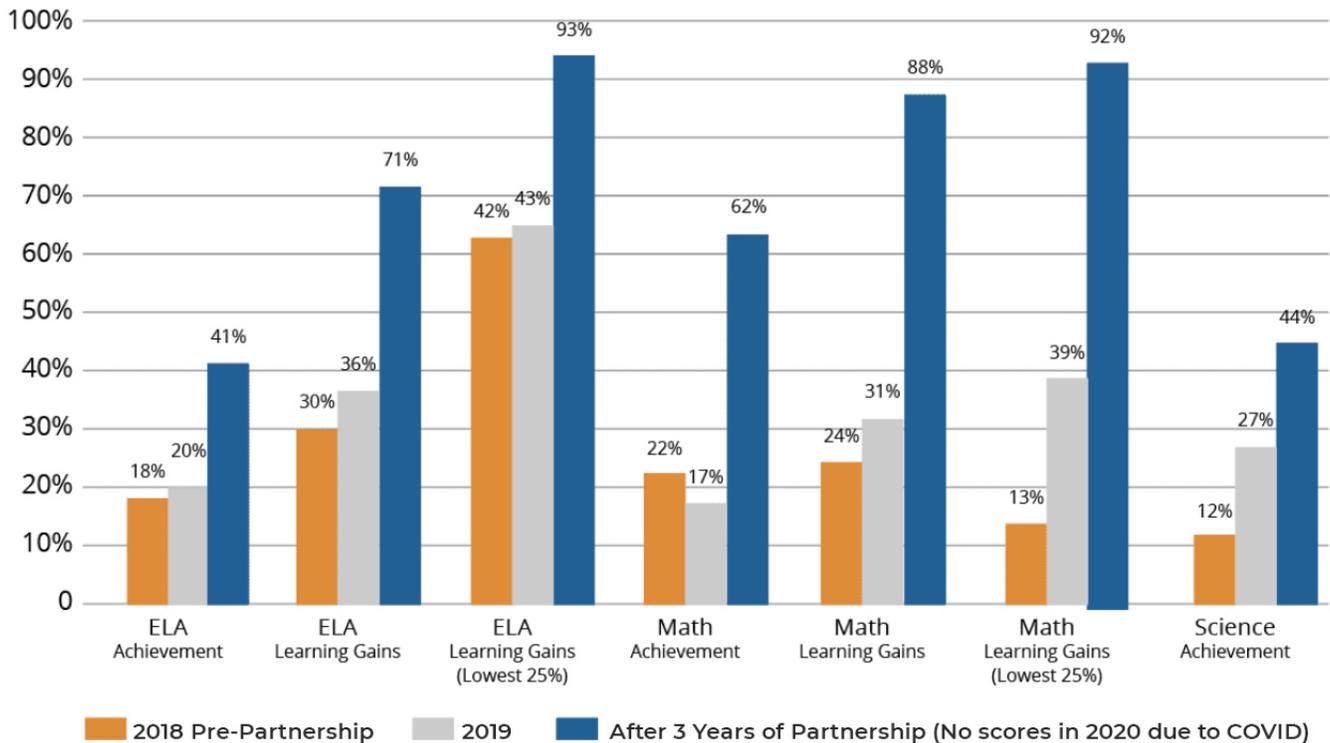


Figure 3. Lakewood increased achievement (proficiency) in all subjects – ELA, math, and science. Lakewood also increased learning gains and learning gains for their lowest 25% in all subjects (learning gain data for science not provided by the state). All data publicly available from the Florida Department of Education.

A Historic Improvement – in the Middle of a Pandemic

Lakewood’s improvement didn’t happen overnight – it was a multi-year process. Through the partnership, the team of external consultants rebuilt virtually every system of the school besides the physical structures. Lakewood was still an “F” school after one year of work – but the school made improvements and the community celebrated the transformation of conditions and academics. In the second year of partnership, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, cancelling state tests and letter grades. The team projects Lakewood would have made at least a “C” grade that year – likely a “B.”

When Lakewood made the “A” after the third year of partnership, their improvement was truly historic. 202 schools have received an “F” grade since 2015, when Florida switched to the FSA statewide test – of those 202, only 12 traditional public schools have improved from an “F” to an “A” grade, and Lakewood was among them. Lakewood now ranks #89 in the entire state of Florida out of 1646 traditional public elementary schools – in other words, among the top 6%. Lakewood outperformed their district during COVID and experienced learning gains while the overall district decreased learning rates (Basileo, 2021).

District	School	Pre-Partnership	During Partnership			Change
		Grade 2018	Grade 2019	Grade 2020	Grade 2021	
Pinellas	Lakewood Elementary	F (23%)	F (30%)	- (no test)	A (70%)	 +47%

“We have kids whose older siblings never had the opportunity to take honors classes and their parents may not have gone to college. Now, so many of our students are able to get on the honors track as they enter middle school because of their own efforts and results on the statewide test. It’s so amazing. So many doors are opening for our students..”

– Bridget Harden, first-grade teacher at Lakewood Elementary

Footnote:

* Traditional public schools are defined as all schools besides charter schools, ESE centers, alternative schools, and district virtual schools.

References

Basileo, L.D. & Wolf, K. (2021). How Lakewood (FL) elementary school partnered with LSI pre and post COVID-19 to substantially outperform its Pinellas county schools district learning rates.

Fitzpatrick, C., Gartner, L., & LaForgia, M. (2015, August 14). Failure factories, part one. Tampa Bay Times. <https://projects.tampabay.com/projects/2015/investigations/pinellas-failure-factories/5-schools-segregation/>

Florida Department of Education (2018). Florida School Grade Archives. <https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/accountability-reporting/school-grades/archives.shtml>

Toth, M.D. & Sousa, D.A. (2019). The power of student teams: Achieving social, emotional, and cognitive learning in every classroom through academic teaming.



A proud partnership with Pinellas County Schools and Lakewood Elementary School!

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