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Green Cove junior high Clay's best

School also gets high scores from the state and feds

By **BETH REESE CRAVEY**
Clay County Line

When Principal Ken Francis got a congratulatory letter from Gov. Jeb Bush earlier this month, commending Green Cove Springs Junior High as the top school of its grade level in Clay County, the first call he made was to his parents.

He was raised in Green Cove Springs, a graduate of the now-closed Dunbar High, Class of 1965, and his father and mother applauded him every step of the way. Now 93 and 81, they would applaud him again.

"Every achievement I've ever had, they have been part of. I had to share it with them," Francis said.

Some of the old-timers among the faculty and staff, who were there in the years when the school received ridicule instead of praise, heard about the letter from the governor and just cried.

"They've been through the good times and the bad times. They were emotional, the tears welled up," he said. "We were feeling on top of the world."

"We've gone from a school nobody wanted their children to attend to a school that has accomplished academic goals," said Francis, now in his 35th year in education and 10th year as Green Cove Springs Junior High principal. "Each year the bar is raised and we have been able to live up to that. The feeling of accomplishment is really overwhelming."

The school's newfound pride stemmed from a double-whammy of academic achievement, top scores in state and federal assessments.



BETH REESE CRAVEY/Staff

Principal Ken Francis (from left), Vice Principal Janice Tucker and Assistant Principal John O'Brian begin the school year at Green Cove Springs Junior High with new pride after earning top marks from state and federal education programs.

Fleming Island High also recognized

Green Cove Springs Junior High has been named the top junior high school in Clay County under the state Department of Education's student and school grading criteria. Fleming Island High received similar recognition for its grade level. Clay County Line will chronicle its achievement in a subsequent report. The state has not yet announced Clay's top elementary school.

First, the school earned an A grade from the state Department of Education for the 2004-05 school year, based on students' Florida

Comprehensive Assessment Test scores — its fourth A in a row.

FCAT results showed 67 percent of the school's students reading at or

above grade level, 56 percent making a year's worth of progress in reading, 69 percent of struggling students making a year's worth of progress in reading, 75 percent at or above grade level in math, 83 percent making a year's worth of progress in math and 81 percent meeting state standards in writing, according to the Education

Department Web site.

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Congratulatory letter

The letter from Bush, co-signed by Education Commissioner John Winn, said, "By setting high standards, providing challenging content and consistently supporting students as they endeavor to achieve academic success, you and your staff increase possibilities for all students to reach their highest educational aspirations."

Also, the school received high scores from the U.S. Department of Education's tough No Child Left Behind program. No Child Left Behind focuses on small demographic subgroups of children and can fail a school if even one of those subgroups do not show sufficient improvement. Student subgroups are based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency and disabilities.

All Green Cove Springs Junior High's subgroups showed gains, at overall higher percentages than any other Clay school.

"We lead the county in academic gains, we lead everyone," Francis said.

The federal program is designed for a school like this one, a "true melting pot" of student backgrounds and family economic status, he said.

Walter Brock, Clay's assistant superintendent for instruction, said doing well under the strict No Child Left Behind criteria is particularly worthy of commendation.

"It means the instruction they delivered and the students' response to that gained the most percentage points of any school in the county," he said.

Francis said the achievement was the outcome of a year of toil, teamwork and willingness by faculty and staff to use inventive ideas to reach kids.

"We set this as our goal. We were one of the schools that got an A, but had not met No Child Left Behind," he said. "We made a concerted effort this year to see if we could achieve that."

After reviewing FCAT data, educators determined that the school's "higher-achieving" students were doing well, he said. Of the 36 Clay students who made the top FCAT score, 21 were from Green Cove Springs Junior High. But

lower-level students were struggling.

"We have kids who have the capability, but have difficulty expressing it, especially in a test situation," Francis said. "There were learning gaps between majority and minority students. Our goal was to attack that."

The school implemented "inclusion," where lower-level students from special education programs were included in regular education classrooms. Those students got help from both special education and regular education teachers, Francis said, and their self-esteem improved once they were no longer physically separated from other students.

"The expectation levels of teachers was that they could achieve at the same level," he said. "We made that possible."

Focus on reading

A schoolwide focus was placed on reading. A reading department was created — not just as a part of language arts — and reading was incorporated into all subjects and a 30-minute reading time set aside.

"The reading program is a strong component," Francis said. "Everybody is involved in the reading process."

Also, teachers were given the flexibility to switch certain students to different classes, to

separate "kids who feed off each other, causing disruption," Francis said. "Breaking up cliques settled the class down and allowed the teacher to teach. We got the best of the ability of those kids."

In addition, the school got students in year-long "testing mode" by requiring semester exams in FCAT format; offered Saturday summer school for students who failed courses the year before, giving them the chance to replace a failing grade with a passing one; and held FCAT review sessions to help students hone their test-taking skills.

Francis also credited Vice Principal Janice Tucker and Assistant Principal John O'Brian, now in their second year at the school, with bringing a "fresh look" to academic challenges.

"They have . . . made a difference," he said. "Everyone buys into the process of academic excellence. We have a great student body, great teachers, supportive parents, administrative leadership."

The outcome has changed attitudes, said O'Brian.

"The community and the kids developed a sense of pride. Like a winning sports program, they want to be part of that," he said. "They're proud to go to school here. You feel it."

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Ken Francis, principal of Green Cove Springs Junior High, shows his yardstick of excellence listing the school's academic achievement goals.