

In Florida Setting the Standard

LIZA JACKSON PREPARATORY SCHOOL



Photo courtesy Liza Jackson Preparatory School

Immediately after its opening in 2001, Liza Jackson Preparatory School became one of the highest-scoring schools in the district. Eleven years later, it continues to rank near the top, and Success for All has been there every step of the way. >>>

An A ranking!

It typically takes a new school a few years to work out the kinks. But that wasn't the case at Liza Jackson Preparatory School, a K–8 charter school and longtime Success for All Foundation partner in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. After opening in fall 2001, the school marked its first year by meeting all the requirements to earn an A ranking from the state. That was only the beginning. Liza Jackson has received the A ranking each year since, and last year ranked 18 out of 3,146 schools in the Florida Department of Education's school ranking system.

When it received its charter, Liza Jackson administrators looked for a research-based curriculum with best practices that would provide teachers—many of whom were first-time teachers—with a solid instructional framework. “We were just looking for something different,” said Julie Jenzen, elementary education assistant principal. “[SFA] had all the things we were looking for in a program.”

Jenzen, Principal Mary Gunter, and the other administrators knew that SFA's cooperative-learning strategies, built-in support systems, and rigorous standards made it the ideal choice. “This program lends itself to every teacher being effective,” Jenzen said. “Whether they're working in a low school or whether they're working in a high school, it still works.”

After just one year, Liza Jackson was setting the bar for other schools in the Okaloosa County School District. “I think it made a difference to have this one charter school that was excelling, and everybody else wanted to do as well,” Jenzen said of the friendly competition that developed. “That's when we saw the whole district really improve and skyrocket to the top.”

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Every Teacher an Effective Teacher

Liza Jackson administrators found that SFAF's in-school coaching and instructional consistency give teachers the right tools to effectively educate their students. "That's what I love about it," Jenzen said. "If nothing else, I tell my teachers: Everything you need is right there." That framework, she said, helped Liza Jackson's teachers excel: "It's made every teacher an effective teacher." She has also observed that when teachers become familiar with SFA's methods, the structure becomes a natural part of what they do and how they teach.

Data: Driving Every Facet

SFAP helps schools gather extensive data and then shows teachers how that data can be used to influence and improve instruction. "SFA does a good job of incorporating and teaching how to use those skills in the classroom," Jenzen said. SFAF's method provides extensive data tracking through SFAF's Member Center database. Noting the importance of analyzing this key information, administrators revised the school schedule

to allow every teacher a one-hour planning period each day. During this hour, they take the time to scrutinize the data and determine "how they can make the program better in their individual classrooms."

The data isn't just for teachers. Students become heavily involved in their own learning by looking at their performance numbers. Jenzen has seen firsthand how students use that information to set goals for themselves. "They know instantly by their rubrics score how they can get better for the next time and what they need to do to make a higher score," she said.

She's also seen firsthand how students embrace SFA's cooperative-learning tactics. "They can tell you what strategy they're using, why they're using it," she said. "They give feedback to other students on how they could improve their answers."

Since SFA places students at their own academic levels, teachers report that students' fear of failure dissipates, creating "a very safe environment," Jenzen said. "The thing I love about SFA is that each kid gets an individualized

program." The data back that assertion: 84 percent of Liza Jackson fourth graders scored above average in reading on the 2011–12 FCAT.

Gunter concurs that students are eager to learn. She has noticed that when "they leave in the afternoon, they all have smiles on their faces. Some of them don't want to leave."

Success at school makes for happier children at home—something parents appreciate about SFA. Jenzen has found that they especially value SFA's ninety-minute block of uninterrupted reading time. When using this strategy, the difference in reading skills is palpable, especially among struggling readers. "It's amazing how fast they start picking it up," Jenzen said. "Their parents will come to me and say, 'My child never read like this when they were in other schools!'"

Parents are also involved with the data; they value the concrete measurement of their child's progress. Jenzen said, "They understand why their child is doing a certain level or why their child made a certain grade in reading."



Photo courtesy Liza Jackson Preparatory School

“I Couldn’t Imagine a Different Program”

Liza Jackson administrators appreciate how Success for All uses data in every facet of classroom instruction and to stay on top of an ever-changing academic climate. SFA is “constantly evolving—it’s not a stagnant program,” Jenzen said. “They’re constantly out there looking at the research.”

That evolution is something Liza Jackson staff experienced firsthand. Though test scores were consistently high, reaching a plateau about four years ago caused teachers to re-evaluate how Success for All was working. Gunter and Jenzen formed committees of teachers and invited them to research alternate programs. After analyzing several other options, teachers concluded that Success for All, even after eleven years of use, was still by far their best choice; its continuous upgrades and improvements still provided the greatest structure for success. Jenzen recalled that “when it came down to it, when they had to say what is best, [they said] ‘We definitely think Success for All is what we need.’”

That was a relief for administrators. “When the teachers were talking about not using SFA, I couldn’t even imagine bringing on a different program,” Jenzen said.

Scores have again risen steadily, thanks in part to the staff’s close collaboration with the school’s SFA facilitator and area manager. These built-in resources provide teachers and administrators with a discerning outside eye; Jenzen credits these vital support staff with offering a different perspective

to teachers, helping them to re-evaluate methods and set new goals. “That’s another reason why our scores have really rocketed,” Jenzen said. “It just makes all the difference in the world when you’ve got somebody supporting those teachers, keeping them focused, helping them read the data.”

Eleven years after its opening, Liza Jackson continues to make great academic strides with Success for All. Jenzen concluded, “I can’t even imagine not having it.” ★



The Success for All Foundation, founded in 1987, was awarded a \$50 million federal Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up grant in 2010. It enables eligible Title I elementary schools to receive grants of \$50,000 or more toward first-year implementation costs. To learn more about available i3 grants, contact us at (800) 548-4998, ext. 2372, or visit www.successforall.org.